

# Durham native Ernie Barnes' paintings make the leap from the canvas onto the stage

## Entertainment

By Linda Haac

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Professional NFL football player-turned-artist Ernie Barnes created paintings that appear to dance off the canvas.

Now, the N.C. Museum of History is bringing some of the [late Durham artist's](#) paintings to life on stage as part of the museum's 18th annual [African-American Cultural Celebration](#) next weekend.

"A Celebration of Movement Inspired by Ernie Barnes" on Jan. 25 features North Carolina dance companies who have used Barnes' paintings as inspiration for their original choreography. The event, which kicks off the cultural celebration, is sold out.

On Jan. 26, a dance inspired by a version of "The Sugar Shack," Barnes' signature painting, will be part of the daylong celebration.

The dances coincide with the exhibit, "The North Carolina Roots of Artist Ernie Barnes," which launched in June and displays 37 oil-and-acrylic works and many of Barnes' artifacts. The exhibit runs through March 3 and has proven to be popular, attracting more than 65,000 visitors so far, said Emily Grant, the museum's youth and family programs coordinator.

Barnes' paintings, much like dance, are marked by a fluidity of form and the swirl of emotion. They celebrate the movement and rhythm of life: the marching band from Hillside High, or young women on Durham's Willard Street. Sports are displayed prominently, too, from a basketball player to a jump-roping figure to boxers in a ring to fellow football players.

"The movement piece comes in when you look at his work," said Grant, describing the dancing depicted in the paintings.

"What he's really known for is this unique style of elongation and energy and movement," she said in a phone interview.

*This Nov. 15, 1966, file photo shows Ernie Barnes, former offensive lineman for both the American and National Football leagues, standing alongside one of his paintings at the Grand Central Art Gallery in New York. Barnes retired from the NFL to pursue a career as an artist. The North Carolina Museum of History has an exhibit that showcased many of Barnes' original paintings, as well as artifacts from his life. John Rooney, File AP Photo*

He grew up in the Bottoms area of Durham during the segregated era of Jim Crow in the South. His mother enrolled him in tap-dance classes when he was a kid. He graduated from Hillside High School and attended N.C. Central University, then known as North Carolina College, on an athletic scholarship, majoring in art.

Barnes portrays all the hope and agony of his times, tackling his canvas with his paintbrush. He knew how to dance across a field with stamina and joy.

Barnes based “The Sugar Shack” on dances held at the Durham Armory during his time growing up in the 1940s and ‘50s. He first witnessed the social gatherings at age 13, when he sneaked into the dance hall against his mother’s wishes to observe “hop” night. R&B artists Clyde McPhatter and the Dominoes were playing.

“My little Christian mind was shocked,” Barnes later wrote, according to papers provided by his estate.

He figured he was among sinners, but still found himself captivated by the fluid movement.

Some 25 years after this, Barnes captured that movement, memorializing Durham’s African-American social scene and its cultural history.

The same year, Marvin Gaye decided to put “The Sugar Shack” on the cover of his 1976 album, “I Want You.” Gaye never returned the original painting, and eventually it was sold to actor Eddie Murphy. That explains why the museum is showing a slightly different version of the iconic piece in the exhibit.

The piece is memorably seen in the closing credits of the ‘70s TV series, “Good Times.”

The painting is marked, Grant said, by “movement and energy and color and vibrancy.”

On Saturday, Nicole Oxendine of Durham’s Empower Dance Studio will transform this painting into a dance called “At the Shack.”

The task of bringing the painting to the stage required some creativity. Oxendine said she placed a copy of the painting on the wall and “played with the image” as she choreographed the dance.

“As we’re creating it, we’re talking about that work and what that looks like,” Oxendine said. “This really gives us a sense of how to embody it. How do you actually take that and feel the energy? How does this dancer in the red dress enter? Does she come with this person here?”

“At the Shack” is set to Gaye’s songs “I Want You” and “Get It Up.” It will be shown in the museum’s 300-seat auditorium. Dancers will also perform “Guiding Light,” inspired by Barnes’ paintings “Lift Every Voice” (2008) and “Balance of Power” (1981).

“The big thing is you have to freely move it,” Oxendine said. “So, what’s happening? What were they talking about next? What happened before? Let’s not let it be static.”

## Details

**What:** African-American Cultural Celebration: “Celebrate! Culture, Kinship, and Community, ‘The Ties That Bind’”

**Where:** N.C. Museum of History, 5 E. Edenton St., Raleigh

**When:** Jan. 26, 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

- The Empower Dance Studio and poet J. Ivy will present “At the Shack” and “Guiding Light” from 11:45 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. Jan. 26 in Daniels Auditorium.
- “[The North Carolina Roots of Artist Ernie Barnes](#)” exhibition runs through March 3. Admission is free.

**Info:** [ncmuseumofhistory.org/ernie-barnes](http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/ernie-barnes).

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