

Sitting in a Minneapolis bar listening to a mutual friend's funk band, Nick Bowman and Ricci Milan began to talk about dance.

"That's when we had just this crazy idea," Bowman says by telephone from Minneapolis. "What if we were able to create tap dance and music together with their style of music? What would that even look like?"

A week later Bowman maxed out his credit card to produce the first Rhythmic Circus show at the Ritz Theater in northeast Minneapolis.

"We were all in a room together," Bowman says. "We had this funky blues band, this athletic style of tap dancing and beat boxing. I remember saying, 'I don't know what it's going to be but it's going to be a circus.' That's where the name came from, and that's what it's turned out to be. It's just this crazy, creative collective of music and dance."

That was nearly eight years ago. Since then, the percussive dance troupe, led by Milan, the artistic director, and Bowman, its executive director, has won the 2012 spirit award at Scotland's prestigious Edinburgh Fringe Festival, launched a successful Off-Broadway run at the New Victory Theatre in New York City, and appeared on "America's Got Talent."

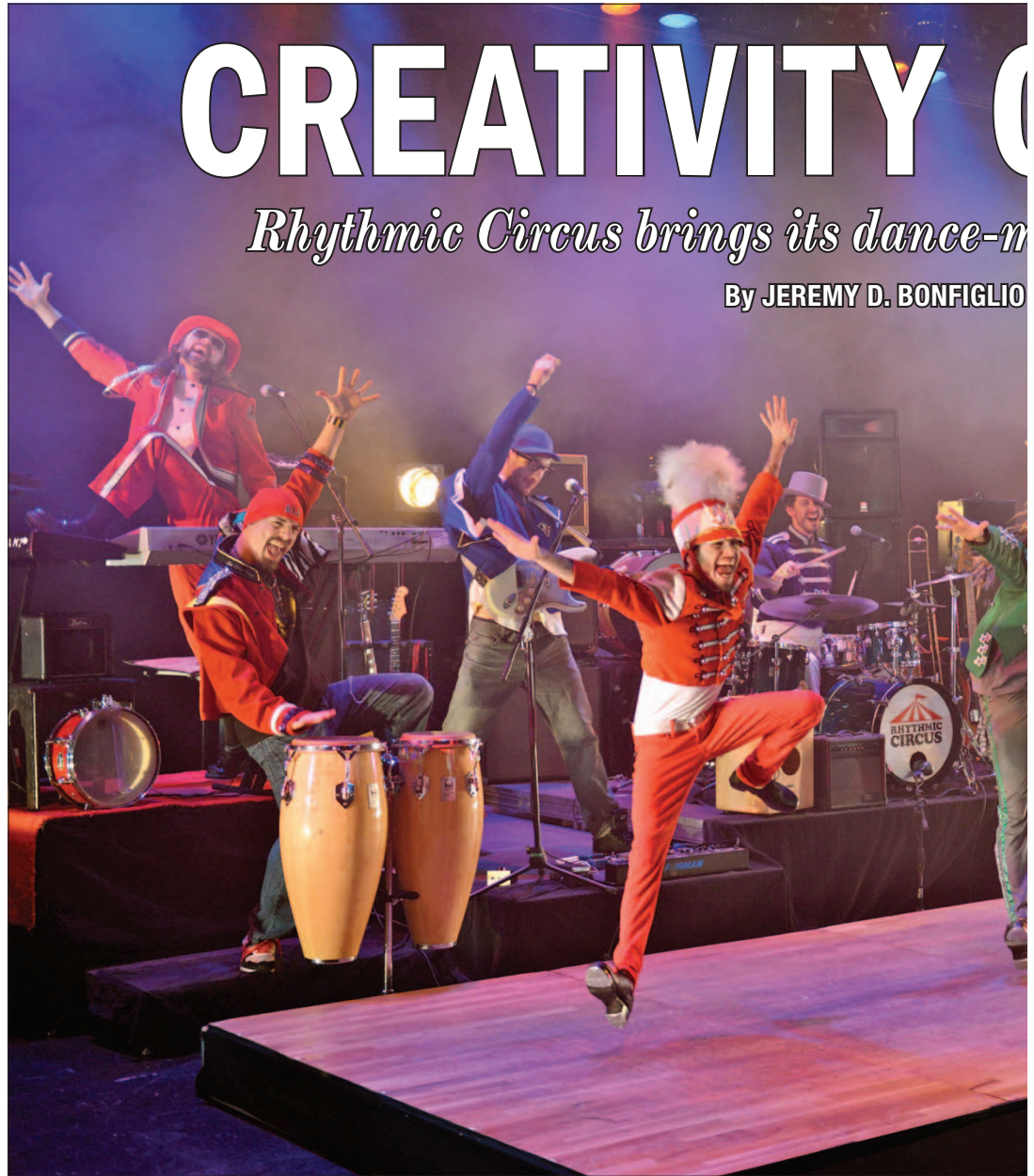
On Saturday, Rhythmic Circus, which features tap dancers Bowman, Milan, Galen Higgins and Kaleena Miller and guitarist Alex Rossi, beatboxer Aaron Heaton, keys player Cornell Blanchard, drummer Patrick Nelson, bassist Dan Ristrom, saxophonist Peter Vircks and trumpeter Aaron Wiener, brings its show, "Feet Don't Fail Me Now," to the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"People think of our show and they think tap dancing, but really it's a collaborative effort of all 11 artists," Bowman says. "The musicians are not a back-up band by any stretch. They have been full collaborators in the creation of the work. It's just as much a music concert as a dance concert and then we have this curveball, which is our beatboxer. It's creativity on steroids."

