

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

# What do Billie Eilish and ‘Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood’ have in common? A Montrose dance studio



Jazz director Fred Diaz and co-owner and director Julie Kay Stallcup at Revolution Dance Center in Montrose. (Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

By MARY MCNAMARA

JAN. 24, 2020  
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**H**onolulu Avenue in Montr

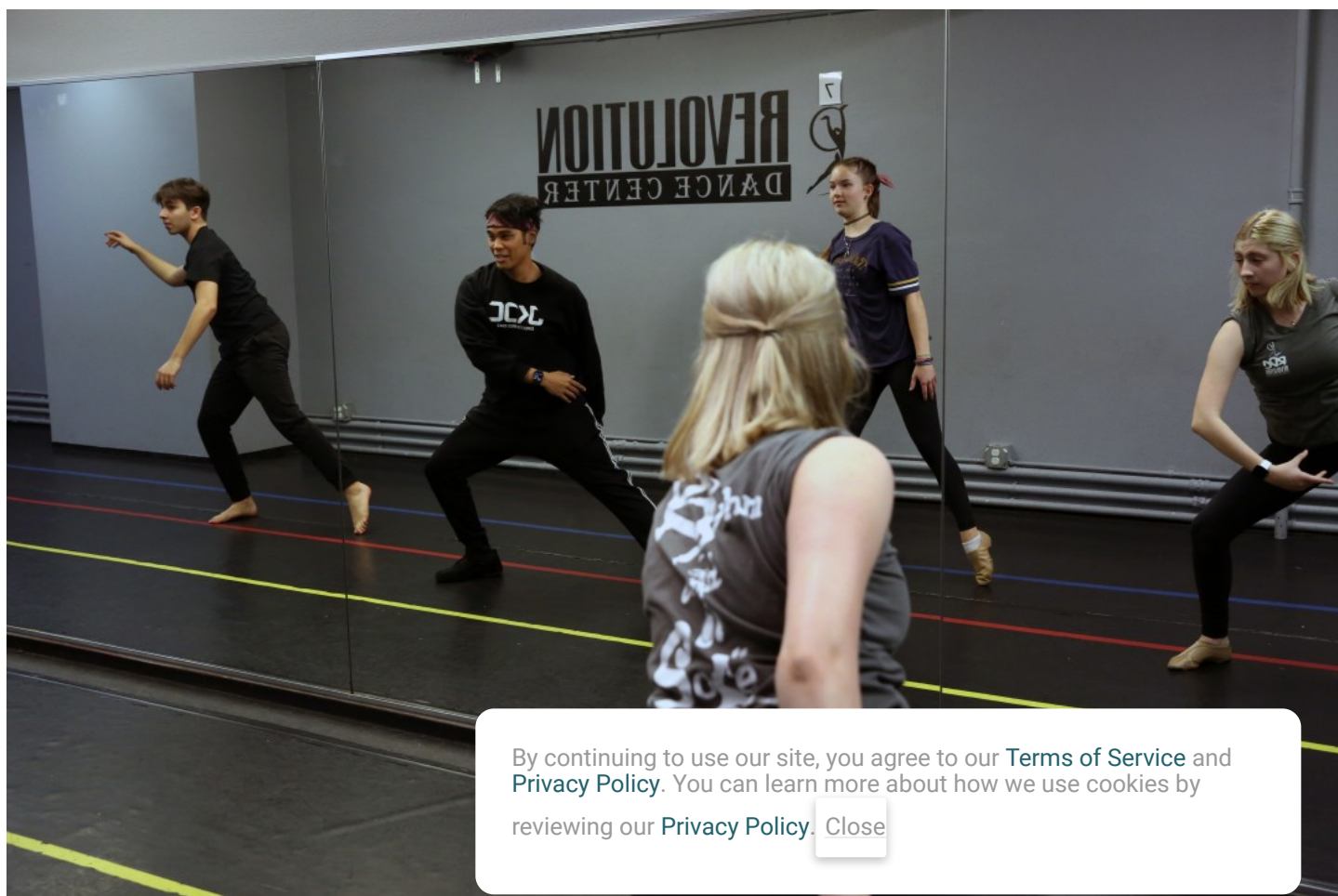
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Yes, Starbucks and Coffee Bean hunker down on opposite corners, but Lululemon, Topshop and the like are miles away. The boulevard, which runs for blocks, is lined with barber shops, the Once Upon a Time children's bookshop, Anderson's Pet Shop, vacuum and watch repair shops, Faye's Intimate Apparel, Aladdin Rugs and the bustling Black Cow Cafe. The retail mix bears little resemblance to such tourist magnets as Santa Monica Place or the Americana at Brand.

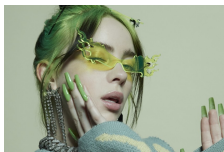
But right now there is nothing on Honolulu Avenue more surprising than the Revolution Dance Center. On Jan. 26, two of its former students will occupy reserved-for-nominees seating at the Grammys and, two weeks later, a third will be sitting among multiple nominees at the Oscars.

