

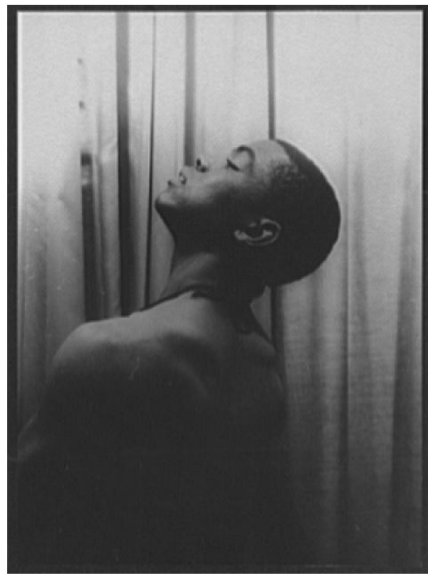
Emmy Garcia

HIST 225

P. Herrington

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Inversion



Van Vechten, Carl, photographer. Portrait of Alvin Ailey. , 1955. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004662475/>.

Alvin Ailey, Jr. (born January 5, 1931 - December 1, 1989) was an African American dancer and choreographer and best known for creating the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City in 1958. His work popularized modern dance technique and solidified a spot in the dance world for African American dancers. Ailey's most iconic piece *Revelations* is often cited as the most watched and best know modern dance work. He and his company has received

numerous awards for being a trailblazer for not only the modern dance discipline but for dancers of color as well.

Alvin Ailey's life story best exemplifies the common definition of the American Dream: everyone can become successful despite the circumstances one is born into. He made a name for himself regardless of coming from a childhood filled with poverty, and he achieved this by working hard and persevering. Once he first saw Katherine Dunham and her company perform, he knew that he wanted to dance forever and he began learning from the greatest pioneers of modern dance.¹ Although, Ailey went on to become a pioneer of his own right by giving black dancers, choreographers, composers, etc. a platform to share their voice, their story of being black in America.

Ailey was born into a family of poor laborers in Rodgers, Texas, however, within a few months of being born, his father abandoned Ailey and Lula Elizabeth Cliff, Ailey's mother which left the two homeless for six years. From then on, Cliff traveled by foot to various farms and picked cotton in order to support the two of them.² Despite these hardships, they found a home and community with a nearby black Southern Baptist church, True Vine Baptist Church.³ The sights and sounds that happened during these church services like gospel music and sermons intrigued Ailey even as a child, and this later inspired his most iconic modern dance pieces like *Blues Street* and *Revelations*.⁴ Ailey once said about his fascination and connection with small-town religion and its rituals, "Its the roots are in American Negro culture, which is part of the whole country's heritage. But the dance speaks to everyone [...] Otherwise it wouldn't work."⁵

Eventually, when Ailey was eighteen, he started studying under a well-known modern dance choreographer, Lester Horton. During his early years with the Horton's company, Ailey choreographed three pieces and was later invited to perform in the Broadway musical, *House of Flowers*. Although the production only ran for four months, this then led Ailey to decide to stay in New York City and to continue to study dance and theatre under Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and many other well-established performers. It's not until March 1958 when Ailey made his grandiose debut in a concert as a serious choreographer and dancer with his own dance company, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Upon seeing this concert, dance critics wrote very highly of him and his company, citing that his movement was "rich, animal[istic]" and had "an innate sense of theatrical projection." ⁶ The great reception from the public projected Ailey and his company to fame, prompting the group to tour around the United States and the world. From then on, his company has been the epicenter of success in the modern dance world especially for giving a name and a face to the black experience in America.

In addition to Ailey and his company's amazing modern dance technical skill, people were drawn to his performances because his audience could relate to him on many different levels. Admirers of Ailey's can connect to his past whether that be through his struggles with poverty in his childhood or his deep ties to religion in the South. People can turn to Ailey and see a part of themselves in him and recognize his achievements and see him living the American Dream. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Ailey's work consistently referenced black history and culture in America and yet that did not alienate his audience. As Nick Evers, a writer for the independent newspaper *Unicorn Times*, describes in his article, he now knows how important gospels and spirituals mean to black people after seeing a performance of Ailey's

Revelations. "Mr. Ailey just showed me. And that is Alvin Ailey. [...] He does not preach, nag or lecture; he just shows us." ⁷

Despite there being moments when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was struggling financially, Ailey never strayed from his core belief of having a company and repertoire that crossed racial borders- he never compromised and made pieces that did not fall in line with his company's mission. Even after Ailey's passing in 1989 at the age of 59 and his longtime friend and fellow dancer Judith Jamison took his position as artistic director, the company never strayed from their values to empower dancers without racial limitation. ⁸ To this day, Ailey's company is still thriving and continues to spread his message of the American Dream to all the young, hopeful performers to come.

Additional Sources

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¹ Nick Evers, "Ailey's Fantasy For Everyone", *Unicorn Times*

² Lili Cockerille Livingston, "Ailey, Alvin (1931-1989), Actor, Dancer, and Choreographer | American National Biography.", *American National Biography*

³ Jennifer Dunning, "Alvin Ailey, a Leading Figure in Modern Dance, Dies at 58." , *New York Times*

⁴ R. L. Cowser, "A Major Force in Contemporary American Dance", *Southern Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Winter, 1980)

⁵ Jennifer Dunning, "Alvin Ailey, a Leading Figure in Modern Dance, Dies at 58." , *New York Times*

⁶ Jennifer Dunning, "Alvin Ailey, a Leading Figure in Modern Dance, Dies at 58." , *New York Times*

⁷ Nick Evers, "Ailey's Fantasy For Everyone", *Unicorn Times*

⁸ Lili Cockerille Livingston, "Ailey, Alvin (1931-1989), Actor, Dancer, and Choreographer | American National Biography.", *American National Biography*