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President Biden Awards Brooklyn’s Billie Holiday Theatre National Medal of Arts

Medal is nation’s highest honor awarded to artists and organizations by the U.S. government for outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth, support and availability of the arts

Celebrating its milestone 50th anniversary season, The Billie Holiday Theatre is a beacon for world-class art rooted in racial justice in the heart of Bed-Stuy, dedicated to elevating the voices of Black artists in one of the largest African American communities in the nation

Leaders from Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and The Billie Holiday Theatre joined President Biden and additional honorees at the White House to receive the honor



Washington, D.C. (March 23, 2023) — [The Billie Holiday Theatre](#) (“The Billie”), one of the nation’s preeminent arts and culture organizations founded by the [Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation](#) (“Restoration”) was awarded the National Medal of Arts at the White House during the first in-person ceremony to be held since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ceremony celebrated the 2021 National Medal of Arts honorees during which President Biden presented the medal to arts and entertainment leaders including Restoration President and CEO **Blondel A. Pinnock**, who accepted the medal on behalf of The Billie.

The ceremony was held in the East Room at the White House for which Dr. Jill Biden was also present. Also in attendance were **Toni Yuille Williams**, Chair, Board of Directors, The Billie Holiday Theatre, **Wayne C. Winborne**, former Chair, Board of Directors, Restoration, and **Sabine LaFortune**, General Manager, The Billie Holiday Theatre.

Founded by Restoration in 1972 during the height of the Black Arts movement, The Billie opened as a means of exposing America to Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of its largest artistic Black communities. Since its inception, The Billie has elevated and promoted the critical voices of Black artists such as Samuel L. Jackson, Debbie Allen and other stellar artists in the Black diaspora. Its programming largely focuses on producing, presenting, and commissioning new and classic works and festivals in theater, dance, music, visual arts, and film; providing artistic and institutional residencies; and serving all ages with educational programming.

The National Medal of Arts is the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the federal government. It is awarded by the president of the United States to individuals or groups who are deserving of special recognition by reason of their outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth, support, and availability of the arts in the United States. Over the years, the National Medal of Arts has honored a wide range of artists and culturally significant institutions and organizations, such as the Apollo Theater and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In addition to The Billie, 2021 Medal of Arts recipients include Mindy Kaling, Bruce Springsteen, Gladys Knight, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Antonio Martorell-Cardona, Vera Wang and The International Association of Blacks in Dance. The full list of recipients can be found [here](#).

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Chair Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD, said, “The National Medal of Arts recipients have helped to define and enrich our nation’s cultural legacy through their lifelong passionate commitment. We are a better nation because of their contributions. Their work helps us see the world in different ways. It inspires us to reach our full potential and recognize our common humanity. I join the President in congratulating and thanking them.”

“We are honored and grateful to have received a National Medal of Arts in recognition of The Billie’s impact and continued commitment to telling Black stories and redefining the arts community in New York. Culture is at the center of all we do, and we are thrilled to see The Billie receive the nation’s most prestigious arts award as it celebrates 50 years of essential and unwavering support for Black creative expression,” **said Blondel A. Pinnock, President & CEO, Restoration.** “The award comes at an auspicious moment as Restoration prepares for a dramatic transformation including the expansion and reimagining of The Billie to serve as a 21st century hub for the next generation. Thank you to President Biden and the National Endowment for the Arts for your commitment to supporting and celebrating the arts in all its forms. Your leadership is critical to ensuring that Black artists continue to thrive and enrich our lives.”

“For 50 years, The Billie has served as a mecca for bold and daring artists and audiences to come together in a rigorous artistic space that tackles racial injustices, presents new and unapologetic voices, and imagines a world where all people can flourish. Under consistent strong leadership, The Billie has been able to maintain its role as a beacon of its community from Herbert Scott-Gibson to Marjorie Moon to Dr. Indira Etwaroo. In this moment, we also have to acknowledge the visionary leaders over the last five decades who all picked up the mantle to steer and lead this incredibly important institution to this point,” **said Toni Yuille Williams, Chair, The Billie Holiday Theatre Board.** “We are deeply encouraged and honored by the administration’s and NEA’s unwavering belief in the power of the arts to make a positive difference in the world.”

"Congratulations to Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and The Billie Holiday Theatre for this well-deserved honor. Bedford Stuyvesant is one of the nation's historic birthplaces of Black culture and creativity, and the Billie Holiday Theatre upholds that tradition by providing a dedicated space for Brooklyn's next generation of leaders in dance, theater, and the visual arts," said **U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer**. "The arts have always been central to the services that Restoration provides to thousands of residents in the community, from youth arts education to personal financial counseling and technology fellowship programs. This outstanding honor reflects the profound impact the organization has made in the lives of so many people."

