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Tap Dancing Steps into the Future

Thursday, July 30, 2015 by [Stephen Raskauskas](#)



Chicago Human Rhythm Project dancers (left to right) Tristan Bruns, Starinah Dixon and Zada Cheeks.

Chicago Human Rhythm Project Celebrates 25 Years of Tap

The [Chicago Human Rhythm Project](#) (CHRP) is currently presenting its 25th festival celebrating American tap and contemporary percussive arts, Rhythm World. I sat down with **Lane Alexander, CHRP's artistic director and co-founder**, as well as several Rhythm World instructors and guest artists, to learn more about this unique festival, which honors tap's past while helping it step into the future.

Alexander and I chatted in a dance studio at CHRP's new home, the **American Rhythm Center**, located in the historic **Fine Arts Building** in Chicago. After being itinerant for over twenty years, CHRP has called the Fine Arts Building home for the last three. At the Center, CHRP offers classes year round, and shares the space with 5 core partners and 25 community partners.

The CHRP's journey to the Fine Arts building has been decades in the making. Alexander explained, "I had an epiphany in 1988 when I went to the **Portland International Tap Festival** [in Portland, Oregon], where I experienced a lot of the elder masters for the first time. I learned that there's a lot more to this art than I previously knew, and I wondered why I had to go to the West or East Coast to get that."

"There were a lot of tap dancers in Chicago, but none of them were working together," Alexander said. "So the Festival really has been the platform for community development to fill that need for the last several decades."

Alexander said, "The organization has grown with the field." He is proud that "work being done at the grass roots level has altered the trajectory of the form and the field. Tap is becoming less associated with musical theater and more with foot drumming, percussive art, and rhythmic expression. Of the two schools – theatrical tap and rhythm-centric tap – rhythm-centric tap has become more predominant."

Tap Returns to Its Roots

In essence, Alexander explained, tap dancing, which blends African and European dance traditions, has returned to its roots. "Over a century and a half, almost two centuries, the primary understanding of stomping the feet has been to entertain people. But, the deeper roots go back to ancient practices, thousands of years ago, when stomping the feet was used for war, or to celebrate bringing a new life into the world, or a marriage. Rhythmic and ecstatic dancing was a sacred practice."



Students of all ages and backgrounds learn rhythmic dance with instructor Yukiko “Smilie” Misumi at the American Rhythm Center. Click the player above to hear Misumi and her students rehearse.

“The sacred nature of the dance is still present in the theatrical form. But we as a society are so divorced from the root that we don’t consciously recognize it. Although I think people still feel it. That’s why audiences who see foot stomping have such a visceral reaction, because they feel the energy from the sacred root of expression.”

Current CHRP students are eager to work with teachers who have some connection to the 20th century masters of tap. But they also blend a variety of traditions, old and new, that are helping rhythmic dance return to its sacred roots. “The students are doing unbelievable work technically and expressively,” Alexander said. “It’s way beyond what you saw even 10 years ago. The transformation of the field has been extraordinary.”

Dancer and instructor **Sam Weber**, who has been working with CHRP since its inception, traces the transformations in the field to the 1970s and 1980s. He said, “there was what we refer to as a tap renaissance or resurgence.”

Dancer and choreographer **Gregory Hines** is often cited as a key figure in bringing tap full circle back to its African roots, which was an essential aspect of tap’s broader renaissance.

Before these transformations began to take hold within the field, Weber said, “I didn’t think I’d ever be able to be a tap dancer. Tap dancing was out. It was something I loved to do, but you didn’t see it on Broadway, you didn’t see it in musicals, it was passé. So, I thought tap dancing was something I would always do for enjoyment, and that maybe I’d get a gig here and there.”

Slowly, however, Weber said “people began to go back to find the roots of tap dance. We got a lot of the old masters like Charles Honey Coles, Jimmy Slyde, Chuck Green, Buster Brown, and Eddy Brown, and we got them to teach at these workshops and we started to connect with that tradition. You can see that tradition continue now with the younger dancers. Now, to see how CHRP has grown over 25 years is incredible to me.”

Stepping Into the Future

Sarah Savelli, dancer and instructor, is perhaps the embodiment of how the field of tap is stepping into the twenty-first century through CHRP. Savelli, who hails from Ohio where her mother has run a dance studio for almost 30 years, first became affiliated with CHRP as a student about 15 years ago.



Dancer and instructor Sarah Savelli, who has been collaborating with the CHRP since she was a teen, teaches the next generation of rhythmic dancers at the American Rhythm Center.

“I knew I was going to become a dancer and at age 13 when I saw the movie *Tap*. I saw a different style of dance than I was used to in my studio classes, which was more technique based,” she said. “This other style had a syncopated rhythm that spoke to me and it was very clear to me that is what I wanted to do. So then it was a question of where do I find that? Where does that kind of tap dancing live? Because it wasn’t where I was in Ohio.”

Savelli first was encouraged to work with CHRP by her sister, who was studying with Lane Alexander at the Gus Giordano Dance School. Sarah participated in her first CHRP festival at age 15, and was able to realize her dream of working with **Savion Glover**, widely recognized as one of the most important living tap dancers in the world.

She said that though Glover’s sessions were extremely popular at the beginning of the week, his style is “so difficult, and so intricate,” she said, “that by the end of the week there were only about eight people.” Savelli is proud to be one of the few dancers who had the endurance to keep up with the living legend.

Now, Savelli is honored to teach her own daughter and niece, both of whom are in their mid-teens, at CHRP – truly bringing the art form full circle from a personal perspective. She said she loves that they are “bright eyed and excited. It’s exciting watch them take the same path that I started when I was their age. It really gives me a different perspective watching that magic moment of discovery through them.”

“This kind of festival takes tap dancing outside of the studio and put it into a community with people who are young, who are old, who tap in all kind of styles,” Savelli said. “But, what connects us is the rhythm.”

JUBA! Master of Tap

For those who are more inclined to *watch* dance than dance themselves, Rhythm World presents a series of public performances called **JUBA! Masters of Tap** at the **Museum of Contemporary Art – Chicago**.



Dancer, instructor, and Rhythm World guest artist Cartier Williams relaxes after teaching a rousing morning course at the American Rhythm Center in the Fine Arts Building.

Cartier Williams, teacher, performer, and guest artist, told me that those who attend performances are “in for a treat,” as we spoke in a studio following a rousing morning class with his young students. Williams will be performing in a tribute to jazz master **Billy Strayhorn**, a pianist who performed alongside Duke Ellington.

Williams explained that he’s not only excited to honor Strayhorn, but that he will be performing alongside live jazz musicians, since jazz is an essential part of his personal style as a dancer. “Jazz is very integrated in what I do,” he said. “Tap dancing grew with jazz over time, and tap dancing is all about improvisation.”

“I learned to tap through improvisation,” Williams said. “I started when I was 4 years old. My grandmother taught me how to tap, but it was all improv. Many tap dancers argue that we *are* musicians.”

While tap includes many diverse styles, Williams said, “I’m a hooper. A hooper is someone who dances just from the heart. Nothing is forced. Everything is organic. Everything is improvised on the spot. And, we use our whole body. It’s a full body experience. So, if you see me dancing to some blues music, you’ll see me do a little boogaloo, you’re gonna see me moving those legs, you’re gonna see the whole thing.”

For more information about the Chicago Human Rhythm Project and Rhythm World, visit CHRP’s [website](#).

For more information about JUBA! Master of Tap performances, visit the MCA’s [website](#).

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