

# Merriweather Arts and Culture Center Annual Report for 2023

## Introduction

The Merriweather Arts and Culture Center (MACC)—formerly the Downtown Columbia Arts and Culture Commission—is a nonprofit organization working to expand artistic, cultural, civic, and educational programming in and around Merriweather Post Pavilion and downtown Columbia, Maryland. The Center was founded in 2013, and in 2016 it became the owner of Merriweather Post Pavilion, the iconic and beloved outdoor amphitheater surrounded by 40 acres of woodlands in the heart of Columbia, Maryland.

In 2023, MACC had its most successful year of programming since its founding, welcoming more than 18,000 community members to its events at Merriweather Post Pavilion, Color Burst Park, and elsewhere in Howard County. MACC’s season included events featuring a diverse lineup of local and national touring artists, educational partnerships with the Howard County Public School System and the Howard County Library System, a new series of teen programs and events, and a return of its classic programs including Merriweather Movie Nights and the Symphony of Lights.

In order to expand its impact and reach, MACC underwent significant organizational changes, including launching a new brand and website, growing its staff and board of directors, and strengthening key partnerships in the community. MACC also continued its vital role as the community’s steward of Merriweather Post Pavilion and its work to enhance the positive impact and cultural significance of the venue on our community.



Merriweather Post Pavilion

## Organization

The Merriweather Arts and Culture Center is a nonprofit community organization governed by a nine-member Board of Directors and operated by a staff of three, with the support of professional contractors and consultants, as well as key community partners. It works primarily in Downtown Columbia and is focused on nurturing a strong, cohesive, and collaborative arts and culture ecosystem in the heart of Howard County.

**Mission:** The Merriweather Arts and Culture Center is a nonprofit community organization dedicated to growing arts, culture and community in Merriweather Post Pavilion and throughout Downtown Columbia. As owners of Merriweather Post Pavilion, we work to enhance this cultural centerpiece and

the majestic woodland park that surrounds it through artistic and community programs and stewardship. In collaboration with community partners, businesses, government, and educational institutions, we produce, present and promote artistic and learning programs that engage, uplift, and inspire.

**Vision:** Our vision is to lead a thriving cultural ecosystem in Downtown Columbia where our local, regional, and global communities come together to celebrate the best of our cultures and experience the joy and wonder of the arts. Through a constellation of places and programs, Downtown Columbia is a place where art happens regularly, spontaneously, and inclusively.

**Values:**

We strive to ensure that artistic and cultural opportunities are available and appealing to all residents of Columbia.



Merriweather Teen Night

We believe the arts can help build community and are an important component in fulfilling the values upon which Columbia was founded.

We are committed to being transparent and responsive to the community.

Our success depends on partnerships and collaboration with the many existing arts and community groups who share our vision and aspirations for Downtown Columbia.

We want to expand the presence and reach of artistic and cultural programming in Columbia, including creating new spaces or incorporating art into existing spaces.

The Center believes in supporting visionary programming and activities that reflect and engage our diverse community.

We provide programs and activities to make Merriweather Post Pavilion accessible and appreciated by our diverse community, especially youth and families.

We aim to spark joy, creativity, and connection to help contribute to the vibrancy of our community and local region.

We aim to help provide engaging opportunities for every community member to be inspired and amazed by the magic of the arts.

## Leadership and Operations

For the Merriweather Arts and Culture Center, the last year has been full of exciting new programs and events, and in order to effectively run these programs, MACC has gone through significant organizational changes. Perhaps the most notable is our new trade name—the Merriweather Arts and Culture Center.

MACC's new brand name better reflects its ownership of the iconic Merriweather Post Pavilion, and our efforts to make it the most dynamic and impactful cultural asset it can be. The rebranding is part of a broader set of organizational changes and aspirations and is aimed at making MACC more recognizable and identifiable to local and regional audiences and funders.

Additionally, MACC refined its staffing structure in the past year—adding a new employee, Sharniece Bowens, in a Program Manager role, and redefining the role occupied by Megan Wills to focus on communications and marketing. This new position and staffing structure allowed MACC to grow its reach and develop new and expand existing programs. Ian Kennedy continues to serve in the role of Executive Director.

MACC is already looking ahead to adding additional staff in the coming years, but in the meantime, the organization is relying on key contractors, consultants, and partners to ensure its programs and operations meet high standards of professionalism.

In particular, MACC engaged consultants over the past year to assist with organizational and board development, fundraising, marketing, public relations, and event planning. With respect to the production of its programs, MACC continues to rely on industry professionals from throughout the region, including members of IATSE Local #19. Additionally, MACC's longstanding partnership with the Columbia Festival of the Arts (CFA) continues to produce significant benefits for both organizations and our local cultural ecosystem. MACC and CFA planned several events in the past year together and will continue to seek ways to create synergies between our organizations.

