

## Healing power of art: Alys Stephens Center to commemorate 1963

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On Sept. 15, 1963, a box of dynamite planted in hate exploded on the steps of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a central meeting place for leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Four young girls — Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley — were killed and nearly two-dozen people injured.



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The blast reverberated through the nation and caused a major turning point in the Movement, which led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Nearly 50 years later, that day has not been forgotten.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary, UAB's Alys Stephens Performing Arts Center is developing and producing community events and performances for the week of Sept. 15, 2013, to honor the memory of the four girls and engage the community through the healing power of the arts. The culminating event of that week will be the world premiere of a new work co-commissioned by the Alys Stephens Center and philanthropist Tom Blount.

The work, by composer Yotam Haber, will premiere on Sept. 21, 2013. Haber has titled the work "A More Convenient Season." It will be written to be performed by the Alabama Symphony Orchestra with guest conductor Damon Gupton and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church youth choir.

"The effects of the bombing in 1963 and the Civil Rights Act it spurred can still be seen in human rights movements around the world, and the events in Birmingham serve as a springboard in the struggle for equality for all," says Theresa Bruno, president of the Alys Stephens Center's Corporate Board. "The events and performance in 2013 will offer a time of community reflection on the past, evaluation of the present and hopeful dialogue about the future.

Haber named the piece from the text of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail": "... who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a more convenient season." The center will stage a community reading of the full letter in the week leading up to premiere.

Haber says the evening-length work will incorporate multi-media components including archival film, photographs and historical sound recordings from the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. It also will incorporate gospel melodies, hymns and protest songs. The project focuses on the tragedy and the larger issues of extremism in civil rights, race and religion. UAB's Alys Stephens Center is working with the Birmingham Convention and Visitors' Bureau, Mayor William Bell and Big Communications to dovetail this project in with the city's larger commemoration.

"The Alys Stephens Center's education program ArtPlay will play a major role in the commemoration. Education and outreach programs in music, dance, theater and spoken word are being planned throughout the year for students

and people of all ages,” Bruno says.

In spring 2014, the Alys Stephens Center will premiere the work on the West Coast in conjunction with Cal Arts, in a performance featuring the Cal Arts Orchestra at REDCAT (Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theatre).

Haber visited Birmingham March 28-31 to work with the Alys Stephens Center and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. For the project, he will draw upon the BCRI’s Oral History Project for sermons, field recordings and personal narratives from the event and its aftermath on following generations. He also met with living witnesses and survivors while here.

According to his website bio, Haber was born in Holland and grew up in Israel, Nigeria and Wisconsin. Haber says he arrives at this project from a past work he created: a cycle of three works composed about the music, culture and history of the Jewish diaspora in Italy. The first work was “Shemà” in 2000, for chamber orchestra and voice, drawn from a memorial service given in Milan in 1954 by the head Milanese rabbi to commemorate those fallen at the hands of fascism. In 2008, while a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, Haber explored the origins of Roman Jewish liturgical music and focused on 10 hours of reel-to-reel recordings of Roman cantors from the 1950s and ‘60s. These recordings were woven into two major works which completed the cycle: “death will come and she shall have your eyes” in 2008 and “New Ghetto Music” in 2011.

“I will be composing a score that owes a debt to the cultural, historical and musical legacy of the South, while emerging as a new, personal reaction in my own voice, in a fresh vocabulary of sound, through my own history, perception and experiences coming to America as an immigrant after a childhood in Israel and Nigeria,” Haber writes. “In the spirit of Dr. Henry Moskowitz, founder of the NAACP, and the ongoing history of African-American-Jewish dialogue, I wish to create a work that delves into larger realms of the struggle for human rights, religious freedom and racial harmony.”

For more on Haber’s biography and the project, visit [www.AlysStephens.org](http://www.AlysStephens.org).