

Sports, Arts, & Entertainment

Mississippi Arts Commission announces five 2026 Governor’s Arts Award recipients, including the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra



Jesse Robinson



Heather Christian



Dottie Armstrong



Greg Harkins (Photo Credit: Samantha Yancey)



Mississippi Symphony Orchestra (MSO)

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JACKSON, MS – The Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC), in partnership with the Governor’s Office, is pleased to announce four outstanding artists and one legacy arts organization as recipients of the 2026 Governor’s Arts Awards.

- The 2026 recipients and awards are as follows:**
- Jesse Robinson** – Lifetime Achievement
 - Dottie Armstrong** – Excellence in Arts Education
 - Heather Christian** – Excellence in Music Composition
 - Greg Harkins** – Excellence in Traditional Craft
 - Mississippi Symphony Orchestra** – Excellence in Performing Arts

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The Governor’s Arts Awards is Mississippi’s most prestigious award for living artists. The awards are given to individuals and organizations as recognition for outstanding work in their artistic disciplines, arts-based community development, and/or arts patronage. For 38 years, MAC has partnered with the Governor’s Office to host the Governor’s Arts Awards to honor those who have shown excellence in the arts. The collaboration showcases the strong partnership between the arts and government.

The 2026 recipients will be recognized at the award ceremony on Thursday, February 12, 2026, at a new location, The Westin

Jackson.

“As we have continued to elevate the awards, we have grown out of the beautiful auditorium at the Two Mississippi Museums,” said David Lewis. “This was our driving force in the search for a new venue. We found the perfect space at The Westin Jackson, and we are pleased to be able to offer more public seating this year and we hope everyone will join us in honoring these incredible Mississippi artists in February.”

A public reception will take place at 4:30 p.m. preceding the ceremony at The Westin Jackson. The ceremony will begin at 6 p.m. MAC and Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB) partner each year to record and broadcast the award ceremony for television and radio. The ceremony will air on MPB in March of 2026.

About the Recipients

Jesse Robinson, born in 1944 in Mileston, MS, is a masterful guitarist and vocalist. He began playing guitar at six and moved to Jackson as a teenager, where he became active in the local music scene, competing at the Alamo Theatre and performing at various venues. After a period in Chicago, he became a key figure in the blues and jazz scene, leading bands and collaborating with artists like Sam Myers. Robinson toured with Little Milton and Bobby Rush, and performed frequently in Jackson, contributing to the late-night blues tradition at the Subway Lounge. In 1971, he returned to Jackson and formed the Master Sound Band. Inspired by his time in Chicago, Jesse launched the "Blue Monday" series at Dorsey’s. In 1986, he established the Knee Deep Band and continued to perform actively. A strong supporter of the blues community, he helped found the Central Mississippi

Blues Society and performed with the B.B. King Blues Band after King's passing. As a music education advocate, he worked with Mississippi State University's "Blues in the Schools" program from 2000 to 2014, reaching out to K-12 schools to inspire students through music. Jesse was honored with a Mississippi Blues Trail marker at The Iron Horse Grill in Jackson, in March of 2025. Throughout his career, Jesse Robinson has been committed to preserving and celebrating the blues as an essential American art form.

Dorothy "Dottie" Armstrong grew up on a dairy farm in Jacksonville, Florida, entertaining her six younger siblings with sock puppet shows. Despite her passion for creating, she believed she lacked artistic talent in her youth, missing opportunities as a student at Florida State University and the University of Southern Mississippi. Her artistic journey flourished when she became a high school English teacher, creating posters and illustrations for her lessons. Encouraged by her superintendent, she pursued a master's degree in art education and advocated for an art program in the Newton School District. She developed the arts program, including the curriculum. For nearly half a century, Dottie has taught and inspired thousands of students through art. In addition to her teaching, Dottie created murals and public art in Newton and the surrounding areas. She helped promote local talent by hosting art shows. After retiring from teaching in 1999, she offered private classes in her studio known as "The Secret Garden Art Studio" built by her husband. Even

after undergoing open-heart surgery in 2025, she continued to nurture students of all ages in her studio, a vibrant space for creativity.