In addition to expanding its operational capacity through the addition of staff and contractors, MACC expanded its Board of Directors in early 2023 by adding two new members, Barry Curtis and Elizabeth Kromm, bringing the total to nine. The current roster of directors is:

**Candace Dodson Reed**, Chair; **Kenneth Ulman**, Vice Chair; **Jeffrey Lavis**, Treasurer; **Debbie Ellinghaus**, Secretary; **Maurice Bellan**; **Barry Curtis**; **Greg Fitchitt**, *ex-officio*; **Elizabeth Kromm**; **Louis Ulman**



Merriweather Movie Nights – Frozen Sing-Along



Rocky in Concert with the BSO

The Center’s directors have focused on guiding and supporting the growth of the organization and ensuring that its focus and operations are aligned with the mission, vision, and values of the organization and the community it serves.

The board expansion is also aligned with MACC’s broader push to develop a more robust fundraising program. As noted previously, MACC engaged a consultant to assist with the development of a fundraising strategy and new practices.

This work has already resulted in new and deeper relationships with donors and sponsors, allowing MACC to nearly double its contributed income in 2023 over 2022 totals.

While the Center owns and oversees the management of Merriweather Post Pavilion, it does not manage the day-to-day operations of Merriweather, including the booking and production of the concerts for which the venue is most known. Operations, booking, and promotions at Merriweather are handled by It’s My Amphitheater, Inc. (IMA), which manages the property according to the terms of a long-term lease between IMA and MACC. The Center works with IMA to schedule and produce community and cultural events at Merriweather Post Pavilion.

The Center’s operations are funded primarily by the rent payments it receives from IMA under the terms of the lease. In 2023, MACC also received grant funding to support operations and programming from the Maryland State Arts Council and Howard County Government. In addition, it increased contributed funding from donations and sponsorships from individuals and businesses in Howard County significantly, allowing MACC to offer new and expanded programs. While the bulk of its programming was offered to the community free of admission charges, MACC earned programming income related to a few of the events it produced and/or presented— notably, its main stage events at Merriweather Post Pavilion.



Merriweather Movie Nights – Black Panther

## Activities and Programs

In 2023, MACC built on its successful post-pandemic programming approach of building collaborative partnerships that are aligned with our vision and values. The result was a season of programming that exceeded MACC's own expectations.

MACC's programming season began in March 2023, when it hosted its first ever in-school artist residency. In 2022, MACC had been approached by its partner, the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), about creating opportunities for students to re-engage with in-school music programs. Distance-learning had caused attrition in their programs, and on top of that, both MACC and HCPSS had become aware of inequities with respect to arts education and enrichment across the county.

With that in mind, MACC, HCPSS, and the Columbia Festival of the Arts developed a plan to host in-school residencies in seven middle schools in and around Columbia where there are large populations of students who may not otherwise have access to programs like these. And following a well-received performance at the CFA's *Lakefest* in 2022, MACC secured hip hop duo *The Reminders* for this week-long project in March of 2023.

The response from the students, teachers, and administrators at these seven schools was nothing short of overwhelming. Some of the comments MACC received from students included the following: "They were incredible and creative" and "The singer was naturally gifted - they were awesome."

A teacher from Murray Hill MS said: "Every single one of my kids loved it. They couldn't stop talking about it. There were lots of smiles, and stories to tell the next day."

Another teacher said: "They were incredible! The most down to earth family! I love how they made sure to get ALL students involved (even the teachers danced a bit on stage). Thank you for this. It made my Thursday awesome!"

*The Reminders* were able to connect with more than 1,200 students across the seven schools during this inspiring week in Howard County, and students at each school were able to sing, dance, clap, and celebrate the joys of music with their peers.

### ACTIVITIES AT A GLANCE

3/24 – HCPSS IN-SCHOOL  
RESIDENCY WRAP PARTY

4/28 – BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

5/13 – BOOKS IN BLOOM AND  
MERRIWEATHER TEEN NIGHT

5/21 – GUSTER AND KYSHONA  
WITH THE HOWARD COUNTY  
YOUTH ORCHESTRA

6/21 – MERRIWEATHER MOVIE  
NIGHTS – FROZEN SINGALONG

7/4 – LUMINUS RACE FOR THE  
WORLD 5K

7/18 – MERRIWEATHER MOVIE  
NIGHTS – BLACK PANTHER

8/23 – MERRIWEATHER  
TEEN/MOVIE NIGHTS – CLUELESS

9/13 – THE BALTIMORE  
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA'S FILM  
WITH ORCHESTRA – ROCKY IN  
CONCERT

10/5 – MERRIWEATHER MOVIE  
NIGHTS – FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY  
OFF

10/15 – HOWARD COUNTY PRIDE

11/24 – 1/1 – MERRIWEATHER  
SYMPHONY OF LIGHTS

12/5 – MERRIWEATHER TEEN  
NIGHT AT THE LIGHTS



*The Reminders Residency in Howard County Public Schools*

At the same time that MACC was planning this residency, it was also working with HCPSS to build on a collaborative concert framework that it first created in 2018, when MACC and HCPSS brought touring group *TwoSet* to Columbia to perform with the Howard County Youth Orchestra (then known as the Gifted and Talented Orchestra). It followed up with a similar collaboration in 2022 with the group *Time for Three* at the Jim Rouse Theatre, before MACC ultimately set our sights on a main stage event at Merriweather Post Pavilion.

