

Chicago Human Rhythm's tap tribute to Billy Strayhorn is spirited, sublime



Jumaane Taylor, shown in 2013, was among Wednesday's performers at the Chicago Human Rhythm Project's tribute to Billy Strayhorn at the Jazz Showcase. (Matt Glavin)

[Laura Molzahn](#)

Chicago Human Rhythm Project offers lively homage to Billy Strayhorn

A warm room, convivial company, everyone clearly an individual but sharing a history, a tradition, in the pointed manner of jazz music and tap dance: Like the best Thanksgiving ever, Chicago Human Rhythm Project's one-night show Wednesday at the Jazz Showcase epitomized an openhearted family. Part of the Billy

Strayhorn Festival, which started in September and concludes next Saturday at the Auditorium, the evening celebrated the music of this gentle soul and the Chicago tap dancers who love him.

Composer-arranger-pianist Strayhorn was gentle, by all accounts, but hardly uncomplicated. Reflecting that range, the versatile Vijay Tellis-Nayak Quartet — pianist Tellis-Nayak, drummer Clyde Davis, bassist Eric Hochberg and trumpeter-vocalist Andrew Distel — played numbers from "Take the 'A' Train" to "Lush Life" (but, too bad, no one danced to that sublimely bitter and accepting song). Like Strayhorn, a musician member of the tap-dancing Copasetics from 1950 until his death in 1967, the Tellis-Nayak Quartet responded sensitively to the dancers' needs.

The 10 tappers here have called various companies home — most significantly M.A.D.D. Rhythms, focusing on rhythm tap — but have all played together under the CHRP umbrella.

Showboat Nico Rubio, powerful and sure, kicked off the evening with "Feet on the Beat," which Strayhorn composed for tappers. Flashing rapidly from tip-toes to heels and back, Rubio delivered a confident rhythmic counterpoint to the song. Starinah Dixon, the only woman to perform a solo, likewise danced a song running in tandem with the music, "Satin Doll." This doll clearly has a mind of her own, however. Inventive, driven, Dixon gathered force and speed as she went, sometimes almost literally falling into her own reveries, her own complex rhythms.

Matt Pospeshil's solo, danced to "Something to Live For," preceded two choreographed duets by performers who are or have been members of BAM!, CHRP's resident ensemble. Emcee Marty Bronson introduced the duet by Pospeshil and Sioned Papparotto, set to "Taking a Chance on Love," as the slowest soft shoe ever, in contrast to the usual high speed and precision of the hard-hitting Copasetics. Sure enough, we saw impossibly floaty arms, turns and kicks directly referencing the Charles "Honi" Coles-and-Cholly Atkins take on the song. Then Bronson and his wife, Jessica Chapuis Bronson, epitomized harmony to "Chelsea Bridge," punctuating and embroidering on its rhythms.

After a short break, old-time (but far from old) song-and-dance man Time Brickey told jokes, sang a bit of the flippant "I'm Checking Out, Goodbye," and tapped with so much flair and ballon I thought he'd fly off the stage. Tipping perilously far forward and back, Brickey was a literal loose cannon, embodying tap's visual and kinetic appeal.

Next, two grand old men represented Chicago tap history. Exemplifying the street origins of tap, the voluble Reggio "The Hooper" McLaughlin performed a medley that began by reviving, in softly pedaled song and dance, the true reverence of the often sentimentally sodden "Mr. Bojangles." After deftly demonstrating his trademark — the self-described "cool walk," marked by a hiccupping limp — McLaughlin did a chair dance he attributed to his partner of 17 years, Copasetics dancer Ernest "Brownie" Brown, who died in 2009.

Jimmy Payne, Jr., whose father opened a seminal Chicago tap-dance studio in 1947, offered another link to the past. Impeccably neat and upright, Jimmy Jr. gave a rock-solid reading of "Just a Settin' and a Rockin'," an homage to the music that underscored and amplified its syncopations, ending precisely on the song's final beat.

Finally, Jumaane Taylor interpreted "Take the 'A' Train." A rhythmic marvel, Taylor paid the utmost respect to this iconic music even as he created a complex, elaborate song all his own, a brilliant visual and percussive descant to an unimpeachable tune.