

MUSIC CENTER
STRATHMORE

*Strathmore
and Step Afrika!
Present*

STEP AFRIKA!
Celebrating 30 Years

Friday & Saturday, June 27 & 28, 2025, 8pm



Strathmore extends its gratitude to the following long-time donors for their generous support and for making this program possible:

AARP[®]
and
Marsha and Peter Pratt



PROGRAM

Step Afrika! celebrates 30 years of critically acclaimed, percussive performance with this groundbreaking program. As the world's leading authority on the art form of stepping, Step Afrika! is committed to pushing the boundaries of the tradition, exploring its nearly limitless artistic possibilities. This evening's performance features two world premieres choreographed by Conrad R. Kelly II, alongside works shaped and refined through the Company's long-standing collaboration with South Africa.

STRIKE – World Premiere

Choreographed by **Conrad R. Kelly II**

The word percussion stems from the Latin *percussio*, meaning “to beat” or “to strike.” In this work, the artists of Step Afrika! strike their bodies and transform the stage into a percussive platform—while also playing one of the world's oldest instruments. *STRIKE* is an explosive exploration of rhythm, sound, and power, and it is a bold reminder of the body's capacity to speak, to command, and to resonate—without a single word.

Passing 30

Choreographed by **Christopher Brient, Ryan Johnson, Brian McCollum, Jason Nious, Jakari Sherman, Pelham Warner, Jr., and Robert Warnsley**

This dynamic “step” work honors three decades of Step Afrika!'s creativity. *Passing 30* features intricate choreography by some of the company's most influential artists who have merged stepping with contemporary body percussion, spoken word, drumlines, and so much more. It's a tribute to Step Afrika!'s ever-evolving commitment to presenting stepping like no one else in the world.

Umngane

Choreographed by **Makeda Abraham, Mfoniso Akpan, and Aseelah Shareef**

Lead percussion by **Agyei Edwards**

Umngane, pronounced “oom-gah-ney” means friend in Zulu, and the performance is a tribute to Step Afrika!'s co-founder, the late Mbuyiselwa “Jackie” Semela, and his notable choreographic work, *Still My Friend*. *Umngane* incorporates Modern, West African, Zulu, and Semela Dance Technique to create an intriguing mélange of movement. *Umngane* imagines the first meeting of Jackie, founder of the historic Soweto Dance Theatre, and C. Brian Williams, founder of Step Afrika!, in Johannesburg, South Africa, in January, 1994.

Shared Space – World Premiere

Choreographed by **Conrad R. Kelly II**

In this highly anticipated new work, stepping becomes both the soundtrack and the foundation for an intriguing investigation of modern movement practices. *Shared Space* represents a conversation between two distinct art forms—stepping and contemporary dance—that has been brewing for over seven years. It is a vision for the future of Step Afrika!, where rhythm opens doors to new artistic expression.

The Wade Suite

featuring **Sweet Honey in the Rock®**

Movement One: THE DEACON'S DANCE

Originally conceived and choreographed by **Bongkosi and Kirsten Ledford**

Danced by **Keomi Givens, Jr.**

Vocals by **Sweet Honey in the Rock®**

African American spiritual songs have long lifted spirits during troubling times. Here, a Deacon prepares for Sunday service.

Movement Two: WADE

Choreographed by **Kirsten Ledford, LeeAnét Noble, and Paul Woodruff**

Vocals by **Sweet Honey in the Rock®**

Step Afrika! first shared the stage with the legendary ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock® over 18 years ago. In Wade, we witness a distinct fusion of the South African gumboot dance, stepping, and tap with the power of the African American spiritual.

Zulu

Originally choreographed by **Jackie Semela** with contributions from countless artists in South Africa and the United States

For over 30 years, Step Afrika! has studied Zulu traditional dance through its partnership with the Soweto Dance Theatre. In August 2024, the company returned to Johannesburg for a month of exchange, rehearsal, and celebration. This performance of *Zulu* features new solos and choreography developed during that residency—a vibrant celebration of culture and connection.

ADMINISTRATIVE, CREATIVE TEAM

C. Brian Williams, Founder & Executive Producer

Lamar Lovelace, Executive Director

Mfoniso Akpan, Artistic Director

Conrad R. Kelly II, Assistant Artistic Director

Pascha Barnwell, Company Manager

Margo Cunningham, Senior Marketing Manager

Milen Matthews, Manager, Arts Education and Community Programs

Chrystal 'Chrys' Vaughan, Manager, Events and Special Projects

Marianne Meadows,* Production Manager/Lighting Designer

Paris Francesca, Costume Designer

Kyle Homstead, Sound Engineer for Sweet Honey in the Rock®

**Member of the United Scenic Artists Local USA 829*

COMPANY

Kenneth L. Alexander

Nya Christian

Ariel Dykes

Keomi Givens Jr.