There are many fine dance centers in the Los Angeles area with famous alumni: The Millennium Dance Complex in Studio City was recently [featured in Vogue](#) for its commitment to diversity, its connection to stars including Jennifer Lopez and Ariana Grande and its history of boosting the careers of women and girls. Some, such as [EDGE Performing Arts Center](#) in Hollywood, stress the ability to help students perfect their artistry for film, television and stage.



Fred Diaz, second from left, leads a Revolution dance class. Among his former students are siblings Billie Eilish and Finneas O'Connor. (Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

Some have a broader mandate — for 30 years, the mission of the [Lula Washington Dance Center](#) in Los Angeles has been, according to its website, “to keep young people off the streets by giving them creative alternatives to drugs, gangs, violence and failure.” And many communities offer local dance classes that simply give kids a chance to learn while taking a break from the pressures of school and the distractions of all their many screens.



MUSIC

## Billie Eilish isn't stressing over the Grammys. She's busy worrying about the end of the world

Dec. 4, 2019

Revolution Dance Center, which has occupied a storefront space on Honolulu since 2006, falls into the last category. But it is also where 18-year-old Billie Eilish and her older brother, Finneas O'Connell, first collaborated on “Ocean Eyes,” the song that launched them to stardom. And it's the place where 10-year-old Julia Butters, the “American Housewife” star who stole two of Leonardo DiCaprio's scenes out from under him in Best Picture Nominee “Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood” learned to love performing.

Not bad for a dance studio a world away from the traditional enclaves of the entertainment industry.

Montrose is officially part of La Crescenta, a foothill community between La Cañada Flintridge and Tujunga that bills itself as “the balcony of Southern California.” On a clear day, you can see the downtown L.A. skyline, and on some days, the Pacific Ocean. Montrose has a smattering of Latinx residents and, in the last few years, become a [favorite filming](#)

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La Crescenta's best-known Hollywood connection is as the home of the notorious Kimball Sanitarium where actress Frances Farmer was given insulin shock therapy (Kimball was razed in the 1960s and the site is now occupied by a Ralphs). Today, locals are far more likely to be famous for their work on the Mars Rover at nearby JPL than for picking up statuary on awards night, but this being L.A., a number of residents work in the entertainment industry and many local kids take acting classes, do modeling and dream of stardom.

If you live in the area, as I do, and have children, it is likely that they will take a class at Revolution Dance Studio as my daughters did, when they were very young. Over the years, thousands of La Crescenta youth have made fun of siblings whom they watched practicing ballet, tap, hip-hop and lyric dance through a window that stretches between the raucous, Lego-enhanced displays of Tom's Toys and the sedate elegance of Executive Jewelers.

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Bouquets of little girls in tutus bloom on weekends, skipping and twirling their way into the glass and mirrored interiors. In the after-school hours, girls and boys in Revolution Dance sweatshirts and T-shirts, ballet tights, leggings and sweatpants make the block or so loop between the center, FroyoLife, Paradis ice cream, Starbucks and Coffee Bean.

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Julie Kay Stallcup is the director and co-owner of Revolution Dance Center. (Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

The director and co-owner of the studio is Julie Kay Stallcup, or Julie Kay as she is known by many — and she is known by many. With her long red hair, Arkansas twang and relentless positivity — “I like you,” she tells parents, “but I love your kids” — she is a recognizable figure in town. Stallcup keeps a trash bag taped to one of the studio walls in which the teenage members of one class must put notes describing whatever “drama they’re upset about today,” Stallcup says, “so they can leave their garbage at the door and just dance.”

Stallcup is happy to discuss her famous students, but those conversations are always couched in her love of dance, and her belief that every kid needs a place, in addition to home and school, where they feel safe enough to explore who they are.

Which may be why, for Eilish, O’ of the magic happened.

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As their fans know, Eilish and O'Connell grew up and were home-schooled in nearby Highland Park. Their parents, Maggie Baird and Patrick O'Connell, are actors; Eilish, who joined the Los Angeles Children's Chorus when she was 8, began writing songs when she was 11 and her brother, who is also an actor, began writing songs when he was 12. The siblings had been taking various Revolution dance classes for four years when instructor Fred Diaz asked Billie if she wanted to write and sing a song that Diaz would choreograph for the next recital. Instead, O'Connell gave his sister a song he had written for his band called "Ocean Eyes."

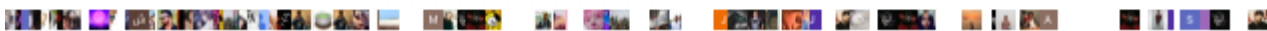


Billie Eilish

Ocean Eyes

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In November 2016, Eilish recorded the song and uploaded it to Soundcloud so she could send Diaz a link. Before he even began the recital choreography, the song blew up; a year later, "Ocean Eyes" was released by Darkroom and Interscope Records on Eilish's debut EP, "Don't Smile at Me," and Eilish officially became a star.

This year, her debut studio album, "When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?," landed [Eilish six Grammy nominations](#), making her the youngest-ever performer to be nominated in all four of the music academy's top categories — best new artist and record, album and song of the year. [O'Connell, 22, received five nominations](#), three of which he shares with his sister.