After months of calls and emails to agents and managers, in January 2023 MACC finally identified a touring group with broad enough appeal who was open to the idea of a concert with an orchestra comprised of high school students. The band, *Guster*, had performed numerous concerts with orchestras previously, but this would be their first with a youth orchestra. As the presenter and producer, MACC found itself often outside of its comfort zone, but was able to bring in new and existing partners to help ensure the concert was a success. Among those partners were a host of contractors and a few consultants, but most critical was the Columbia Festival of the Arts, which helped to both promote the show and coordinate production.

This partnership proved to be very successful, as the event exceeded its sales goal of 2,500 tickets, and the show garnered rave reviews from the audience, orchestra, and *Guster*, who remarked several times from the stage and on their social media about how excited they were to perform the concert and how much fun they had.

This was MACC's biggest event yet, and it temporarily overshadowed some of the other programs. For the second year in a row, MACC partnered with the Howard County Library System to bring its popular Battle of the Books event to Merriweather on April 28, with MACC helping to coordinate and facilitate use of the venue and providing assistance with production matters.

A few weeks later, in response to our community's need for new teen programming, MACC sought to create a space for teens to gather, socialize, and connect with their peers. Accordingly, the Center opened Merriweather Post Pavilion on a Saturday evening in May, and brought in a few activities, as well as student musicians and teen improv performers. The event was a great first step, and, to follow up, MACC established the Merriweather Teen Council, which would help guide additional teen programming and have its work supported by Howard County's Youth Engagement Programming grant program. MACC hosted a second Teen Night later in the summer, which included several activations and activities, a screening of the film *Clueless*, and a video game tournament on the big screen at Merriweather Post Pavilion.

In May, as part of MACC's vision of creating a thriving and connected cultural ecosystem in Downtown Columbia, the organization identified an opportunity to re-engage Battle of the Books participants by including an author of one of the books on the Battle of the Books reading list at the annual Downtown Columbia literary festival, Books in Bloom. Tae Keller, author of *The Science of Breakable Things*, participated in an author's talk and Q&A facilitated by MACC's Executive Director at Books in Bloom.



Guster with the Howard County Youth Orchestra

In June, MACC launched another season of its longest running program—Merriweather Movie Nights—with a sing-along showing of *Frozen*. Additional movie nights followed in July with *Black Panther*, in August with *Clueless* as part of the back to school Teen Night, and in October with *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

In September, MACC welcomed back the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for another successful 'Film with Orchestra,' which had brought an enthusiastic crowd to the venue in 2022. MACC used new marketing methods and created new partnerships with local businesses like Mayweather Boxing + Fitness Columbia to boost the visibility and attendance of 'Rocky in Concert,' a long-awaited collaboration with Philadelphia's The Mann Center.

In addition to programs at Merriweather Post Pavilion, MACC also presented a series of outdoor concerts at Color Burst Park in the Merriweather District. This series was a partnership with the Columbia Festival of the Arts and the Howard Hughes Corporation, and it was very successful and well-received. AMPED in the Park featured a diverse lineup of artists from across the country and represented many genres. The acts performing included *Las Cafeteras*, *Bassel and the Supernaturals*, *The Kentucky Gentlemen*, *The Honey Larks*, *Emily Wolfe*, *Emmet Cohen*, *Better off Dead*, and Washington, DC's *Rare Essence*.

In addition to producing and presenting events in and around Downtown Columbia, MACC also worked with community partners to support their programs and events, as it did in June with the Columbia Festival of the Arts' *Lakefest*, The 3<sup>rd</sup>'s *Women of Color Art Expo (WOCAX)*, *Luminus's Race for the World 5k*, and *Howard County Pride* in October.

As is tradition, MACC and MPP's season came to a close with the annual Symphony of Lights holiday lights event hosted on the grounds of Merriweather Post Pavilion. This year, MACC was able to provide free entry to one of the traditional walk-through nights for Howard County teens as part of its Teen Council and programming.

## Outlook for 2024

The Center is looking ahead to 2024 with great optimism. MACC has already engaged in talks with its key collaborators and stakeholders to build on its successes in 2023, and expand programming offerings in 2024. Additionally, MACC is continuing to focus on strengthening its organizational framework through staff and board development and training and capacity growth.