Heather Christian is a Drama Desk and two-time Obie Award-winning composer/playwright/performer known for her music-centered shows and rituals. A Natchez native, she has won notable awards, including the 2021 Richard Rodgers Award and the 2024 New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Recent projects include Oratorio for Living Things (Ars Nova, Signature Theater), Animal Wisdom (The Bushwick Starr), and I Am Sending You the Sacred Face (Theater In Quarantine/YouTube—Vulture's Top Theater Experience of 2020). She is currently working on a Broadway-bound adaptation of the beloved children's book A Wrinkle in Time with playwright Lauren Yee, set to premiere in 2027. She has been named the NYC Signature Theater's new resident and will premiere three new productions across their 2025-2026 season. Christian has composed for film and TV, including The Craft: Legacy and A Good Girl's Guide to Murder. Additionally, she has released 11 records, taught vocal-based music composition at NYU and Princeton, and owns and operates her own recording studio in Beacon, NY. She can be seen regularly in concert halls and dive bars as Heather Christian & the Arbournauts.

Greg Harkins is a Master Chairmaker with 50 years of experience creating heirloom-quality furniture and is famously known for his iconic rocking chairs. He

has achieved national and international recognition through festivals, exhibitions, and features in various media. Despite his travels, Mississippi remains his home, providing him with clarity, purpose, and inspiration. Raised in Jackson, Greg is a seventh-generation Mississippi Irish Catholic. He spent summers in Thomastown, where he began an apprenticeship in 1976 with Master Chairmaker Tom Bell. By 1978, he founded Harkins Woodworks in Vaughan, and two years later, he gained fame by presenting a rocking chair to President and Mrs. Reagan at the Neshoba County Fair. Greg's craftsmanship is celebrated globally, with furniture in all 50 states and over 35 countries. He has gifted chairs to six Presidents and Pope John Paul II, but it's the working families for whom he makes chairs that he views as his heroes. As a cultural ambassador for Mississippi, Greg's creations embody the state's heritage and hospitality, such as the 10-foot-tall Harkins Chair at the Mississippi Agricultural Museum. After five decades, he continues to mentor his apprentice, Hodges Boland, and plans to establish the St. Anne School of Arts and Crafts in Canton.

The Mississippi Symphony Orchestra (MSO) is the largest professional performing arts organization in the state and has been a cornerstone of Mississippi's culture since its founding in 1944. Based in Jackson but serving the entire state of Mississippi, MSO is dedicated to enriching, inspiring, and educating communities through the power of live orchestral music. Under the leadership of Music Director and Conductor Crafton Beck,

MSO presents a vibrant season of concerts ranging from masterworks of the classical repertoire to pops, chamber music, outdoor performances, and special collaborations that highlight the richness of Mississippi's artistic landscape. With a mission to bring music to all Mississippians, MSO reaches thousands each year through statewide touring, community partnerships, and educational initiatives. Its education programs—including school concerts, string instruction, and outreach to young musicians—help cultivate the next generation of artists and audiences across urban and rural communities alike. From the grandeur of its symphonic series to the beloved annual Pepsi Pops at the Reservoir, the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra serves as both a cultural ambassador and a unifying force, celebrating the shared experience of music while continuing to expand access and impact throughout the state.

MAC seeks sponsorship support annually to produce the Governor’s Arts Awards. If you are interested in sponsoring the awards this year to help honor these exceptional recipients, please contact communications@arts.ms.gov or visit arts.ms.gov/gaa.

Award recipients are nominated by members of the public and selected by a committee of community arts leaders and industry peers. Recipients are not required to be Mississippi residents but must have significant ties to the state through some years of residency. Nominations for the 2027 Governor’s Arts Awards will open in April 2026.



Watch for The Mid-South Tribune’s “Charlie Kirk, Safety, and First & Second Amendment Rights!” Special Edition.

