

University of Southern Mississippi
the Arts University of Mississippi



Univeristy of Southern Mississippi

On the football field, Brett Favre calls the plays. But did he ever play a part in a play in a theatre production during his time at the University of Southern Mississippi? He holds numerous National Football League records, but has he ever recorded an album? Favre might be the most notable alumni of the school in recent decades, but he is not the only talent to pass through its gates. At Southern Miss, high-quality arts programs are cultivating the next generation of the state's artistic talent.

Southern Miss is one of only 24 schools in the country to be accredited in all four areas of higher education in the arts: dance, music, theatre, and visual arts. Accreditation speaks to the rigorous quality of arts education at the university but also hints at the comprehensiveness of the arts education that the school offers. The list of degrees and specializations available to students is exhaustive. Through the departments of arts and design, music, and theatre and dance, Southern Miss offers more than a dozen bachelor degrees and two dozen master degrees, as well as doctoral degrees in music. This diverse offering includes nationally distinguished programs and courses of study available at very few universities in the state and country. Examples, include the undergraduate curricula in sculpture and design, the master of fine arts degrees in theatre, bachelor of science degrees in the entertainment industry, and the doctoral degrees in music education and music performance.



Southern Miss dance program

A Jaw Dropping Experience

Perhaps the most important element of preparation for a career in the arts is performance. For students in the theatre department at Southern Miss, the personalized classroom training they receive is enhanced by the performance opportunities afforded by the eclectic season of productions that the Department of Theatre and Dance puts on every year. For 2009-2010,

the playbill spanned from Shakespeare to contemporary regional humor and edgy contemporary drama, with stops along the way for musical theater. Added to this variety in productions is the chance for students to work as paid actors for the university's Southern Arena Theatre, a summer repertory program that puts on three performances each summer and just completed its 33rd season.

The icing on the cake? A state-of-the-art facility dedicated in 2000 that includes three performance spaces ranging from 70-275 seats, rehearsal spaces, design studios (including a computer-assisted design lab), and faculty offices. Lou Rackoff, Director of the Theatre and Dance Department, spent most of his career as a professional actor and director and still remembers his first encounter with the department's facility when he arrived as a visiting guest artist.

"When I walked in, my jaw dropped to the floor," he said. "It's an unpretentious but well-designed building...a facility that most regional theatres would be jealous of." The advantage to this facility, said Rackoff, is that "students have the chance to work at a very high level"—and this pays off for them when they graduate. Most students leave the state to pursue graduate studies or internships and employment as working actors in cities across the country, from Atlanta to Los Angeles.

Like theatre students, the university's music students, who number more than 500, are able to hone their professional skills before they graduate. The School of Music puts on approximately 400 concerts and ensemble performances a year and all students in the program are required to perform. Outside the university's gates, many students find paid performance opportunities --at churches and events throughout the Hattiesburg community, as well as in the Mississippi, Tupelo and Pensacola orchestras, all of which are within a reasonable drive from Hattiesburg. The School of Music's symphony orchestra, comprised of between 70 and 90 students and now in its 89th season, performs between six and eight concerts a year to audiences of around 1,000 people. Over the years, symphony members have had the chance to interact with the impressive list of world-class talent that has visited the school--from classical stars like Placido Domingo and Yo-Yo Ma, to Ray Charles and Patti LaBelle. For this reason, the School of Music has adopted the motto "Bringing the World to Mississippi," which was originally coined by one of the school's many international students.

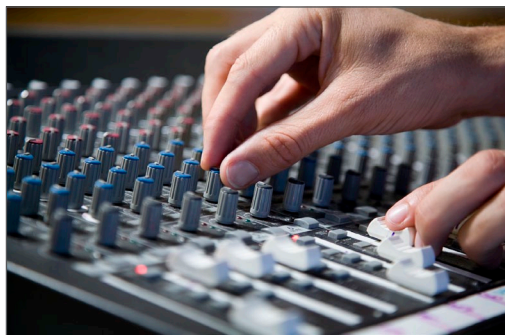
Making Records

Operating out of another corner of the School of Music is the Entertainment Industry program, the university's fastest-growing major. The program started approximately five years ago as an emphasis option within the music major. Today, the program has more than 150 majors in its two tracks, entertainment management or production, and the curriculum includes courses in everything from accounting to live music production. Darko Velichkovski, the former director of the Mississippi Orchestra, was brought to Southern Miss to create the entertainment industry curriculum. To him, one of the most significant elements of the program is that it attracts students who might not have otherwise gone to college, and provides them with a college education that goes beyond the vocational skills they could receive at the private technical institutes that offer specialized training in elements of music production.

Another draw of the program is what Velichkovski describes as the chance to "put your hands on something for real:" South City Records. About three years ago a group of students and two professors came together to create this company as a means of providing students with hands-on experience in all facets of the music production process: pre-production, production, mixing, and advertising. Today, South City Records is registered with the state as a tax-paying corporation and serves as an umbrella company for five different student-run record labels. The initial financing came from the small group of students and professors who launched the label three years ago. The company now has become self-sustaining: proceeds from the sales of initial production runs are put back into the company to pay for production of new albums and more additional production runs.

