

# Tommy Tune, coming to Chicago, shares earliest dance memories



Laura Molzahn

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Showbiz legend Tommy Tune, here for Chicago Human Rhythm Project's JUBA Award, shares earliest dance memories.

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"I danced before I walked," says Tommy Tune, adding modestly that this is "hearsay" from his parents. "I'd be crawling through the living room, and music would come on the radio—and I'd get on my hind legs and just dance up a storm. Then the music would go off, and I'd get back down on all fours and crawl into the den. I didn't know how to perambulate, but I was already choreographing."

Dancing — not to mention his other musical-theater achievements — has landed Tune, 76, some 10 Tony Awards, including one in June for lifetime achievement. Now he's getting another: the Chicago Human Rhythm Project's 25th-anniversary JUBA! Award, to be conferred at the organization's gala, July 30 at the MCA. Two evenings of the "JUBA!" performance series follow, also at the MCA. (Young artists perform Monday at the Jazz Showcase.)

Tune, who's appearing only at the gala, will perform his one-man show "Taps, Tunes and Tall Tales." A self-described "very shy" person, he's relieved he won't have to give a speech.

Calling "Taps" the "most intimate" of several one-man shows he's done, Tune likens it to a Victor Borge concert: He dances, tells stories about people he's worked with, and sings Broadway tunes relating to his own life. The Chicago edition adds two numbers he performed at New York's City Center as part of its February revival of the Gershwins' first Broadway musical, "Lady, Be Good!" (1924). Also an early vehicle for Fred and Adele Astaire, "Lady" has "wonderful historic links," Tune says.

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History, both personal and cultural, is crucial in the world of tap, an art passed down from one individual to another in often-improvised dancing.

Mentioning his Native American heritage, Tune talks about the "earth dancing" he did as a child on his grandmother's farm. "I'd get into the fields — that red clay earth of Oklahoma — and dance up and down the rows. Nobody could see me; I could practice. I did a lot of stomping on the earth: I think it's in my genes."

Lane Alexander, who's directed the Chicago Human Rhythm Project since its inception in 1990, holds a similar view. He believes that a love of tap dance — essentially as inexplicable as liking chocolate ice cream — comes from a "genetic predisposition to moving and making music at the same time." Tap and rhythm in general, he says, have "a tantric, religious component. Stomping the ground with your feet — that's an old thing, done for thousands of years in sacred rituals."

Alexander and Tune both grew up in Texas, where each was also, at a young age, the only boy in his dance class. Though Alexander was unhappy enough with that to switch to drumming, returning to dance only when he reached college, Tune relished being the only boy. "I liked it. No competition!" he says. "I always got the part." His first love was ballet, but when he started to "stretch," the six-foot-six Tune says, his legs became too skinny for tights.

Once Alexander returned to hoofing, he remembered everything he'd learned in "that brief but accelerated year" of tap-dancing at eight, he says. "And with all the drumming I'd done, I felt like I'd never stopped." He added ballet, contemporary and jazz classes; when he came to Chicago, in 1983, he was on scholarship at the Giordano school.

Alexander didn't found his organization as a vehicle for his own work, however. Instead, building on the model of two pioneering tap festivals out West, he started CHRP (with Kelly Michaels, who died in 1995) to spread the gospel of tap via a gathering that from the get-go combined education and performance.

That effort proved phenomenally successful. CHRP, now the country's oldest presenter of tap dance, has made Chicago a mecca for the percussive arts, bringing in performers from Argentina, Japan, Brazil, Spain and Israel. In 2012, its American Rhythm Center opened in the Fine Arts Building downtown with a "rhythm-centric" curriculum featuring tap, Indian and African dance, flamenco, and hip-hop as well as ballet and contemporary classes. Students range in age from 4 to 70 and up.

Friday night of this year's popular "JUBA!" performance series pays tap tribute to jazz great Billy Strayhorn, while Saturday features soloists and BAM!, the CHRP resident ensemble Alexander

started in 2004.

Hardworking and determined, Alexander offers these entirely unsurprising final words: "25 down, 25 to go." By then, the gospel of tap should require 25 more.

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## **Chicago Human Rhythm Project / 'JUBA!'**

**When:** 5:30 p.m. July 30 (gala), 7:30 p.m. July 31-Aug. 1

**Where:** Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave.

**Tickets:** \$500 at 312-542-2477 or [chicagotap.org](http://chicagotap.org) (gala), \$25-\$35 at 312-397-4010 or [mchicago.org](http://mchicago.org)

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