

EAST BAY EXPRESS

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Soundwave Redefines the Who and Where of Sound Art

It runs through October in Oakland and San Francisco.

By *Madeline Wells*



• Photo courtesy of Stevie Sanchez

Marshall Trammell will perform at Warrior Ethos: Black Fighting Formations on Oct. 13.

In its eighth edition, San Francisco's [Soundwave Biennial](#), a two-month long experimental arts and music festival featuring local, national, and international artists, is doing things a little differently. For the first time, the nonprofit arts organization is trying to feature a majority of women and people of color guest curators and artists on its lineup — a lineup that, in the past, has been glaringly white. Plus, the festival is finally making its way across the bay for the first time since 2004.

"I feel like we all prefer to be here," said Sharmi Basu, guest curator for one of the festival's events in Oakland and electronic musician who performs as Beast Nest. Many of the sound artists on the lineup are based in Oakland, so holding performances in the Town allows

them to feel more at home. "We were trying to have our communities and our friends do the work in a place that they feel comfortable."

Basu has never curated on such a large, institutionally backed scale before, but she has performed as Beast Nest nationally and internationally, has presented a workshop series called "Decolonizing Sound," hosts a quarterly POC improvisation ensemble for writers, musicians, and dancers called the MARA Performance Collective, as well as a QTPOC music night called Brown Noise, and was one of the organizers for the first-ever Black and Brown Punk Festival in Oakland.

To find guest curators like Basu, chief curator Tanya Gayer wasn't looking for individuals with professional gallery or museum experience — rather, she was looking to include those with backgrounds in theater, dance, film, social practice, and music, so as to consider sound from as many angles as possible.

"I really wanted to see people hired on who were part of the club scene, or DJs, or who were organizing discussion groups, or actors," Gayer said. "We changed the dynamic of the community we're reaching and we're incorporating different mediums of art this year."

Soundwave ((8)) Infrastructure runs through October with six performances held in San Francisco and Oakland. If you're a newcomer, don't expect the academic, stuffy environment of yesteryear. None of it is just paintings on the wall — these are experimental, immersive, one-night-only performances that often incorporate dance, and some involve audience participation.

For each edition of *Soundwave*, artists are presented with a theme to consider: This year's is infrastructure. Many performers are thinking beyond just the joists and beams of city architecture to examine more human, intangible frameworks, such as interpersonal relationships, structures of community, and togetherness.

For the performance that Basu curated at the Lake Merritt Bonsai Garden on Friday, Oct. 5, titled *Time:Miracle*, she considered the immaterial infrastructures of trauma and healing and how they relate to time and space on a personal and historical level. It's an exploration of the systemic factors at play in oppression, featuring artists Titania Kumeh, Alexa Burrell, and Aja Archuleta.

Place plays an essential role in performances like Basu's. She sees the Bonsai Garden as a reflection of the themes at play in *Time:Miracle*. "The whole idea of the bonsai is shifting perspectives, going from macro to micro," she said. "The way that we heal goes through these external things in the community and also through these deep internal processes on a subatomic level."

Along with being more intentional in how they chose guest curators and artists this year, *Soundwave* organizers also chose venues that have been bastions for underrepresented groups within their neighborhoods. One such venue is the Eastside Arts Alliance in Fruitvale, where guest curator Ryanaustin Dennis is organizing *Warrior Ecologies: Black Fighting Formations* on Saturday, Oct. 13 — a collaboration with Music Research Strategies

and Black Organizing Project, inspired by narratives of fugitivity and solidarity during the Underground Railroad and Black grassroots organizing abilities in times of resistance. The lineup includes Marshall Trammell from the experimental music project Black Spirituals, as well as Mogauwane Mahloele and Jeramy DeCristo.

Dennis is an Oakland-based curator/artist/writer, as well as a founding member of the Black Aesthetic, a curatorial collective supporting Black visual artists. While organizing *Black Fighting Formations*, he made it a point to consider the audience he would draw.

"If you want to have these experimental avant-garde experiences, you need to think about who you want to make them available to as an audience," said Dennis. "It's not just the artists that bring the audience, it's also the space." He was pleased to see Soundwave expand outside of San Francisco, both for broadening its accessibility for East Bay residents and for the opportunity to expose non-locals to new spaces and experiences.

As far as Soundwave's effort to include more women and POC into the mix, Dennis said, "It's about damn time. That's just a base level — that's just America." While institutional, academic portrayals of sound artists are often "white dudes behind laptops," noted Gayer, in Dennis's experience, there has been a long tradition of POC and women sound artists. Maybe they aren't what some would categorize as sound artists, but they work within the same craft.

This year's Soundwave is all about bursting that bubble. The result?

"The folks who will come to see Aja and Titania and Alexa are not the same people who would have gone to the last Soundwave," said Basu. By broadening its scope both geographically and demographically with its artists and curators, the festival is likely to draw a very different, diverse crowd. It's an opening of aesthetics, and the result just might be something groundbreaking.

"Hopefully, this will help explode certain notions around what a sound artist looks like," said Dennis.