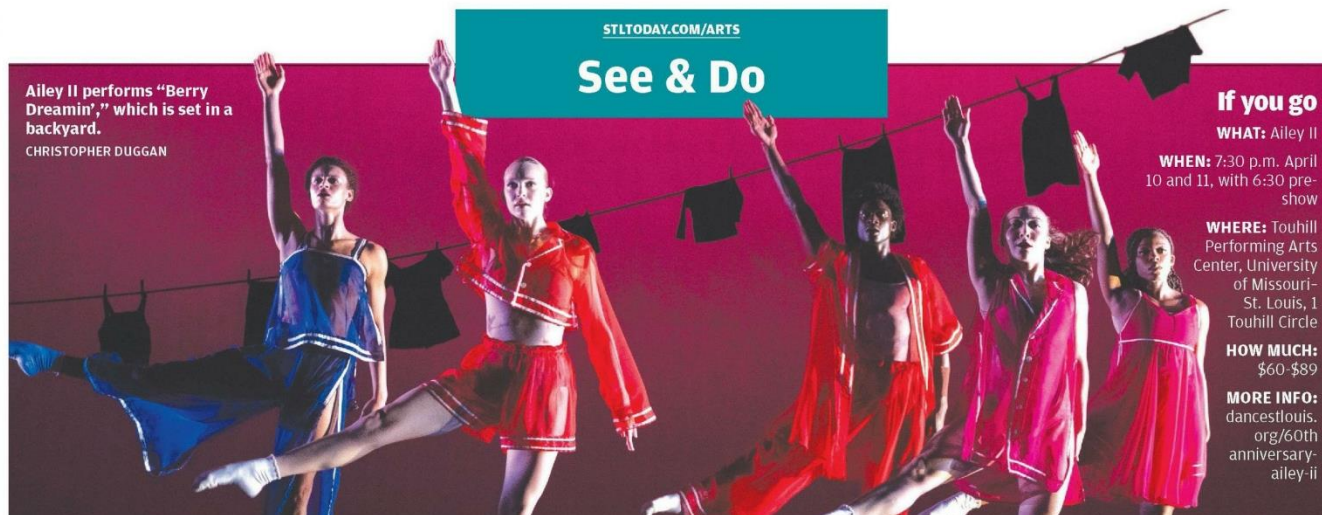


Dance St. Louis celebrates Chuck Berry's 100th birthday with world premiere dance

By: Rosalind Early

April 9, 2026



Dance St. Louis celebrates Chuck Berry's 100th birthday with world premiere dance

ROSALIND EARLY | St. Louis Post-Dispatch

When you think of dancing to Chuck Berry music, you may think duck walks or sock hops, but new choreography will have you seeing the rock 'n' roll originator and St. Louis native in a whole new light.

This weekend, Ailey II will perform the world premiere of "Berry Dreamin'," a contemporary work commissioned by Dance St. Louis for its 60th anniversary season to celebrate what would have been Chuck Berry's 100th birthday this year. Choreographed by Chalar Monteiro, the piece draws on Berry's music and spirit while imagining a dreamlike world of memory, intimacy and human connection.

"I wanted to be very careful that I wasn't trying to retell his life story," Monteiro says. "I wanted to build a world that was broad enough that a lot of people could see themselves in the work."

Rather than offering a straightforward biographical tribute, Monteiro's piece unfolds in emotional vignettes. Using songs like "Maybellene" as well as lesser-known tracks such as "Memphis, Tennessee," "Berry Dreamin'" explores the fragile ways people connect.

"I think people will see scenarios they remember — your first crush, being in trouble, sibling dynamics," Monteiro says. "I hope they get to see themselves."

And yes, there are nods to social dances of Berry's era like the twist, the Lindy and his famous duck walk. "But they're not obvious," Monteiro says.

Unlike many dance works set to popular music, "Berry Dreamin'" leaves Berry's lyrics intact. Monteiro said he was drawn not only to the storytelling in the songs, but also to the rhythm and texture of Berry's voice.

"The rhythm of the words next to each other has a story just as much as the instrumentation," he says. "I wanted to use that to build a world that the dancers could live in."

That world is intentionally familiar. Monteiro says he wanted the stage to feel like a shared backyard, complete with a clothesline and six dancers dressed in elevated pajamas in berry-toned hues — blueberry, raspberry and other shades that subtly nod to Berry's name. The costumes and setting suggest a place of comfort and closeness, where the people onstage already know one another.

"These aren't strangers," Monteiro says. "These are people who know each other — siblings, neighbors, a crush from down the street."

Within that homey environment, the choreography shifts between clarity and abstraction. Some sections are driven by Berry's lyrics and recognizable emotional scenarios. Others move into a more meditative, dreamlike state, using ambient

reinterpretations of Berry's music to create what Monteiro described as a liminal, subconscious landscape.

The work was built quickly: Monteiro had just three weeks in the studio with Ailey II dancers, working three hours a day, five days a week. Even so, he described the process as deeply collaborative, saying he came in with most of the choreography prepared but left room for the dancers' instincts and responses to shape the final piece.

"I came in with about 95% of the choreography," he says. "But I wanted to play up the strengths and instincts of the artists that I was working with."

That collaborative spirit is central to Monteiro's broader artistic philosophy. A New Jersey-native who trained at Sharon Miller's Academy for the Performing Arts and SUNY Purchase, he performed with companies including A.I.M. by Kyle Abraham, GALLIM, Ailey II and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He is also founder of THE MNTRO PRJCT and now serves as a visiting arts professor at NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

Monteiro says his path into dance began in the church. Raised by a father who was a reverend and a mother who was an evangelist, he grew up performing in church settings before receiving formal dance training as a teenager. That background, he says, unexpectedly helped him connect

to Berry, whose father was a deacon in a Baptist church.

"I saw this as an opportunity to really connect with a pioneer," he says.

The dancers bringing "Berry Dreamin'" to life come from one of the country's most significant dance institutions. Ailey II, founded in 1974 as the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, serves as the second company of Ailey and was created to help early-career dancers bridge the gap between training and professional performance. The company carries forward the legacy of Alvin Ailey, the groundbreaking choreographer who founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and helped transform American dance by centering Black life, culture and experience onstage.

Under artistic director Francesca Harper, Ailey II has continued that mission while embracing new work from emerging and established choreographers. For Monteiro, returning to work with the company felt especially meaningful: his first rehearsal for "Berry Dreamin'" came the day after his final performance with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

"It was very poetic," he says.

The performances on April 10 and 11 will also include a pre-show tribute beginning at 6:30 p.m. in the Touhill's lobby, with live music by the What the Chuck! tribute band featuring Chuck Berry's son and grandsons, a Q&A with Ailey II led by Dance St. Louis Artistic Director Michael Uthoff and exhibit elements celebrating Berry's life and influence.

Rosalind Early - 314-340-8353
rearily@post-dispatch.com

If you go

WHAT: Ailey II

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. April 10 and 11, with 6:30 pre-show

WHERE: Touhill Performing Arts Center, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1 Touhill Circle

HOW MUCH: \$60-\$89

MORE INFO: dancestlouis.org/60th-anniversary-ailey-ii