The Billy Strayhorn Festival in Chicago - An Evening of Music and Dance

By Katrina Engel

I had a most delightful experience on the evening of November 11th, Veteran’s Day. I was wary about the storm that was predicted to invade the Chicago area, but as I drove up the Edens Expressway through a torrential downpour on my way home, I was utterly happy with my decision to venture out, and on my own, no less.

This event was part of the Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University’s citywide festival celebrating the life and music of Billy Strayhorn, with the Chicago Human Rhythm Project (CHRP) presenting an evening of music, song and dance marking his close association with Duke Ellington, the Duke Ellington Orchestra and Harlem’s famous tap collective the Copasetics at the Jazz Showcase.

Starinah Dixon, Photo by Matt Glavin
I arrived at the **Jazz Showcase** early and had a lovely time checking out the intimate space that's been open since 1947. The walls are covered with pictures of great Jazz musicians, and the seating is varied and comfortable, from bar tables and cafe tables, to comfy looking couches. The raised stage is quite small, which only adds to the wonderfully intimate feel of the room. The space was packed by the time the show began, and what a show it was.

Performers included associate director of **Chicago Human Rhythm Project’s (CHRP's) ensemble BAM! Marty Bronson**; the **Vijay Tellis Nayak Quartet**, including **Andrew Distel** on trumpet and vocals, **Eric Hochberg** on bass and **Clyde Davis** on drums; and Chicago tap dancers **Nico Rubio, Matt Pospeshill, Marty and Jessica Bronson, Jimmy Payne Jr., Time Brickey, Starinah Dixon, Sioned Papparotto, Jumaane Taylor** and special guest, **Reggio “The Hoofer” McLaughlin**.

The evening highlighted not only Strayhorn’s music, but also featured re-creations of famous tap dances from that era, including the **Chair Dance (Reggio “The Hoofer” McLaughlin)** and the **Coles and Atkins Soft Shoe (Marty and Jessica Bronson)**.
All of the pieces of music and dance had their moments of beauty, but there were a few real standouts. **Starinah Dixon** has a charm and fierceness that emanates from her smile and tap shoes at the same time. The rhythms she created with her taps sounded like a fifth instrument, with nuanced shifts in intensity and tone. She has tremendous stage presence, something not always apparent in tappers, and the confidence she possesses in her artistry is one that belies her young age. **Time Brickey** was a delightful tapper and also displayed a lot of humor in his interactions with the audience as well as his fellow performers. But the real highlights for me all came one after another at the end of the show.
Special guest Reggio “The Hoofer” McLaughlin has a richly connected history with Billy Strayhorn and the Copasetics, the tap collective that Strayhorn was a founding member of. Everything about Mr. McLaughlin; his expressions, speaking and singing voice, unique dance style, and stage presence speaks to that connection. Mr. McLaughlin delighted his audience with stories of love, music and dance, and his connection to the rich history of his art form emanated from every part of this outstanding artist. Next, Jimmy Payne Jr., the son of legendary tapper Jimmy Payne, also exuded his connectedness to Chicago’s tradition of great tap dancing. Finally, Jumaane Taylor (The Bearded Hoofer) closed the evening with some astonishing dancing and great stories about past teachers and performers. Mr. Taylor really dances and expresses his emotions with his entire body and soul, and it was as he performed that I noticed most of the other performers peering over a ledge by the stage to watch him. A wonderful and impromptu treat was given to us by Taylor and the drummer, Clyde Davis. After Take the “A” Train ended, the two improvised together and brought the house down; it’s those moments that I love most about going to see live music and dance. And if that wasn’t enough, the entire group of tappers ended the night with the grin-inducing tradition of the Shim Sham Shimmy. I left the Jazz Showcase with music in my head and no worries about the storm I was about to drive into. I went for the dance, but will return for the music.
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Time Brickey, photo by Teresa Stephens

Photo: Courtesy of the Chicago Human Rhythm Project