

HONOR THE PAST AND PUSH FORWARD



Giordano Dance Chicago celebrates jazz dance's roots in New Orleans debut

By Lauren Warnecke

In 1928, a kid from St. Louis visited a cousin in New Orleans. It was here that five-year-old Gus Giordano first learned the Charleston listening to Jelly Roll Morton's *Shoe Shiner's Drag*. Nearly a century later, the name Giordano is synonymous with jazz. The company Giordano started in 1963 is largely considered the first troupe dedicated to American jazz dance; today, it's one of few remaining.

That 60-year path may not have been charted—it certainly wouldn't have been the same—had young Gus Giordano not heard Jelly Roll Morton in New Orleans as a kid. And now, the company he founded will get their New Orleans debut.

After returning to St. Louis, Giordano's father built him a tap board. He started dance lessons with Minette Buchman, "who he always credited for his early dance training," says Giordano's daughter Nan, who has led the company for 40 years.

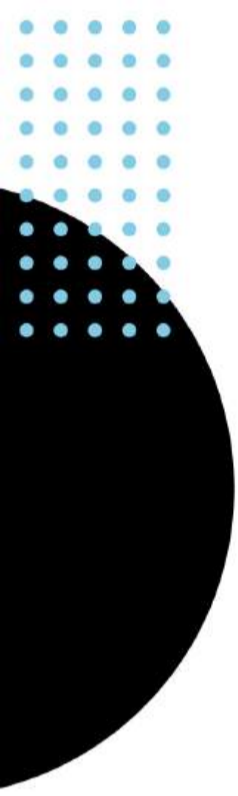
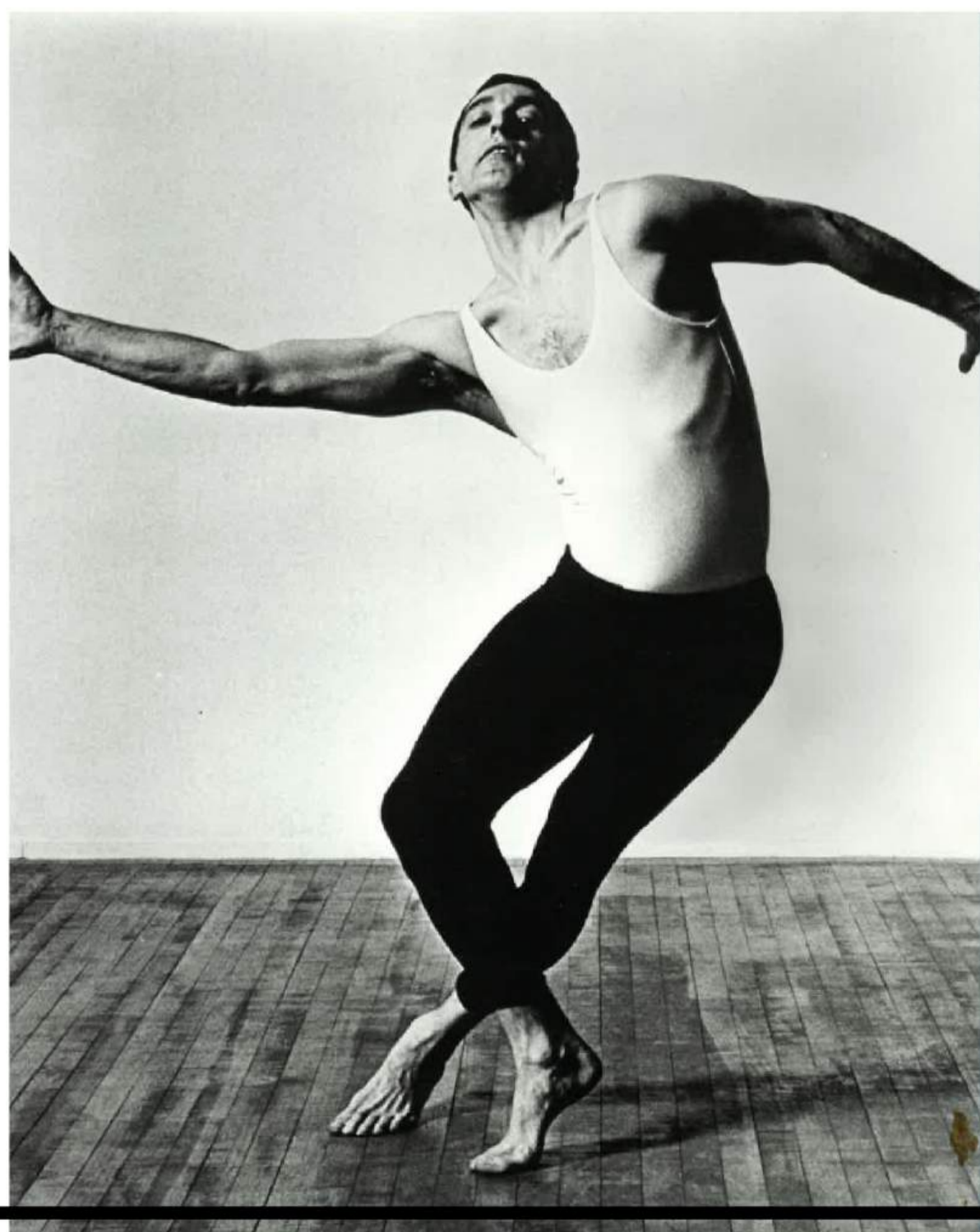
"She wasn't very good," Nan Giordano says. "My father was not a good technician, but she instilled this flame and fire into him. It wasn't the technical training—he got that elsewhere."

