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Arts & Style

With 'Last Splash,' Kim Deal's band the Breeders seemed like rock's post-Nirvana future. Touring again 30 years later, they explain how they fell apart.



What happened to the Breeders?

STORY BY GEOFF EDGERS IN DAYTON, OHIO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MADELEINE HORDINSKI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

In a cluttered suburban basement this summer, Kim Deal cupped her hands over the mic to distort her lilting voice into something like the moan of a humpback whale, and suddenly it was 1993 again.

AhhOOOOOwah! AhhOOOOOwah!
A few taps on the snare rim and cymbal stand from her bandmate Jim Macpherson. Then Josephine Wiggs came in with the bass line, that inquisitive Morse-code riff that telegraphs within a heartbeat that you've tuned into the biggest hit of the Breeders' all-too-fleeting heyday. *Spitting in a wishing well!*

Blown to hell, crash — I'm the last splash
"Cannonball" was no mainstream chart-topper, but its delectably off-kilter riff was everywhere in the mid-'90s, making it the 22nd greatest indie anthem (according to *New Musical Express*), the 83rd greatest song of its decade (says *VH1*), one of the 500 greatest hits of all time (*Rolling Stone*). The Deal sisters' cooing vocals against their scowling guitars, those impenetrable lyrics, that lifeguard whistle beckoning us ... where exactly? The song was in "South Park," over the sports highlights, on MTV. If you were filming a pitch-black comedy about bank-robbing

cheerleaders, as someone actually did back then, you would definitely cue up "Cannonball" to score the madcap heist scene.

I'll be your whatever you want. The bong in this reggae song
For many critics and fans, though, the Breeders weren't just supposed to be the sound of 1993. They were supposed to be the future — a femme-powered vanguard of grunge that could have, should have, led the way in the post-Nirvana vacuum. But "Last Splash," the platinum-selling album that spawned "Cannonball," somehow ended up being the Breeders' last act in their prime.

"Sometimes I think, God, wow, we really should have probably done another Breeders record," Deal said dryly. "Because it really was quite popular." Popular enough that they are marking "Last Splash's" 30th anniversary by playing it live in its entirety, in a tour that comes to the Fillmore in Silver Spring, Md., on Thursday.

Instead, the Breeders disappeared at their peak, for reasons that are easy to itemize — the drug abuse, the writer's block, the fights, etc. — but hard to pin on one person. Like their greatest work, their mystifying collapse was a true collaboration.

SEE BREEDERS ON E8

From left, Josephine Wiggs, Kim Deal, Kelley Deal and Jim Macpherson make up the classic lineup of the Breeders.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

At Ground Zero, a cube stakes its claim in packed N.Y. arts scene

Solemn backdrop, bold aesthetic anchor \$500M Perelman center

BY PETER MARKS IN NEW YORK

The windowless, marble-clad structure sits on the Ground Zero site like a giant sugar cube. Or more aptly, perhaps, like one in a pair of massive stone dice: The new, aesthetically bold Perelman Performing Arts Center looms as a breathtaking, \$500 million gamble that theater, music and dance will draw culture lovers to a hallowed patch of the city better known for tears than applause.

"At night, the building actually glows from within," architect Joshua Ramus of the REX design firm said as he led a tour of the Perelman's stylish interiors, pointing out the half-inch slab of translucent marble in which the building is encased. The intent was to radiate drama in respectfully muted tones — a presence, Ramus said, "that was pure and

elegant, and a little bit deferential."

The test of the impact of the arts complex, with three flexibly conjoined performance spaces on one floor, starts with an opening show next Tuesday, under the guidance of seasoned theater professionals: artistic director Bill Rauch, the longtime head of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival; executive director Khady Kamara of Second Stage Theater and, before that, Arena Stage; and producing director Meiying Wang, formerly of the Public Theater.

Their formidable job is to carve a new niche in the city's arts scene, a crowded marketplace fraught with economic risk. They have some reassuringly important sup-