That is evident in the way the ensemble creates each piece in the show. The genre-hopping original music, which encompasses funk, blues, jazz, reggae and salsa, and integrated choreography are composed in a room together and not treated as separate entities – from a percussive chair routine to the stripped down acoustic tune, "Dream Song," inspired by a front porch jam session.

"Sometimes it will start with a tuba line or sometimes it will start with a combination of steps we've put together and we'll fit the mood of the rhythms we're creating with our feet to a melody with the band," Bowman says. "The one thing that's constant is that it's all created simultaneously."

Using large hardwood floor platforms filled



Rhythmic Circus performs its show, "Feet Don't Fail Me Now," on Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre. **ON THE COVER:** Rhythmic Circus features top dancers Nick Bowman, from left, Kaleena Miller, Galen Higgins and Ricci Milan.

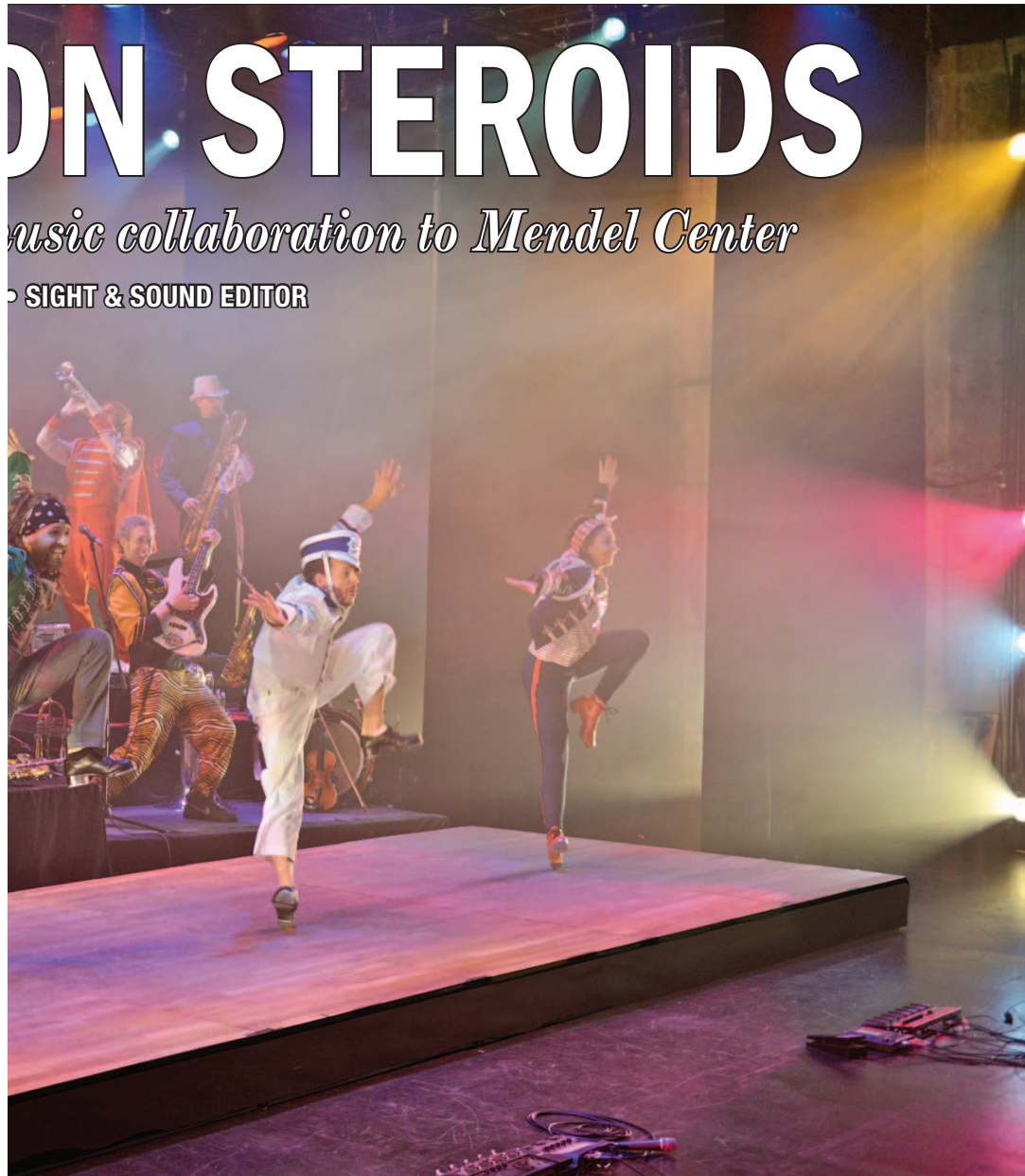
with guitar pickups and microphones, the ensemble treats the tap dancing as another instrument that just happens to provide a good measure of visual showmanship.