Gus sold popcorn outside his father's movie house in St. Louis and produced DIY films at around age 16. He performed at military bases while enlisted in the Marines during World War II—and on Broadway as a cast member in *Paint Your Wagon* and *On the Town*. By then, he'd gotten the technique he needed, taking summer classes with Hanya Holm, Katherine Dunham, Peter Gennaro and Alwin Nikolais. He met his wife Peg while attending University of Missouri on the G.I. Bill. The couple moved from New York to Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago, desiring a more sustainable place to raise their two sons and two daughters. Gus worked for The Film Council of America at first, but dance was always part of the plan.

"At a very young age, he knew that jazz dance was the path he was going to go on," Nan Giordano says. "He was doing something that no one else was doing."

Jazz's journey from Africa to the deep south and up the Mississippi River, passing through St. Louis and on to Chicago can be seen in its pulse and polyrhythms, an undulating torso and a low center of gravity. The Giordano style leans on vernacular dances born in New Orleans, on Euro-American techniques like ballet and modern, with the high gloss of Broadway.

This "theatrical jazz" spread like wildfire beginning in the 1970s. The Jazz Dance World Congress, which Giordano launched in 1990, and other conventions affiliated with second generation teachers like Louisiana native Joe Tremain, trained young dancers for decades. The Nan Giordano Certification Program now aims to reintroduce Giordano technique by training new jazz teachers. And generations of former GDC dancers spread the technique at studios and universities across the country.



“What all of us are trying to do is get jazz back,” Giordano says, an assignment Emmy Award-winning choreographer Al Blackstone took seriously in creating *Gershwin in B*.

The company opens its Nov. 16 program with an excerpt of the first-of-its-kind one-act narrative work premiered earlier this year. They’ll restage a section set to a big band arrangement celebrating the 100th anniversary of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Blackstone is now a choreographer in residence at Giordano Dance Chicago; he sought to choreograph *Gershwin in B* in a classic Giordano aesthetic, even taking the certification program while developing.

“It’s like coming home, in a way, to be in a room of people that all speak the same language. says Blackstone. “I think that’s a testament to Gus’ impact and the impact of Giordano dance.”

Two more contemporary-fusion pieces, *Flickers* (2019) and *Unconditional* (2024), follow *Gershwin in B* on the bill, with So You Think You Can Dance choreographer Ray Leeper’s 2018 *Soul* closing, set to music by Gladys Knight and the Pips, Al Green and Tina Turner.

Leeper took his first master class at age 12—with Gus Giordano.

“I was in a sea of kids and somehow, Mr. G saw me in the back and pulled me up on stage,” Leeper says. “Jazz is making a comeback outside the Giordano world, so it’s really a pleasure for me to work with a company who can execute my style in the best way possible—and probably better than anyone I’ve worked with.”

Completing the program is a refreshed version of Gus Giordano’s 1983 classic, *Sing, Sing, Sing*.

“We know who we are,” Nan Giordano says. “My father used to say jazz dance is a temple of the time. It’s always ready to do something new. Honor the past and push forward.”



Giordano Dance Chicago performs Nov. 16 at the Mahalia Jackson Theater. Lauren Warnecke reviews dance for the *Chicago Tribune* and is a reporter for NPR member station WGLT.