"The Billie Holiday Theater has served as a bastion of Black art, creativity, and culture for more than 50 years. It has helped launch the careers of countless Black creatives who may not have received that opportunity elsewhere. This recognition by President Biden and the National Arts Endowment is a powerful affirmation of Restoration's long-standing leadership as a talent incubator just as it embarks on a sweeping expansion to make its programming more accessible to Brooklynites and New Yorkers alike," said **Laurie Cumbo, Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of New York**.

"I want to extend my warmest congratulations to the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and The Billie Holiday Theatre for receiving the prestigious National Medal of the Arts. Restoration and The Billie have long played a critical role in providing opportunities and resources for young Black artists to develop their craft, share their stories, and be a driving force in shaping the cultural landscape of Brooklyn for generations," said **Brooklyn Borough President Antonio Reynoso**. "This incredible honor is a testament to the outstanding work being done to enrich our communities and inspire generations of young artists to pursue their dreams, right in the heart of Brooklyn."

"Brooklyn has long been defined and made great by its diversity, creativity, and inclusivity, with Bed-Stuy at its beating heart. It is inspiring to see Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and The Billie Holiday Theater be awarded the National Medal of Arts, a tremendous achievement and reflection of the immense impact these organizations have had on the Black arts community in Brooklyn and beyond. By providing access to resources, mentorship, and performance opportunities, they are helping to nurture a new generation of talent that will carry on the rich legacy of Black arts in our community for years to come," said **New York City Council Member Chi Ossé**.

"The intersecting pandemics of COVID-19 and ongoing racial injustices in 2020 defined the most consequential moment in modern history. The Billie Holiday Theatre stood on the front lines of the fight against long-standing systemic racism with the largest African American community in the nation - Central Brooklyn - disproportionately impacted by both pandemics and our rallying cry was the arts, a cry heard across the nation and the world," said **Dr. Indira Etwaroo, Executive Artistic Director Emeritus, The Billie Holiday Theatre**. "To lead an institution of extraordinary people, to galvanize a group of committed artists and community members, and to collectively use the arts to condemn racial injustice with a sense of urgency and humanity in 2020 is what this particular National Medal of the Arts embodies."

"This recognition by President Biden and the National Endowment for the Arts is a major affirmation of The Billie's historic legacy as a stalwart for Black creativity and expression over the last 50 years. During my 40-year tenure as its Executive Director, my goal was to take The Billie to a place of growth from an ambitious community-led project into our nation's premier hub for Black talent. To see our early vision come to fruition is one of my proudest moments. The Billie is the heart of Bed-Stuy and I am so thrilled

that it is receiving the nation's highest honor in the arts at the People's House in Washington D.C.," said **Marjorie Moon, Executive Director Emeritus, The Billie Holiday Theatre.**

The Billie is currently celebrating its milestone 50th anniversary with a special Anniversary Season in 2023. The season pays homage to five decades of excellence presented from The Billie's iconic stage while also spotlighting the institution's future and its continued commitment to telling Black stories. More on the anniversary season and programming can be found [here](#).

The Billie is also the centerpiece of Restoration's recently [unveiled plans](#) to reimagine its longtime Fulton Street home as the Restoration Innovation Campus, a global hub dedicated to closing Brooklyn's racial wealth gap, including increasing Black workers' access to jobs in creative industries. Designed by renowned architect Sir David Adjaye, the campus includes a major expansion of the theater, designed to host a wide-ranging mix of performances and support Brooklyn's next generation of creative leaders.

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About The Billie Holiday Theatre

The AUDELCO and Obie Award-winning Billie Holiday Theatre is the artistic anchor to the largest African American community in the nation—Central Brooklyn and one of the last remaining theaters forged in the aesthetic and sociocultural kiln of America's Civil Rights/Black Arts Movements. Founded in May 1972, The Billie Holiday Theatre is a beacon for world class art rooted in racial justice in the heart of Bed-Stuy: producing, presenting, and commissioning new and classic works and festivals in theater, dance, music, visual arts, and film; providing artistic and institutional residencies; and serving ages 3 to 103 with educational programming. For bold and daring artists and audiences from around the corner and around the world who look to The Billie as a rigorous artistic space that tackles racial injustices, presents new and unapologetic voices, and imagines a world where all people can flourish...welcome home.

About Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation

Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation is the nation's first community development corporation. Created in 1967 through grassroots activism and the bipartisan support of Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Jacob Javits, Restoration serves more than 60,000 annually as an advocate, coalition-builder, and direct service provider with a focus on the predominantly minority and low-income communities of Central Brooklyn. Restoration's mission is to relentlessly pursue strategies to close gaps in family and community wealth to ensure all families in Central Brooklyn are prosperous and healthy.

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