"As dancers, we consider ourselves an exten-

sion of the rhythm section of the band," Bowman says. "The footwork is incredibly difficult and incredibly precise, but each of the dancers have their own way of expressing themselves. ... As much as we're concentrated on the musical

aspect of what we're do to throw in some flashy or something."

Although Bowman a formed Rhythmic Circ



Photos provided

ON STEROIDS

music collaboration to Mendel Center

BY SIGHT & SOUND EDITOR

ing, we're also not afraid
combos or do the splits

and Milan officially
in 2007, its core

members have been collectively choreographing and performing together in multiple forms since 2000. Some connections date back to high school and extend as far back as childhood dance competitions.

Bowman says his first foray into dance came at age 9 thanks to a bet with his cousin, Tony.

"Our sisters were in dance classes together, and it was a \$50 bet, about how only girls dance – that kind of thing," Bowman says. "It was a lot

IF YOU GO

What: Rhythmic Circus: "Feet Don't Fail Me Now"

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$28-\$45

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.rhythmiccircus.com

of money so I took that class and immediately fell in love with making music with my feet and expressing myself through movement."

Bowman went on to dance in Los Angeles, while his lifelong friend Milan headed to New York. They both returned to Minneapolis at the same time to create something of their own when the idea eventually came to them in that hometown bar.

"I always felt like I was helping someone else achieve their vision of what tap dancing should look like," Bowman says. "That's why I moved back to the Twin Cities. ... This isn't a show created by millionaires. I got a loan from my grandma – that's how we started. To grow it from that to where we are today is unheard of. It also means we have the creative freedom to do what we want to do. So there's an ownership and real passion about how we perform every show."

That's what voters at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival saw in 2012, awarding Rhythmic Circus one of its top honors.

"It's the largest arts festival in the world, and the most exciting place to go and perform as a performing artist," Bowman says. "To be given an award was just a dream come true. It meant so much to all of us. It was definitely a launching point."

As was the troupe's appearance this past season on "America's Got Talent."

"The excitement and input from all four judges was just great," Bowman says. "And Howard Stern was just so into it. That was so fulfilling to do that. ... When we started this thing it was a little passion project in the Twin Cities, and now we've done tours all over the world."

Bowman says the most rewarding thing, however, has been the reactions from audiences, adding that fans often end up dancing in the aisles themselves.

"You don't go see a ballet and then attempt to put your leg above your head," Bowman says. "You appreciate it in a different way; you appreciate it from afar. In tap dancing people feel that if they had metal plates on the bottom of their shoes they could create those rhythms, too. And that's what I love so much about tap dancing – how connected people feel to it."

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