EVIDENCE, On Stage

Brooklyn dance company at DPAC

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DURHAM — Choreographer Ronald K. Brown found inspiration in the music of Stevie Wonder for his newest dance, “On Earth Together.”

Brown’s Brooklyn-based company, EVIDENCE, A Dance Company, performs this 2011 work, as well as his 1999 “Grace,” at the American Dance Festival through Saturday at the Durham Performing Arts Center. EVIDENCE shares the program with Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, which will perform Donald McKayle’s classic 1959 “Rainbow Round My Shoulder” and Ulysses Dove’s 1986 “Vespers.”

Wonder sings songs of love and compassion as well as about troubles in the world that need addressing in order to make the world a better place, Brown said.

For the new work, Brown uses Wonder’s “All I Do,” “You and I,” “Blame It on the Sun,” “Evil,” and “Jesus Children of America.”

The choreographer said he chose to begin his dance on a joyful note to Wonder’s love song, “All I Do,” with its refrain, “All I do is think of you.” The death in March of a beloved mentor, Sherrill Berryman Johnson, who started the dance program at Howard University, prompted this choice, he said.

She would call Brown and others at 6 a.m. and say “Why aren’t you up doing your work?” Brown recalled. He was with

See ADF, Page C7
love song, "You and I," which opens with: "Here we are on earth together, It's you and I." Instead of seeing the song as about two people in love, Brown views it as a way to connect with other people with whom we share this planet.

Wonder's "Blame It On the Sun" calls for personal responsibility for one's behavior toward others rather than the human tendency to blame everything other than oneself. "Evil," addresses the force that must be overcome in the lyrics, "Evil, why have you engulfed so many hearts? ... Evil, Evil, why have you destroyed so many minds?"

In the past, Brown used "Evil" and also Wonder's "They Won't Go When I Go," for his own solos, he added.

In "Jesus Children of America," Wonder incorporates part of the children's song, "Jesus Loves the Little Children of the World," and questions the sincerity of some religious leaders to address the problems that children face in today's world. "The children are in danger. We need to take care of the children here," Brown said.

The choreographer said he was excited about sharing an ADF program with Dayton Contemporary Dance Company — something that's never happened before at the festival. "I love the company," he said Brown also spoke of the respect and affection he has for current artistic director Debbie Blunden-Diggs and for her mother, the late Jeralydene Blunden, who founded the Dayton Company in 1968.

Blunden-Diggs has been with the company in various roles for more than 30 years. She began dance training at age 5 and joined the company as a dancer at age 12, according to the company's Web site.

"Her mother is another angel in my life who's been so supportive on so many levels. ... There are people up in heaven helping us. They give me a kind of light that helps me do my work in the world," Brown said.