



Lost songs from Alvin Ailey's 'Revelations' find voice in new piece

Heard on Morning Edition

By: Olivia Hampton

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Listen here: <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/12/nx-s1-5279458/alvin-ailey-revelations-new-piece-sacred-songs> (6 minutes)

When Alvin Ailey's seminal dance work *Revelations* was first performed in 1960, it was about twice as long as the version that's now been seen by millions of people around the world. The company that bears the late choreographer's name is revisiting this history with a new piece set to fresh interpretations of the songs that were removed.

Du'Bois A'Keen, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's musical director, said that he aimed to not only resurrect the songs but also "re-imagine them and create something that will be resonant for a contemporary audience, for younger people, that would give them an entry point into this world that we were creating." He sought out musicians with jazz and gospel roots to create the soundtrack for the new work, *Sacred Songs*. The music is [part of an album](#) released in January.

"If you've seen *Revelations* or if you've heard any spirituals, there's a certain kind of language, verbal and sonic language. We wanted to stretch these and say, 'How can we make this into a hip hop song? What would this sound like in funk? What would this sound like as blues? What would this sound like as a rock and roll song?'" A'Keen told Morning Edition host Michel Martin.

It's also an echo of the company's signature blended genre, with dance techniques pulled from modern, ballet, jazz and African traditions. It's dance — and music — that delves into the struggles of the marginalized, elevating them on the stage as high art.



Ailey, who died from medical complications related to AIDS in 1989, was only 29 when he created *Revelations*, based on his childhood memories, where church played an important role. Set to traditional Black spirituals, work songs and blues tunes, it reflects the Black experience through its story of faith and perseverance from the trials of slavery to freedom. The same themes underpin *Sacred Songs*.

Interim artistic director Matthew Rushing, a former dancer with the company, said he initially tried to make the two pieces completely distinct, and avoid any parallels.



"As I tried to run away, I just kept falling back into it... so I just gave up and I gave into it," Rushing said during the company's recent stop in Washington, D.C., part of an ongoing nationwide tour through May.

"I actually found a larger space for creativity once I gave in to, 'Hey, I'm hearing from Mr. Ailey to do this step or this piece of the music reminds me of Wade in the Water.'"

He views the piece as a means to reflect on *Revelations* but "still hold on to my individuality as a creator and a choreographer."

The closing moments of *Sacred Songs* quotes another from *Revelations* where a couple bends over water and splashes their faces. In *Revelations*, that dance is set to "Wade in The Water," a song that served as a coded message to enslaved people on the run to hide in the water to evade bloodhounds.

The idea of cleansing one's self became a "connective point" of sorts between the two pieces, Rushing said. "When I was working with the dance artists, I was like, 'Right now we live in a very challenging time. Sometimes we need to cleanse ourselves of the thoughts and the feelings that don't serve us,'" he added. "So if you see *Sacred Songs*, the last image is

the dancers circled around a pool of water, washing themselves, cleansing themselves of thoughts and feelings that will not serve them."

It's a journey that began for Rushing when he first saw *Revelations*, sitting in a front row seat at The Wilton in Los Angeles as a young teenager.

"I had recently been baptized at a beach. So if you can imagine a 13-year-old sitting in a theater seeing concert dance for the first time, and what he sees is an image of something that just recently happened to him in his own spiritual journey. It was mind-blowing... And that was it for me at that moment. I was like, 'This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.'"



While preparing for the company's 60th anniversary before the coronavirus pandemic, Rushing learned about the extended version of *Revelations*. There were live musicians and singers on stage, and some parts were performed without dancers.

"It's still grounded in the African American experience... the human experience that has struggle and tension and pain and loss and love and triumph and victory," A'Keen said about the new piece. "And so we try to, in the re-imagining, still hold on to the essence of, yes, there's struggle, yes, there's pain, yes, there's lament, but there's also joy, there's triumph, there's resolution."



During much of the company's current tour, the two pieces bookend performances — with *Sacred Songs* as the opening piece and the gut punch of *Revelations* in closing.

"I wanted to create music, honestly, that 100 years from now will still be resonant," said A'Keen. "That was the heart and the kind of driver for us."

The broadcast version of this story was produced by Barry Gordermer. The digital version was edited by Majd al-Waheidi.