Leander Gray

Kamala Hargrove

Terrence Johnson

Jemeema S. Montrose

Conrad Kelly II

Isaiah O'Connor

Keanu Powell

Valencia Odeyka Emonni Springer

Ericka Still

Joseph Vasquez

Pelham Warner Jr.

Robert Warnsley

TreShawn Williams

GUEST ARTISTS

Jamal Dickerson

Agyei Edwards

Lauren Hawkins

Jayden King

Janelle Williams

featuring

Sweet Honey in the Rock®:

Louise Robinson, Carol Maillard, Nitanju Bolade Casel,

Aisha Kahlil, Rochelle Rice, and Barbara Hunt

ABOUT STEP AFRIKA!

Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, Step Afrika! is the world's leading authority on the art form of stepping. Under Mr. Williams' leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's cultural exports, touring more than 60 countries across the globe and ranking as one of the top 10 African American Dance Companies in the US.

Step Afrika! blends percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities; traditional African dances; and an array of contemporary dance and art forms into a cohesive, compelling artistic experience. Performances are much more than dance shows; they integrate songs, storytelling, humor, and audience participation. The blend of technique, agility, and pure energy makes each performance unique and leaves the audience with their hearts pounding.

Step Afrika! promotes stepping as an educational tool for young people, focusing on teamwork, academic achievement and cross-cultural understanding. The Company reaches tens of thousands of Americans each year through a 50-city tour of colleges and theaters and performs globally as Washington, D.C.'s one and only Cultural Ambassador.

Step Afrika! has earned Mayor's Arts Awards for Outstanding Contribution to Arts Education, Innovation in the Arts, Excellence in an Artistic Discipline, and was inducted into the National Association of Campus Activities (NACA) Hall of Fame, the first Dance Company to earn this honor. Step Afrika! headlined President Barack Obama's Black History Month Reception and performed at the first ever Juneteenth Celebration at the White House. The Company is featured prominently at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History & Culture with the world's first stepping interactive exhibit and is the GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS™ title holder for the "largest STEPPING dance." **Learn more about Step Afrika: www.stepafrika.org.**

MEET THE CREATIVE TEAM



C. BRIAN WILLIAMS, Founder & Executive Producer

C. Brian Williams is a native of Houston, Texas, and a graduate of Howard University. Brian first learned to step as a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. – Beta Chapter, in the

Spring of 1989. While living in Southern Africa, he began to research the percussive dance tradition of stepping, exploring the many sides of this exciting, yet under-recognized American art form, and founded Step Afrika! in 1994. Williams has performed, lectured, and taught in Europe, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and throughout the United States. Through Williams' leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's newest cultural exports and inspired the designation of Step Afrika! as Washington, DC's official "Cultural Ambassador."

In 2022, the National Endowment of the Arts designated Williams as a National Heritage Fellow, the nation's highest honor in folk and traditional arts. He is the recipient of numerous Artist Fellowships; the World Alive! Distinguished Artist Award by Arts Emerson; the Mayor's Arts Award for Visionary Leadership from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities; Distinguished Arts Award from the Coalition for African Americans in the Performing Arts; and the Pola Nirenska Award for Contemporary Achievement in Dance. He is also featured in *Soulstepping*, the first book to document the history of stepping. He also earned the Mayor's Art Award for Innovation in the Arts and has led the company to multiple Metro DC Dance Awards for "Outstanding New Work," "Excellence in Stage Design/Multimedia," and "Outstanding Group Performance." Williams has been cited as a "civic/community visionary" by *NV Magazine*, a "nation builder" by the National Black Caucus of State Legislators and a "minority business leader" by the *Washington Business Journal*. His work is featured prominently at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. C. Brian Williams holds an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the District of Columbia.



LAMAR LOVELACE, Executive Director

As Executive Director for Step Afrika!, Lamar Lovelace is responsible for the organization's strategy and operations, leading its staff, programs, and the execution of its mission. Working

closely with Step Afrika!'s board of directors, he spearheads fundraising, marketing, operations, and long-range planning for the organization. He brings deep expertise from academia and has managed the organization's humanities-based partnerships.

