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Celebrating Eva Cassidy With Dance

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River North Dance Chicago returns to Dance Celebration with a highly anticipated commission premiere of **EVA**. The work is set to music of Eva Cassidy, the gifted vocalist who worked in many genres and died at the age of 33 from cancer.

Randy Swartz, director of Dance Celebration was an avid fan of Cassidy's and several years ago suggested to Frank Chaves, artistic director of RNDC, that he would love to hear her music in a dance work. "It's been percolating for several years after Randy introduced me to her music and, of course, I fell in love with her. But it took a while to come to life," Chaves said at his studios in Chicago last weekend.

"The thing about Eva, she was not a woman of many words. I got to visit her family and found out more. She was known for her unique interpretations of classic songs. So choreographically, I wanted to glorify her style in these classic songs - the standards 'Autumn Leaves,' 'Stormy Monday,' 'Field of Gold' and 'Wade in the Water', they each tell a different dance story through her voice."



Eva Cassidy

Cassidy was on a promotional tour for her recording *Live at Blues Alley* in July 1996 when she was diagnosed with cancer. She died from melanoma the following November.



Frank Chaves

Chaves was able to obtain audio of Cassidy performing from her former boyfriend and bandmate. "I managed to edit different things she said that would segue into each song, to sound like one of her club concerts. It's a little haunting, but it offered a little more insight into the person and performer," he said.

"I wanted to find a way to add intimacy for people hearing her for the first time."

RNDC is a twelve-member company known for very stylized moves and sense of ensemble. "I think we are very emotive dancers. So many of our dancers could be featured soloists but they just work tremendously as an ensemble.

Since last fall, Chaves has also been developing another large premiere work "*Havana Blue*," which will premiere in Chicago the week after *EVA*. "We open '*Havana Blue*' at the Auditorium Theater in Chicago; it's a collaboration with the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic who will be onstage with us. It travels to a lot of

different areas of Cuban cultural dance," Chaves said.

Chaves and composer Orbert Davis, who also conducts the Jazz Philharmonic, traveled to Cuba to research the project which and developed the choreography and score together. "I wanted to include a dressed down version of a piece. Not in a club or theater setting. We were in Cuba and it such disrepair. I wanted to use that, in terms of the setting. The first sections go through and express the flavors of Cuba, sensual partner dancing, but contemporary choreography belonging in 2013" he said.

The choreographer's family left Cuba in the 1960s when Chaves was just six months old. "Orbert inspired me to write about the exodus from Cuba. That struggle that included my family," he noted. "This was my first time back and it was the trip of a lifetime. Thinking back when my family left and how difficult it is to leave that behind. People were on boats, or flying out or on inner tubes. In the finale we go back to the opening traditional costumes to show that we may have left the country, but not our culture."

*Performances of River North Dance Chicago - **The Eva Cassidy Project** - April 4-6; for complete information go to www.annenberghcenter.org*