The labels, which cover the hip hop/R&B, country/bluegrass, rock, singer/songwriter and blues genres, each have their own talent, business and marketing functions and are continually identifying and signing local and regional talent.

So far, South City Records has released several eclectic compilation albums that showcase musical talent from throughout Mississippi, and several more are in the works. The label is creating opportunities for new and established local and international artists: from former Nashville artist Jacky Jack White, who



*The Entertainment Industry Program,
University of Southern Mississippi*

signed with the label upon retiring to a town outside of Meridian, to Omar, a recent graduate of Southern Miss who sings traditional Latin American bohemian ballads and is the first artist signed to the new Latin music label that the company is developing.

The diverse talent that South City Records showcases is not a happy coincidence. Rather, it is the logical embodiment of Mississippi's rich musical heritage and the continuing influence of this tradition. As Velichkovski says, even the alternative rock music scene in Mississippi is "all mixed up with the sticky, humid, blues thing" and this diversity is also the key to the record label's future success. "We do feel that we are uniquely positioned. We are in the cradle of American musical heritage... We are here at the source, surrounded by talent. I want the students to understand how important it is for them to position themselves uniquely [in the marketplace]."

Many of the Entertainment Industry program's graduates go out of state to find employment in New York, Los Angeles and Nashville, the country's major recording centers, but the ones who do stay in Mississippi find a place for the skills they learn in the program—not only in regional music venues and casinos, but also in the broadcasting, public relations and advertising industries. However, Velichkovski has a vision of South City Records growing beyond being a student entity to being the first professional step for graduates of the program—a place where they can "earn and learn" for a year or two.

Looking Beyond and Ahead

Student talent alone, of course, does not sustain the vibrant performing arts scene at Southern Miss. The audience is a crucial ingredient, and by all accounts the Hattiesburg community is exceptionally supportive of the arts. In fact, Bill Baggett, pro-

fessor and chair of the Department of Art and Design, describes Hattiesburg as a “hospitable and inviting place to be an artist,” a factor that has played no small part in anchoring him to Southern Miss, where he has taught since 1983. “The interaction between the community and university has kept me here,” he says. In turn, his influence on both the community and the university is visible in the form of two large scale murals he has designed and executed—one at the university’s student union building and the other at the Hattiesburg Public Library, which is recognized as the world’s largest stainless steel mural.

This spirit of support is embodied in the Partners for the Arts, a civic membership organization whose sole mission is to support the arts departments at Southern Miss. Founded in 1997 by a group of friends interested in promoting arts programming at the university, the group now has more than 300 members who raised \$87,000 in the most recent year. This money is all awarded to the arts departments at the university through a grantmaking process. Barbara Carter, the current president of Partners for the Arts, describes the “enormous energy” generated by the university’s arts activities and attributes it to interactions between friends—in their homes, at their churches, at social events and soccer games. Now, the organization is trying to expand its membership to include people from the greater Hattiesburg region.

Future of the Arts in Hattiesburg

So what does the future hold for Hattiesburg in terms of the arts? Some see increased collaboration between the town and the university, others see Hattiesburg’s emergence as a regional hub for the arts, and still others see efforts in Hattiesburg as a means of drawing attention to the work of Mississippi artists at the national level.

Susan Fitzsimmons thinks these goals are not mutually exclusive. In fact, she is contributing to several of them. A professor of art and a member of the board of directors of the Hattiesburg Arts Council, Fitzsimmons has spearheaded efforts to display student artwork at galleries and arts spaces around town. This is, in part, an effort to give students professional experience as exhibitors and artistic entrepreneurs because, as she says, “[there is] beginning to be more awareness on the part of the students that arts education needs to be entrepreneurial educa-

tion.” On the other side of the coin, Fitzsimmons is working with Bill Baggett and a New York artist to put together a traveling show of the work of Mississippi artists. This is an effort toward reversing the trend that she sees of importing art from other parts of the country rather than exporting it.

Also in the works is the rehabilitation of the Old High School in Hattiesburg, a building designated as a Mississippi Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The plan is to restore the building’s structural and historical integrity so that it can be put to good use. The renovated building is to include gallery space, and Southern Miss’s College of Arts and Letters plans to be a tenant, using the building for classroom and performance space. Though it suffered a setback in the form of a fire and faces significant financial hurdles, this project could come to embody the vision of greater collaboration between the university and the town in the arts arena.

Lou Rackoff, of the theater and dance department, thinks that the population growth that Hattiesburg experienced after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and other regional amenities—such as two hospitals and the nearby Camp Shelby military base—provide a great opportunity for the university’s arts programs. “We are trying to be a part of that [growth]....We think that our department, in combination with the School of Music and the Department of Art and Design, could comprise an arts magnet [for the region].”

But in the meantime, the University of Southern Mississippi will continue to produce graduates with the skills and experience to compete in the statewide and national arts industries. In many cases, Southern Miss graduates will be at an advantage for the professional opportunities they have already experienced by the time graduation comes, and the enthusiasm with which students embrace these opportunities is telling. Velichovski says this best: “[Our students] wake up eager. We are not here for academic exercise. You are building your life here.”