In July 2017, Lamar joined Step Afrika! as Deputy Executive Director, where he oversaw the dance company's communications and marketing strategy, fundraising efforts, and financial operations. Previously, Lamar spent eight years at Columbia University as Assistant Director in the Office of Community Outreach and Education and Director of Public Programs and Events. At the New York City-based campus, he managed community-based partnerships and special events and produced large-scale, humanities-based programming opportunities to engage students, faculty, and staff.

At Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Lamar was Director of Cultural Affairs and Student Engagement, where he created arts-based social justice programs and exhibitions. He holds master's degrees in arts management and oral history from Carnegie Mellon and Columbia, respectively, and a BA in speech and hearing science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Lovelace is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.



MFONISO AKPAN, Artistic Director

Mfoniso Akpan has trained extensively in tap, ballet, jazz, modern, African dance, and step. While attending the State University of New York at Stony Brook, she majored in biochemistry and

cultivated her stepping skills as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Mfon began her training at the Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center and has performed at Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, the Apollo Theater, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Lincoln Center. Mfon toured with the off-Broadway show *Hoofin' 2 Hittin'*, where she was a featured stepper and dancer.

MEET THE COMPANY



CONRAD R. KELLY II, Assistant Artistic Director

is a native of Fort Lauderdale, FL, who studied criminal justice at Florida A&M University. During his time at FAMU, he performed with the Marching 100 and The Strikers.

Conrad later became a soloist for The Rolle Project in Las Vegas and a dance instructor at Studio 305, where he taught hip-hop, contemporary, and jazz. He has won numerous awards as a choreographer and dancer, including being a two-time recipient of the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' prestigious Arts and Humanities Fellowship Program. A long-standing member of the Company, Conrad serves as Step Afrika!'s assistant artistic director and recently choreographed *The Movement*, an epic tribute to Black Lives Matter and the wave of activism in 2020. This is Conrad's eighth season with the Company.



KENNETH L. ALEXANDER is a native of Savannah, GA, with a BFA in interior design from Valdosta State University. First introduced to stepping through the Sigma Beta Club, Kenneth became a proud member of Phi Beta Sigma

Fraternity, Inc., and Delta Phi Delta Dance Fraternity, Inc., where he served as Step and Stroll Master for both organizations. He has trained in hip-hop under VYB Dance Company and performed at the Super Bowl LV Halftime Show in Tampa Bay. This is Kenneth's second season with the Company.



NYA CHRISTIAN is a native of Cleveland, OH, with a BA in political science, sociology, and dance arts from Howard University. A proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, she has served as the

Alpha Chapter Parliamentarian, Step Mistress, and Stroll Captain. Nya has choreographed performances for the White House Initiative on HBCUs and Howard University's 2022 Homecoming Step Show. She also performed on *Good Morning America* as part of the Black History Month segment "The Story of 9 Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities." This is Nya's second season with the Company.



ARIEL DYKES is a native of Gainesville, FL, with an associate of arts in musical theatre from Santa Fe College and a BFA in dance from the University of Florida. She is a member of the Iota Lambda Chapter of Alpha

Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., where she choreographed step routines for her chapter and UF's National Panhellenic Council. Ariel has trained in ballet, jazz, West African, and post-modern dance, as well as voice and acting. She has worked with notable artists such as Ailey Dancers Nathaniel Hunt and Samantha Barriento; Tony Award winner Scott Coulter; and Grammy Award-winning Gospel artist Smokey Norful. This is Ariel's third season with the Company.



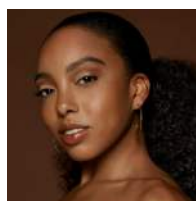
KEOMI GIVENS JR. is a native of Miami, FL, where he trained with Ricardo Dume, Traci Young-Byron, Conrad Kelly II, Tanisha Cidel, Maribel Trujillo, and Robert Battle. He has studied at the New World School of the

Arts and The Mahogany Dance Theatre, where he served as rehearsal director and choreographer. Keomi has danced with Gravity Dance Troupe and Young Contemporary Dance Theatre (YCDT). In addition to his work as a dancer, Keomi has choreographed for The Marching 100 of Florida A&M University, RickyDanco, and the Booker T. Washington Lady Twisters. This is Keomi's second season with the Company.



LEANDER GRAY is a native of Washington, DC, and studied at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Leander has performed at the Black Leaves Project, CityDance Creating the Magic Concerts, Art All

Night DC, the Elements Urban Arts Collective Annual Showcase, and the DC Youth Freestyle Battle. He has participated in the prestigious Monsters of Hip Hop Intensive and the Kennedy Center Dance Lab and was featured in a music video by Revolution Marz. This is Leander's first season with the Company.