"It happened really fast," says Diaz the next ... He grins. Diaz, who had and Jennifer Lopez, did indeed collaborate performed by Eilish's classmates in 2016. Ironically, Eilish did not participate in her own

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number; a hip injury had sidelined her even before fame made afternoon dance classes impossible.

Both Eilish and O'Connell have repeatedly referenced the dance instructor whose request sparked their music careers and still keep in touch with Diaz, who has seen all of their local shows. "We still talk about how crazy it was," he says. "They still say, 'Thank you,' every time."



Dance teacher Fred Diaz asked his then-student Billie Eilish for a song. It ended up being "Ocean Eyes," written by her brother and classmate Finneas O'Connell. (Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

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"They are amazing kids, both of t

Stallcup still remembers the night she realized Eilish, who took classes in tap, ballet and lyrical dance at Revolution, could sing.

“We have this sleepover every year. The kids love it, and during part of it we ask the kids to perform something they’re good at, besides dance. And Billie sat down with her guitar on this little blue chair and sang, and we were all looking at each other going, ‘whoa.’ ”

Baird learned of the studio the way most local parents do — through word of mouth. “We were sitting behind someone at an Occidental College Children’s Theater production who was wearing an RDC T-shirt,” she said via email. “I asked her about it, and she told us that she loved it so much that we decided to check it out.”

“It was great right from the start,” she continued. “Billie loved her first teacher so much that the next year she cried because she didn’t want to have a different teacher. Despite her worry, she went in anyway and absolutely loved every single teacher she ever had there. Each year she added more classes and more teachers and the whole staff, starting at the top with Julie Kay, was wonderful. “

The center, Baird says, became an important part of the family’s life. Even with the studio’s competitive dance team, she says, the focus is not “on winning as the most important goal. They actually take most of the trophies they win and give them to some of their special needs classes. It is really a unique and wonderful studio.”

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Julia Butters, who played against Leonardo DiCaprio in the movie within a movie in “Once Upon a Time,” is a product of the Revolution Dance Complex. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

Julia Butters’ mother, Lorelei, also found the studio through other parents. Looking for a dance class for the then-very shy 2-year old, Lorelei went on Facebook and “everyone told us to go to RDC.”

Julia’s parents both work in the industry — Lorelei, in production; her husband, as an animator for Disney, and Julia had been a “baby model” — but it was at Butters’ first RDC performance that her mother became convinced her daughter should pursue acting. “When it was done, I asked her, ‘Julia do you love the stage?’ and she dropped down and kissed the stage. So we figured we should probably pursue that.

“It’s no coincidence that [Julia] d  
even if she didn’t ... I hope for eve

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A former dancer, Stallcup says she figured out by age 19 that what she really wanted to do was teach. Before RDC was formed, she taught in other small spaces around the area. In 2001, she

met her future business partner, Melissa Gerard, who had brought her daughter to a class after winning free sessions through a raffle. Stallcup, her husband Darrell and Gerard opened RDC, which has two large studios, two smaller ones and a tiny store selling dance gear, with 25 students. Ten years ago, they bought additional space on Honolulu and created four more studios. With a total of 16,000 square feet, the center now offers almost every kind of dance class.

“For me, a dance studio is like a church,” Stallcup says. “It’s where I go when I need to work things out. All I know is I love teaching dance, and I wanted to create a space where your kids can grow up, where they see the same people day after day.” Those kids include her own — Jett, 14, Gage, 12, and Zeta, 10 — and thousands of others.



Julie Kay Stallcup, center, leads a tap class. (Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

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Stallcup is happy to point out the

or show photos of Butters backstage at the Golden Globes that her mother sent, but she has no

big plans for Grammy or Oscar night. In fact, when asked, she said she has no idea when either event takes place.

“I’m thrilled for them, of course, I am,” Stallcup says “But I’m thrilled for all my kids. They are all doing great things. They’re all stars in their own way. This is a family. Once you’re in, you’re always in. No matter what.”

On a recent Thursday night, Stallcup led a class of 20 students, ages 8-11, through some tap steps to the beat of “Do You Love Me” by the Contours; in a smaller studio, Diaz took three older students through lyric moves to Tom Rosenthal’s “It’s been a Year.” Siblings did homework in corners, or pleaded for change to get Gatorade out of a vending machine, while a few of the tap dancers darted out for drinks of water and to find their jazz shoes. Outside, students for the next round of classes gathered, girls laughing into Starbucks cups and watching through the window as others stretched and took a few tentative stamps.

Somewhere, three former Revolution Dance students were preparing for two very big nights. In Montrose, though, it was just Thursday, and a lot of kids had dance class.

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Mary McNamara is a culture columnist and critic for the Los Angeles Times. Previously she was assistant managing editor for arts and entertainment following a 12-year stint as television critic and senior culture editor. A Pulitzer Prize winner in 2015 and finalist for criticism in 2013 and 2014, she has won various awards for criticism and feature writing. She is the author of the Hollywood mysteries “Oscar Season” and “The Starlet.” She lives in La Crescenta with her husband, three children and two dogs.

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