Twenty-five years ago, Lane Alexander and his partner Kelly Michaels started a small dance festival called the Chicago Human Rhythm Project (CHRP). With Michaels' background in modern dance and Alexander's in tap, the summer one-off in 1990 celebrating American tap dance raised money for Chicago-based organizations fighting HIV/AIDS, which would eventually claim Michaels' life. CHRP has now grown into a robust non-profit dance organization, boasting semi-annual festivals, educational programs throughout the community and abroad, and an international foot drumming festival called Global Rhythms.

With no signs of slowing down, Alexander continues to push the envelope of possibilities for a relatively small organization, and has developed it into one of the world's leading presenters of tap and percussive dance forms. With so many initiatives, plus a resident tap ensemble called BAM! and managing a full line-up of classes at the American Rhythm Center, CHRP's home at the Fine Arts Building, the company's website is almost as overwhelming as Lane Alexander's to-do list (presumably). Yet he continues to have new ideas, the latest being the first-ever Chicago Rhythm Festival (CRF).

In an interview with Windy City Times, Alexander was quick to point out that CHRP's mission is about much more than tap dance; he has studied the effects of wide-spread homogenization of dance with Western concert dance forms prioritized by funding organizations, news media, and presenters. Moreover, Alexander's credo places rhythmic dance at the center of our social and cultural identities. Native dance forms can differentiate peoples, or unite them. Indeed, tap dancing is a fusion of West African and Irish foot drumming that has grown through the centuries to represent something truly American. "The dance ecosystem has been built to serve ballet and contemporary dance. … We serve a niche that is not served by the dance industrial complex. About $175 million is invested in modern dance through universities. The National Endowment for the Arts gave $9.2 million to dance last year; $4.6 million went to modern; $4.4 million went to ballet. That leaves $200,000 for everybody else."

Lack of opportunity from foundations, federal and local funding organizations and academic institutions has, to a large extent, provided the catalyst for the many initiatives CHRP undertakes. CHRP tries to unite big-budget programs and fringe projects by participating in the concert dance paradigm, and also through engagement with and in a diverse range of communities.
"We don't aspire to be like ballet and contemporary dance in many respects. We don't want to be Cordon Bleu—we want to be soul food, white pudding, beans and rice... and if we like, we'll serve it on a blanket with children and elders as a part of the feast," said Alexander. "We can conform to the 'temple' model, but it is not our paradigm or our first aspiration. Our traditions are different. It's called the Human Rhythm project, not 'The Chicago Tap Company,' because there's a social and political component to our mission.

"Almost all of human culture has some very deep ancient rhythmic tradition, and the goal is to bring people around that affinity, get people to lower whatever it is that divides us, find a point of similarity, and build on that. We use rhythm as that affinity point to build bridges between communities and artists."

The "Rhythm Fest" is built on this idea that dance doesn't have to be divisive by joining together five local dance companies to bring dance into the neighborhoods in a series of free performances called STOMPING GROUNDS. BAM! is joined by Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theatre, Mexican Dance Ensemble, Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago, and Trinity Irish Dance Company, who will each host free performances at a complimentary with three other participating companies performing for a potluck of amazing percussive and rhythmic dance performance ranging from flamenco to traditional African dance. Alexander sees the event continuing, growing each year toward a large cultural festival that features visual and culinary arts, in addition to dance.

The inaugural CRF kicks off Tuesday, April 14, with a panel discussion presented by Audience Architects and featuring all five artistic directors from STOMPING GROUNDS companies. STOMPING GROUNDS performances take place on April 18 at the Irish American Heritage Center, 4626 N. Knox Ave.; April 24 at the National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W. 19th St.; April 30 at Northeastern Illinois University, 5500 N. St. Louis Ave.; and May 8 at the DuSable Museum of African American History, 740 E. 56th Pl. All performances are at 7:30pm, and free to the public. The Chicago Rhythm Fest culminates with a performance from all five companies together onstage at the Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University, 50 E. Congress Pkwy., on May 13 at 7:30pm. The performance is the fourth and final installment of the Auditorium's "Made in Chicago" series celebrating local dance and the theatre's 125th anniversary. Tickets for the final event are $27-67, available at AuditoriumTheatre.org, 800-982-ARTS and the Auditorium Theatre box office.
DANCIN' FEATS Mid-career artists confront aging in aMID 2016-01-13
Mirza protests Trump, lesbian actress makes statement 2016-01-13
Upcoming: 'Cabaret'; Travel show; Artemis show; 'Le Switch'; Dancemakers; Out at CHM 2016-01-13
TELEVISION Meet the 'Elites': Kentrell Collins and Jerel Maddox 2016-01-12
THEATER REVIEW Gotta Dance 2016-01-06
Upcoming: Burning Bowl; Sam Kirk show; Travel show; 'Cabaret'; APIs group; Dancemakers; Autos 2016-01-06
'Gotta Dance' has red-carpet premiere 2016-01-05
Final Joffrey 'Nutcracker' through Dec. 27 2015-12-23
NUNN ON ONE: THEATER Still dancing with Georgia Engel 2015-12-23
YEAR IN REVIEW An unforgettable year for local dance 2015-12-16
DoJ issues guidance addressing gender bias in domestic violence policing 2015-12-15
DANCIN' FEATS Robert Joffrey's 'Nutcracker' takes final bow 2015-12-09
'So You Think' dancer on the show and being out 2015-11-25
BOOK REVIEW And Then I Danced 2015-11-24
DANCIN' FEATS The 'Flow Show' comes to Chicago 2015-11-11
Joffrey names recipients of Winning Works Choreographic Competition 2015-11-07
Upcoming: Buck Angel; Mitchell/Wachowski; Maserati; Barlesque; Twyla Tharp 2015-11-03
Chicago dancer on Alvin Ailey, film and coming out 2015-10-21
Riverdance 20th Anniversary World Tour here April 5-10 2015-10-20
Memoir out from gay journalist Segal: And Then I Danced 2015-10-16
DANCIN' FEATS 'Signifier' is full of firsts 2015-10-13
Upcoming: Dance judge to host event; 50 States; fusion dance concert; Katrina play 2015-10-06
'Gotta Dance' swings in early at Playhouse 2015-09-23
Dancing for Life 2015-09-23
FALL DANCE PREVIEW Celebrations, milestones, and a few farewells 2015-09-16
DANCIN' FEATS Up-and-comers the focus of Joffrey opener 2015-09-09
NUNN ON ONE: Michel Laprise of 'Cirque' comes out of the cabinet 2015-09-09
Hubbard gets $500K grant 2015-09-09
Chances Dances marks 10 years 2015-09-08
Chicago Dancing Festival Aug. 25-29 2015-08-19
Dance for Life: Annual benefit draws record attendance 2015-06-18
DANCIN' FEATS Dancer's long road back; Joel Hall marks 40 years 2015-06-12
Upcoming: Dancing Fest; Chicago Fringe; Treasure Island; Bette; WildClaw 2015-06-12
Upcoming: Joel Hall dance; 'Downton'exhibit; Shakespeare 2015-08-05
Upcoming: Market Days; Lollapalooza; Clarkson; Joel Hall; Tune; Dance for Life 2015-07-28
Upcoming: Tommy Tune, EXPO Chicago; 'Loving'; 'Dance for Life' 2015-07-22
DANCIN' FEATS A closer look at 'Queer, Ill & Okay' 2015-07-08

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