KAMALA HARGROVE is a native of the Bronx, NY, with a BA in mathematics, theater, and dance from Trinity College. Kamala studied at The Ailey School and Dance Theatre of Harlem and has appeared in various music videos and

live performances. She has performed with artists including Estelle, Mr. Vegas, Wizkid, and French Montana. Kamala has also worked as a teaching artist in New York City, instructing elementary, middle, and high school students. This is Kamala's third season with the Company.



TERRENCE JOHNSON is a native of Broward County, FL, with a BA in general studies from the University of Central Florida. Terrence has stepped with ADIMU: Men of Excellence Step Team and is a co-founder, former

president, and performer of the Hazard Step Team. He was inducted into the UCF Chapter of Progressive Black Men, Inc. in 2015. This is Terrence's second season with the Company.



JEMEEMA S. MONTROSE is a native of Brooklyn, NY. She attended ASA College, where she studied health information technology. Jemeema is a proud member of Swing Phi Swing Social Fellowship, Incorporated, and

has served as the chair facilitator of the National Step and Stroll Committee. She has led performances on numerous college campuses across the country, and Jemeema has also served as a step coach for middle and high school students. This is Jemeema's first season with the Company.



ISAIAH O'CONNOR is a native of Miami, FL, with a BS in biology from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. A student of hip-hop, modern, and urban soul, Isaiah has previously stepped with the Strikers

Dance Troupe under the direction of Shepiro Hardemon. This is Isaiah's third season with the Company.



KEANU POWELL is a native of Decatur, GA, with a BBA in management from Howard University. While at Howard, Keanu became an active member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., serving as 2nd vice president and step

master. He is also a member of Kappa Kappa Psi National Honorary Band Fraternity, Inc., through the

Eta Omega Chapter, and served as Drum Major for the 2021–2023 seasons. Keanu was prominently featured on *Good Morning America* representing Howard University. He has also performed nationally with Howard's band at major events, including Nike Headquarters and the inaugural NBA HBCU Classic. This is Keanu's first season with the Company.



VALENCIA ODEYKA EMONNI SPRINGER is a native of Brooklyn, NY, with a BA in elementary education from Virginia Union University. Valencia is a proud member of the Nu Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. and the Eta Psi

Chapter of Tau Beta Sigma National Honorary Band Sorority, where she served as the first Stand Queen (captain) with the Ambassadors of Sound Marching Band. An alum of Restoration Youth Arts Academy, Valencia has performed with Forces of Nature, Dance Africa (Brooklyn) and as part of a live installation entitled "A Primordial Place." She has also worked as a social studies and science teacher, dance teacher/coach, guest choreographer for local New York and Virginia majorette teams, and as a model for New York and Richmond, VA, fashion weeks. This is Valencia's sixth season with the Company.



ERICKA STILL is a native of St. Petersburg, FL, with a BS in health science, pre-occupational therapy, and a minor in rehabilitation management from Florida A&M University. Ericka previously stepped with AKAdemy

Exquisite Gems and studied under the direction of Paulette W. Johnson and Shepiro Hardemon as a member and Co-Assistant Artistic Director of Mahogany Dance Theatre. This is Ericka's third season with the Company.

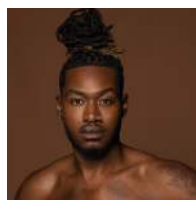


JOSEPH VASQUEZ hails from Guttenberg, NJ, and has a BA in exercise science from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. In college, Joseph danced with the Rutgers Bachata Performance Team, where he

choreographed and led the team for four years. He is a member of Lambda Sigma Upsilon Latino Fraternity, Incorporated—the first Latin fraternity to step and stroll—and The Revels Stroll Team, where he was led by former team captains Francisco Pozo and Carlos Zapata. This is Joseph's third season with the Company.



PELHAM WARNER JR. is a native of the Bronx, NY, and holds a BA from Dutchess Community College. Pelham is a member of The Order of the Feather Fraternity, where he served as the team's step master and captain for five years, and he has previously danced with The Players Club Steppers. Pelham has worked as a dance instructor in the greater New York City area and recently performed in the a cappella musical *The Movement* by Kathy D. Harrison at The National Black Theater Festival. This is Pelham's sixth year with the Company.