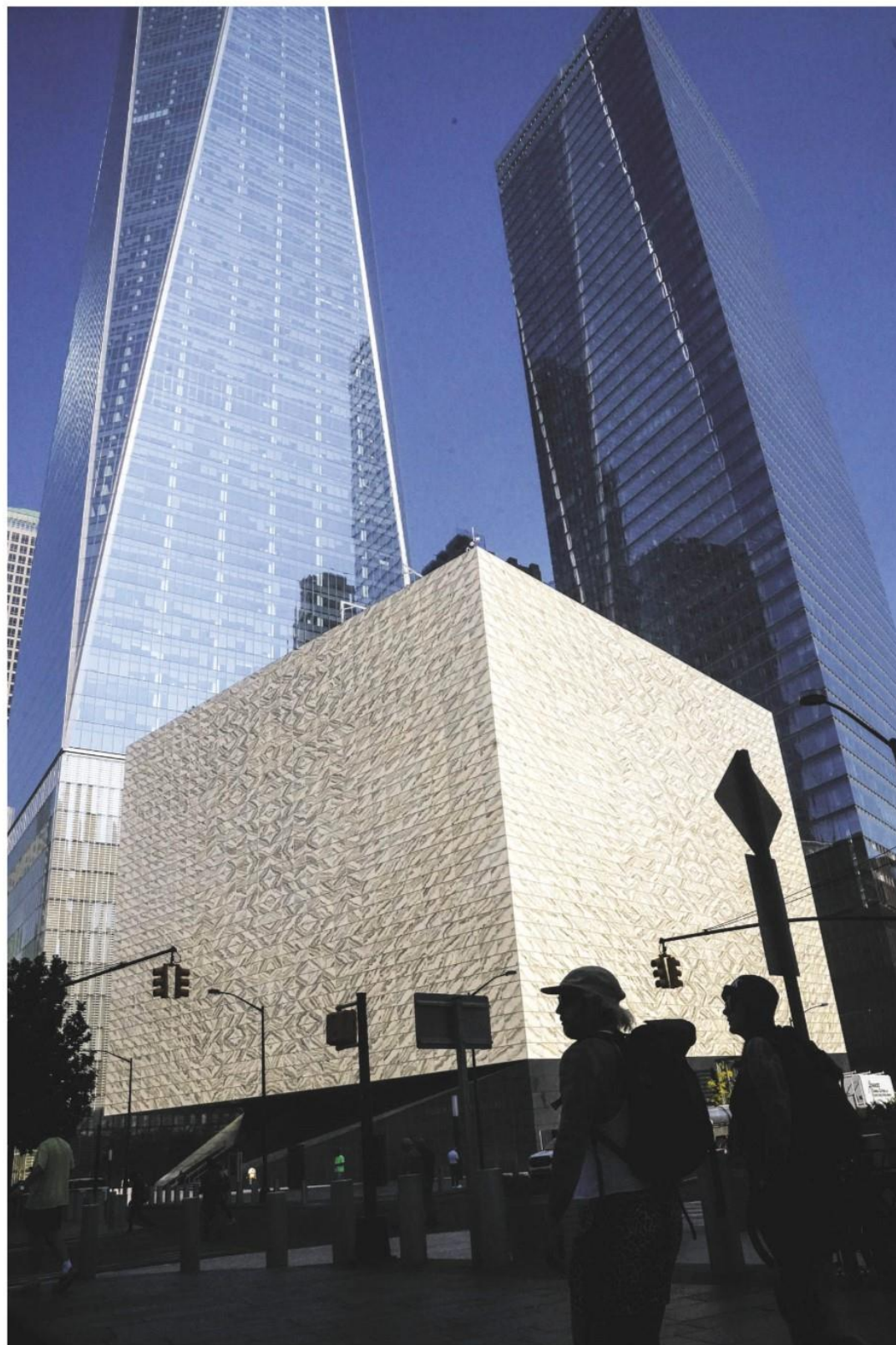
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The Mona Lisa of modern art makes it to the Met E6



REBETO MATHEWS/AP

PERELMAN FROM E1

port. Among key backers is former mayor Mike Bloomberg, who chairs the 31-member board and donated a reported \$130 million to the center's creation; also on the board is the financier for whom the center is named — Ronald O. Perelman, who gave \$75 million.

It's not as if Manhattan, one of the world's most densely dotted theater landscapes, has not seen its share of daringly heavy arts lifts of late: In 2019, the Shed and its 200,000-square-foot Bloomberg Building opened at Hudson Yards, with multiple theaters and galleries. And 2021 saw the birth of Little Island, a cultural gem offering outdoor concerts and shows on 132 distinctive, tulip-shaped pillars on a 2.4-acre pier in the Hudson River. With Broadway and off-Broadway as fairly close neighbors, and a variety of other cultural magnets everywhere from the Upper East Side to the Brooklyn waterfront, a newcomer like the Perelman has its work cut out for it.

The unique location, though, imbues the 117-foot-tall arts center with a special significance that, according to the people in charge, will dictate what will happen here. "A lot of what drove the programming decisions was where there was that emotional hook," Rauch said in an interview in the center's offices adjacent to the Perelman.

In New York, a beacon to the arts rises on hallowed turf

The 129,000-square-foot Perelman Performing Arts Center, wrapped in translucent marble panels, rises at Ground Zero in Manhattan. Its three performance spaces, when combined, can hold up to 1,000 patrons.

"That's beautiful, and that's meaningful. What does it mean to do X, Y or Z at the World Trade Center?"

"You walk by that North Memorial Pool on your way in and your way out," he added, referring to one of the two immense pools constructed in the footprints of the twin towers. "It's right there. And that drove a lot of our thinking."

