

Acia Gray is a musician whose instrument is the body.

For more than four decades, Gray has explored rhythm tap as a percussive American musical form—as a soloist, improviser, choreographer, master teacher, author, producer and artistic director. Her relationship with rhythm, however, began long before tap. At seven years old, she was already playing drums in the smoky clubs of Houston, Texas—learning rhythm not in a classroom, but by listening, playing and communicating with musicians. That early experience became the foundation of an artistic life built around rhythm as a language.

Her work is grounded in the understanding that tap is not simply movement accompanied by music. As a tap artist, she creates time, tone, dynamics, syncopation and phrasing through the body. **Tap IS music.**

Gray continues to perform, teach, choreograph and create nationally and internationally while leading *Tapestry Dance* and Austin's *Soul 2 Sole International Tap Festival*. In addition to numerous festivals, her recent collaborative work as a guest includes the Düsseldorf Tap Dance Days production of Hip Tap Project's *It's About Time*, a tribute to her longtime mentor Sarah Petronio.

Gray emerged professionally during the tap renaissance of the 1980s and belongs to a generation of artists who worked directly with many of the masters who shaped twentieth-century American tap. Her artistic life has been built around musicality, improvisation, listening and the passing of rhythm from one generation to the next.

A graduate of The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City, Gray returned to Austin, Texas, to star in the rock opera *Oedipus TX*. Through a twist of fate, that work trip led her to tap—and to becoming a founding member and Managing Director of *Austin on Tap* directed by Debra Bray.

Throughout this work in the 1980s, Gray developed her voice as a rhythm tap artist while performing and touring. That path led to a pivotal moment in 1989, when she was selected as one of twelve professional dancers to work directly with legendary tap artist Charles “Honi” Coles in America's first creative residency for tap at the *Colorado Dance Festival*.

It was during that residency that the idea for ***Tapestry Dance Company*** was born. Inspired by the creative exchange taking place in Colorado, Gray and Deirdre Strand began imagining a company based in Austin where different dance forms—and the artists who practiced them—could come together. Weeks later, they incorporated Tapestry as a non-

profit organization, creating a home for Gray's evolving work as a performer, choreographer, musician and collaborator within a broader multidisciplinary artistic environment.

Gray returned to the *Colorado Dance Festival* the following year to work directly with Jimmy Slyde in a second creative residency, where Sarah Petronio was a vital part of the creative process. Gray's work with Petronio during that experience began an artistic relationship that would profoundly shape her development, with Petronio becoming her primary mentor.

Those formative experiences connected Gray directly to a remarkable generation of tap artists and a tradition passed from artist to artist. Throughout her career, she has performed, studied, created, taught and shared the stage with many of the form's most influential artists and entertainers, including Chuck Green, Steve Condos, Brenda Bufalino, Donald O'Connor, Fayard Nicholas, Buster Brown, Savion Glover, Gregory Hines and Dianne Walker; as well as many contemporary leaders such as Derick Grant, Ayodele Casel, Michelle Dorrance and many others.

As Gray's individual career has expanded, *Tapestry* has also grown from its Austin roots into an internationally recognized professional dance organization and a platform for her work. From 1995 through 2021, Tapestry held the distinction of being the world's only full-time, salaried professional dance company specializing in tap. As sole Artistic Director since 1995, Gray has created and produced more than 65 full-length concert premieres, bringing together legendary dance artists, contemporary innovators, musicians and emerging performers through original and award-winning productions, residencies, educational programs and collaborations.

Among Gray's most significant works is *The Souls of Our Feet – A Celebration of American Tap Dance*, selected by the National Endowment for the Arts for its American Masterpieces initiative. The production placed historic repertoire in conversation with contemporary rhythm tap and toured throughout the United States, Canada and China from 2008-2011.

Gray is also the founder and Artistic Director of Austin's *Soul 2 Sole International Tap Festival*, one of the country's longest-running celebrations of tap. Through the festival and its year-long programming, she has brought artists, musicians, teachers and students together in Austin to perform, improvise, exchange rhythmic ideas and carry the traditions of the form forward.

Beyond the stage, Gray is also proud to have served on the Steering Committee of **The International Tap Association** and later as its director. Her book, *The Souls of Your Feet –*

A Tap Dance Guide for Rhythm Explorers, has introduced dancers and musicians to a rhythmic language of tap since 1998 and has been translated for publication internationally.

Her numerous honors include the Hooper Award, the Tapology Award, Texas Tap Legend, Austin Critics Table and "Best of" honors, recognition at the Dance/USA Conference, and induction as a premiere member of the **Austin Arts Hall of Fame**.

Gray can also be seen in the documentaries *A Class Act: The Magic of Honi Coles*, *Tap or Die*, *Thinking on Their Feet – Women of the Tap Renaissance*, *Gotta Move: Women in Tap* as well as the PBS special *Passing It Forward – A Vision in Rhythm*.

Gray's work connects the living history of American rhythm tap with its future, carrying forward the musical language and spirit of the artists who came before her while continuing to develop her own voice.

The body is the instrument. Rhythm is the language. Tap is music.