ROBERT WARNSLEY is a native of Chicago, IL, with a BS in information technology from Illinois State University. A member of the Eta Tau chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Robert served as the step and stroll master for four years and has

organized, competed, and placed first in numerous step shows. He has partnered with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America to teach stepping, and he actively participates in community service projects in Chicago. Robert also studies, practices, and teaches dancehall and various Afro styles in the Chicagoland, DMV, and NYC areas. This is Robert's sixth season with the Company.



TRESHAWN WILLIAMS is a native of Davenport, IA, and holds a BFA in dance from the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in Los Angeles. He was introduced to competitive stepping as a child through Step with Soul (formerly Wayman AME Steppers),

where he later became the first junior artistic director. TreShawn has trained extensively in ballet, jazz, and hip-hop, and has performed with Inspire Danz Company, the LA Sparks, and the Disney and Lego web series. He has choreographed for musicals, dance teams, and concerts, including Kanye West's Donda Choir. This is TreShawn's first season with the Company.

GUEST ARTISTS

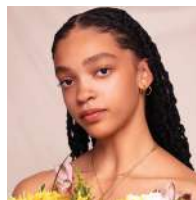


SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK® is a Grammy-nominated African American vocal ensemble rooted in empowerment, education, and musical excellence. Founded in Washington, DC in 1973, the group has been a vital force in socially conscious music for over five decades. Their current roster includes vocalists Carol Maillard, Louise Robinson, Aisha Kahlil, Nitanju Bolade Casel, and Rochelle Rice, with Romeir Mendez on bass and Barbara Hunt as American Sign Language interpreter. Known for their dynamic performances and genre-defying sound, Sweet Honey's work spans themes of civil and human rights, women's empowerment, climate justice, spirituality, and more. They have performed on iconic stages including Carnegie Hall, the Sydney Opera House, and The Kennedy Center, and have collaborated with artists and causes around the globe. Their recent projects include the original theatrical work *When Day Comes*, livestream innovations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and performances honoring Paul Robeson and Harry Belafonte. Now celebrating their 50th Anniversary, Sweet Honey in the Rock® continues to inspire audiences worldwide with voices that uplift, challenge, and transform.



JANELLE WILLIAMS is a native of Miami, FL, currently pursuing a degree in health science at Florida A&M University. She began dancing at the age of two and trained at Dancing Plus in Pembroke Pines before competing nationally throughout her school years.

A graduate of Somerset Academy Arts Conservatory, Janelle served as captain of her high school dance team and helped lead the Junior Varsity team to a National Championship in their first season. Her training spans ballet, jazz, tap, contemporary, hip-hop, modern, and ballroom. As an Intrigue Dance Convention Assistant, she mentored young dancers across the country. She currently serves as President of Mahogany Dance Theatre under Artistic Director Neshae Williams. Janelle has performed in music videos and appeared in HBO's *The Righteous Gemstones*. Her work as a dancer and choreographer is rooted in inspiring others to believe in their purpose through movement.



LAUREN HAWKINS is a native of Prince George's County, MD, with a degree in biological systems engineering with a concentration in natural resources from Florida A&M University. She received her early dance training at Dance Dimensions, Inc. under Dakiya Lambert and continued her development with Mahogany Dance Theatre under the direction of Shepiro Hardemon. With three years of teaching experience, Lauren specializes in ballet, Horton, contemporary, and jazz. She currently serves as an agricultural engineer with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.



JAYDEN KING is a native of Miami, FL, and a graduate of Florida A&M University. She began her training at Artistic Soul and ICTalent Dance Studio and later studied at Arthur and Polly Mays Conservatory of the Arts. Jayden trained pre-professionally at New World School of the Arts and completed summer intensives with Alvin Ailey and Dance Theatre of Harlem. At FAMU, she was an active member of Mahogany Dance Theatre under Shepiro Hardemon, serving as Assistant Rehearsal Director, Rehearsal Director, and President. She has performed works by Conrad Kelly, Tyrelle Rolle, Christopher Huggins, and others. For Jayden, dance is a form of storytelling rooted in connection and truth.



AGYEI KEITA EDWARDS is a professional drummer and percussionist who began performing at just three years old. With over 20 years of experience in West African percussion, he has graced stages including the Brooklyn Academy of Music and The Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage. Agyei has performed with artists like Sheila E. and Busta Rhymes, appearing as a choreographer, dancer, and drummer at the 2021 MTV VMAs. He is the Musical Director of Farafina Kan and brings a spiritually grounded approach to every performance. A nationally and internationally recognized artist, Agyei is a frequent guest with Step Afrika! and lives by the motto: "Do it with excellence or don't do it at all."

Headshots of the Company and Staff and cover image by Keith Major.