



A Bridge of Dance, Sound and Black Creative Imagination

Ailey II salutes Chuck Berry and lifts up Dance St. Louis' legacy

By: Zaria Mac

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This year marks a century since the births of musical giants — including John Coltrane and the region's own Miles Davis and Chuck Berry. And in a season where Dance St. Louis is celebrating its 60th anniversary, it feels fitting that the organization chose to honor St. Louis' own Berry not with nostalgia, but with new creation. Ailey II's St. Louis stop at the Touhill Performing Arts Center delivered a tribute engrained in legacy, but pulsing with the urgency of now.

The centerpiece of the evening was *Berry Dreamin'*, a new work choreographed by Chalvar Monteiro and set to the unmistakable twang and fire of Chuck Berry's catalog. The ballet, commissioned by Dance St. Louis as part of its milestone anniversary, unfolded like a stream of consciousness. It became a dreamscape where thoughts don't arrive in straight lines but in bursts, loops, and flashes of color.

Monteiro's staging made that inner world visible. Dancers drifted through a gray void, their movements loose and searching, until Berry's music cracked open the space. The backdrop would flare red like a synapse firing, and suddenly the dancers shifted from wandering to creating. They swung, slid, and ricocheted off one another, embodying the way ideas collide and reshape themselves in the mind of an artist.

The emotional palette was wide. There was frustration that tightened the body, peace that softened it, joy that spread like a ripple. Each shift felt like a window into the subconscious — the place where creativity is born long before it becomes something the world can hear or see. And as the music moved from "Maybellene" to "Oh Louisiana," the dancers' energy deepened, mirroring the evolution of Berry himself as he carved out a place in American music history.

Dance St. Louis extended the tribute beyond the stage. The pre-show transformed the Touhill lobby into a multigenerational celebration of Berry's life and influence. Students from Grand Center Arts Academy and Central Visual and Performing Arts High School filled the space with drawings and sculptures of Berry and his iconic guitar. Students from Sumner High School, Berry's alma mater, curated an exhibit featuring artifacts. They ranged from a replica of Berry's conk to performance costumes and archival clippings that connected the legend to the community that shaped him.

And then there was the music. What the Chuck!, the tribute band led by Berry's son Charles Berry Jr. and grandson Charlie Berry, warmed the crowd with classics like "Too Much Monkey Business" and "Rock and Roll Music." Grandson Jahi Eskridge provided lead vocals. The groove was contagious. A couple started dancing. Then a group of kids joined. Two generations moving side by side — a reminder that Berry's sound still knows how to call people to the floor. The pre-show performance and art perfectly set the tone for Ailey II's performance.

After intermission came the moment the audience was waiting for: *Revelations*. Even before the curtain rose, the opening strains of "I Been 'Buked" drew a rousing applause. The reaction was a testament to how deeply this work lives in the collective memory of Black audiences. Alvin Ailey's 1960 masterpiece is a spiritual archive. A map of our sorrow, our resilience, our praise.



Ailey II approached it with reverence and youthful fire. The dancers' grounded, weighted movements made the struggle sections feel lived-in, not performed. And when the piece shifted into its joy — the sunburst yellows of

“Rocka My Soul” — the theater felt lifted. No matter how many times those in the audience have seen Revelations, it still reaches into something ancestral, something that remembers.

In a season marking Dance St. Louis’ six decades as the region’s GATEWAY TO WORLD DANCE™, this program felt like a full-circle moment. Ailey II honored a St. Louis icon, carried forward a national treasure, and reminded the audience that Black creativity — in music, in movement, in memory — is a legacy that continues to evolve.

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