

Dear Mayor Jack Young; Council President Brandon Scott; and Members of the Baltimore City Council,

My name is Abdu Ali. I'm a music artist, writer, cultural worker, and the founder of as they lay, an art-making and programming initiative dedicated to nourishing emerging black artists in Baltimore City. For years, I've dedicated an abundance of time playing my part in transforming the Baltimore creative climate so that it can be more sustainable and inclusive for marginalized artists. Because of that, I believe that it is without doubt necessary for the city of Baltimore to allocate \$1,000,000 for COVID-19 relief artist funding.

I grew up in the heart of Baltimore on Pennsylvania Avenue and Martin Luther King Blvd in the humble housing community of Orchard Mews. I went to School No. 22 a.k.a. Samuel L. Coldridge Taylor and Booker T. Washington Middle school where I was fortunate to learn about the legacy of the black arts in Baltimore City — from our city being a hot spot for world renowned jazz artists who performed at staple venues like the Royal Theatre to discovering that one of America's best comedians Mo'Nique is from charm city. On my way to school I would walk past the Billie Holiday statue on Pennsylvania Avenue, I'd go to Shake N' Bake to dance to Baltimore club music for hours, and when I got old enough, I'd go party all night at The Paradox to see people shake off til dusk. As a shy black little queer kid who grew up with a working class mom, the spirit of the arts and culture of our city not only gave me a sense of pride and legacy, it also helped empower me to be the artist I am today. From conquering stages like the Kennedy Center in D.C. to performing in underground clubs in Berlin, I was able to take my evolution of Baltimore club across the globe. I was always struck to find out how Baltimore's music legacy impacted many people across continents. In 2016 *Thrillest* named Baltimore as one of the best cities in the United States for artists to live, and in 2019 alongside John Waters and Joyce J. Scott I was interviewed by the *New York Times* in a piece that deemed the city as a cultural beacon. Whether it be local or international media, when they decide to positively write about Baltimore, often they're speaking on the work of an artist or cultural worker. I myself have graced several media platforms from NPR to the France-based Les InRocks.

Baltimore's arts and culture deserves to be invested in for our youth, for our emerging black artists and for our economy. Arts and culture help drive cities' economies while also attracting fresh energy. Earlier this year, Maryland Arts pointed out that our state generated over 25,000 arts jobs and over \$960 million in economic activity. One could argue that Maryland actually has a good amount of arts funding but the question is how much of that is going to Baltimore City and specifically black artists or art districts? For years, the city government only seems to invest in tourism and arts institutions have been doing the bare minimum to support natives. Yet at the same time, these institutions and city officials often exploit the labor and legacy that native artists create when it's convenient for them. There are barely any black owned art galleries, music venues or creative spaces in Baltimore. And the Black creative spaces that do exist are often bullied out of their spaces or lack rightful investment to be able to afford to stay open. I'm excited to see a black arts district being developed in Penn North but one district will not be sufficient to support a black population that accounts for over 60% of the city.

Not only am I advocating for COVID-19 relief artist funding, I am also demanding that the officials of our city increase the budget for the arts and culture, give artists easier access to health insurance and an accessible request for proposal initiative that allocates commercial abandoned buildings at a very low costs to black artists so that we can turn them into future iconic art galleries, music venues, and multipurpose creative social spaces. Our artist community desperately needs continued post-pandemic financial support from City Hall. We demand that you redistribute Baltimore Police funding and invest that money into creative communities while also ensuring that funding is in the hands of black artists. Our artist community demands to be acknowledged and respected by our own city government as one of the most creative cities in the world. We demand change!

Baltimore's Own,
Abdu Ali