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# Black Creative Resilience Challenges Historical Erasure in Derek Fordjour's "Nightsong"

The exhibition explores how music embodies histories of race, power and autonomy in America.

By [Jordan Riefe](#) • 09/19/25 8:00am



Derek Fordjour, *Transmission*, 2025. Wood, steel, iron, acrylic and rhinestones, 12 1/4 x 28 3/4 x 8 inches, (31.1 x 73 x 20.3 cm). Photo: Daniel Greer, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

This weekend, darkness falls on David Kordansky Gallery in L.A., but in the best way. It's where Derek Fordjour is mounting "Nightsong," through Oct. 11, his immersive odyssey into the origins and byways of Black music, consisting of paintings, sculpture, video and hush harbors.

"I don't want to say that I'm trying to encapsulate the history of Black music, but I am pulling from the tradition, which of course is a deep, rich and vast well," Fordjour says about the sprawling exhibit that incorporates spontaneous live music from producer Omar Edwards and composers Jason White and Josiah Bell, as well as a four-hour soundscape culled from over 200 samples collected by the artist. "When you follow the Black voice in America, in particular, you find the history of race, power, agency, ownership, autonomy. All of the things that are germane to my practice reveal themselves when you go back far enough."

"Far enough" refers to West African roots that materialize first in work songs and gospel, followed by the latter's secular incarnation, the blues, which coincided with emancipation.

Early in the twentieth century, it all came together with jazz. For inspiration, Fordjour visited New Orleans' Congo Square, a crossroads welcoming Haitians, Mississippi Delta bluesmen and later, ex-military personnel tinkering with the cornet. Added for good measure were the Spanish guitar and a West African instrument made from a gourd that, on the plantation, became the banjo.

"That mix of European instruments, enslaved people and free people, that happened at Congo Square because the French allowed the enslaved people to play music there and be free, one day a week," explains Fordjour. "It's credited with the birthplace of jazz music. But it is in that cultural jambalaya that jazz takes place. Cornel West called jazz music the sound of slaves taking up the instruments of the aristocracy to make a new sound."

The first gallery, draped in black and dimly lit, features eight paintings, all of them 24x30-inch copies of works by past artists whom Fordjour admires, like Romare Bearden's *Thank You For Funking Up My Life*, which became the cover of an album by jazzman Donald Byrd.



Derek Fordjour, *Boy Band Breakup: The Fall of Ascension*, 2025. Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 62 x 102 inches (157.5 x 259.1 cm). Photo: Daniel Greer, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

"The origin of covers comes from the practice of larger White music labels remaking regional Black hits. It's a form of erasure," notes Fordjour. "I wanted to show those origins. So, I'm playing on the idea of covering my greatest hits that feature Black musical subjects."

Moving on from there, viewers encounter what he calls "the artifice of night," where everything is covered in black. Fordjour worked with architect Kulapat Yantrasast, who designed the gallery's extension in 2014, to make darkness predominant throughout the space, using only dim light wherever necessary.

Leaving the larger gallery space, viewers land in an area densely packed with trees, a simulated "hush harbor" where slaves would retreat to hatch plans and conduct services. A visualization of work songs and their beginnings includes a painting called *Gourd, Drum and String*, the origins of the banjo.

The third gallery is centered by a rotating sculpture and another room filled with photos of 125 deceased musicians and images of people the artist has lost in life. In an adjacent area, a four-hour rendering of a visual archive, including some animation of Fordjour's paintings, unravels, revealing his unusual process.



Derek Fordjour, *Banjo Lesson in Minor Key (after Henry Ossawa Tanner)*, 2025. Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas, 32 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches (81.9 x 66.7 cm). Photo: Daniel Greer, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

Starting with an acrylic substrate, he cuts pieces of corrugated cardboard and affixes them to canvas, creating channels to conduct rivulets of paint. He then wraps the piece in newspaper and adheres it with glue in crosshatching patterns, making air pockets that get torn open. After it dries, he applies another coat of paint, then wraps it again and applies another coat. He then tears through the air pockets and wraps it a third time, creating a scaly surface on which he begins his composition.

"As this new show makes clear," gallerist David Kordansky writes in an email, "Derek offers art as a form of participation, of sharing and collaboration and communion, even as he stays close to the kind of magic that's only possible when an artist deeply commits himself to the daily life of the studio."

Originally from Memphis, Tennessee, Fordjour received a BA from Morehouse College, an MFA from Hunter College and a Master in Arts Education from Harvard. His work has been exhibited in places like the Studio Museum in Harlem, Brooklyn Museum, LACMA and the Whitney Museum. Public works include *Parade*, a mural at the 145th Street subway station in New York.





Derek Fordjour, *Fermata*, 2025. Resin, fiberglass, iron, bituminous coal, mahogany, glass, acrylic, textiles, mother of pearl, steel, gold, and LEDs, 27 1/2 x 23 3/4 x 30 inches (69.8 x 60.3 x 76.2 cm). Photo: Daniel Greer, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

"With each year, he increases the stakes and the reach of his vision," Kordansky continues, "combining painting, sculpture and performance in ways that allow viewers to fully inhabit worlds in which this creative impulse becomes a life-saving necessity and life-giving pleasure. In so doing, he reveals new and nuanced ways of understanding the achievements of Black communities throughout American history."

When he first conceived of "Nightsong," Fordjour had no idea it would arrive at a time of erasure under the government's anti-DEI measures. "This is something I've never seen in my lifetime," he gasps. "And I will say, naively, I thought certain tenets of social progress were unmovable. They're the foundation of democracy and our country; they're hard fought, and I thought they would stand like pillars. And, in fact, with the right sledgehammer, they can all be leveled. To observe it in real time, in my generation, is something I wasn't prepared for. So, to put forth these ideas in the current political context is a conspicuous choice. One voice comes from one body; a collective voice comes from many. That's really where the show starts. Once we abandon our voices, then we're in trouble."

Riefe, Jordan, "Black Creative Resilience Challenges Historical Erasure in Derek Fordjour's 'Nightsong,'" *Observer.com*, September 19, 2025



Derek Fordjour, *Motor Town Miracle*, 2025. Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 74 x 98 inches (188 x 248.9 cm). Photo: Daniel Greer, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

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