Last week, on the anniversary of the day 22 years ago that the towers were obliterated by terrorists, a Ground Zero tradition continued in which the names of the nearly 3,000 9/11 victims in New York and Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon were read aloud. The confluence of events could not be starker. Just days later, the doors of the Perelman will open to a future of human inspiration.

What does it require, making art on the site of so much horror? Where some of the audience will recall Sept. 11, 2001, as if it were yesterday, and others would not have been born when it occurred, or are too young to remember?

Kamata noted that, between working New Yorkers and curious tourists, 50,000 people cross the World Trade Center campus daily. The arts center, she also observed, sits atop a network of 13 subway lines, and the building's foundations were specially fortified to cancel noise and

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“THE CORE OF OUR MISSION IS TO CONNECT AUDIENCES AND ARTISTS, AND TO TELL STORIES THAT KEEP US CONNECTED AND THAT WORK TOWARD CIVIC HEALING.”

Khady Kamara, executive director of the Perelman Performing Arts Center



PHOTOS BY BEBETO MATTHEWS/AP

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vibration. Somehow that notion of a crossroads both practical and emotional informs the Perelman's own path.

“The core of our mission is to connect audiences and artists, and to tell stories that keep us connected and that work toward civic healing, which is a term that Bill uses beautifully,” Kamara said. Part of the challenge, she added, is persuading passersby to spend more time on the World Trade Center site, to see it as a destination for entertainment. (Steps away on the campus, the renowned Oculus, designed by architect Santiago Calatrava, is a combination transit hub and shopping mall.)

“They can just stop by to rest a bit,” Kamara said of the Perelman. “They can just stop by to enjoy the beautiful lobby that we have. They can just stop by for the free programming on our lobby stage. Or they can just stop by for a juicy burger.”

Or, of course, for a show. The Perelman does have a restaurant, operated by Marcus Samuelsson and designed by set and eatery designer David Rockwell, and a balcony overlooking the canyons of Lower Manhattan for private events. But the centerpiece of the 129,000-square-foot arts center — devised, Ramus said, as a kind of “mystery box” — is the upper level and its three performance spaces.

When combined, they can seat as many as 1,000 patrons. Heavy, acoustic “guillotine” walls rapidly rise and descend to create smaller spaces; the staff has identified as many as 60 configurations for productions.

“You could do a rock concert in one space and spoken word in another,” Ramus said, “without any difficulty whatsoever.”

The Perelman's 2023-2024 season is a blend of music, dance, theater, opera, comedy and lectures. The programming begins Tuesday under the thematic umbrella “refuge.” The five-night concert series will highlight, for instance, musicians from around the world who have settled in New York, among them Laurie Anderson, Raven Chacon, Angélique Kidjo, Wang Guowei and Michael Mwenso. Other nights in the series will be centered on education, memory, family and faith, and feature Com-

Foot traffic and transit nodes at the arts center make it something of a crossroads, says Executive Director Khady Kamara, top left. Artistic Director Bill Rauch, top right, said its Ground Zero location will inform artistic choices. Architect Joshua Ramus, above, said the translucent marble exterior's glow is meant to radiate drama in respectfully muted tones.

mon, the Klezmatiks, Mahani Teave, Shoshana Bean and Martha Redbone. Tickets prices vary by event but are generally \$50 to \$150, and discount programs are available.

“You can visit the building multiple times and have a completely different relationship between spectator and artist,” Rauch said. “I think that there’s a metaphor working there, about the need to change our perspective on each other. And God knows right now, we feel so locked as a society in certain ways, because we’re not willing to consider that maybe we need to look at people who are different from us from a different angle. And so I think that part of the beauty of that building is how can we program it to really reinforce that.”

Among other productions in the inaugural season: director-choreographer Bill T. Jones, with the world premiere of “Watch Night,” a “genre-defying exploration of justice and forgiveness”; “An American Soldier,” a new opera by Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang; “Between Two Knees,” by the Indigenous sketch comedy group the 1491s; and the Motion/Matter street dance festival, as well as a speaker series featuring Jada Pinkett Smith and Kerry Washington. And that’s not to mention a radical reinterpretation of, of all things, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Cats,” inspired by ballroom culture and directed by Rauch and Zhalion Levingston.

As producing director Meiyin Wang described it, the impulse was to create a center built on the power of individual artistic expression, not agendas.

“My values are very aligned, in terms of the work of the artists that we are excited by or passionate about,” she said. “To put Indigenous work into a season should not be a political statement. It’s because these are exciting artists. It’s interesting for me; it wasn’t political. It’s artistic-led.”

Some events have already sold out, so maybe the time is ripe for a new phase in the evolution of Ground Zero.

“The building was designed to house work that affirms life and affirms community and brings people together,” Rauch said. “And, you know, the ultimate response to destruction is creation, and the ultimate response to hatred is love.”