

A series of overlapping circles of various sizes, some solid and some outlined, scattered across the dark background. A diagonal band of purple and blue is visible in the bottom right corner.

DANCE

IN

GRACE ABOUNDING

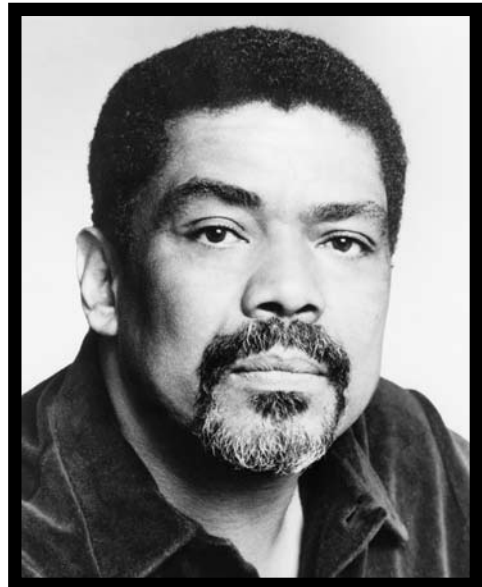
Sequence, *Afrika Bambaataa*, and *Run DMC*, a new art form was born that shows every sign of evolving in exciting and innovative directions.

MODERN AFRICAN–AMERICAN DANCE: SELECTED DEVELOPMENTS

The legacy of African-American contributions to the American dance scene is immeasurable, yet any general survey of African-American art should mention at least a few innovative and influential dancers and choreographers of modern, ballet, tap, and other forms of dance.

Alvin Ailey (1931–1989) is a highly influential and well-known African-American dancer and choreographer. After dancing with the **Lester Horton Dance Theater**, the first racially integrated dance troupe in the United States and serving as the troupe's director from 1953 to 1954, Ailey moved to New York City, where he studied with eminent modern and ballet teachers such as Martha Graham. In 1958, he founded his own company, the **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT)**.

Such performances as *Blues Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960) not only placed Ailey as central to the history of modern dance but were critical for bringing African-American themes to the world of dance. A prolific choreographer, Ailey composed for numerous companies, including the Joffrey Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet. He received many honors, including a lifetime achievement award in 1988 from President Ronald Reagan. The AAADT continues under the artistic direction of **Judith Jamison** (b.1943), a member of the troupe since 1965 and a principal dancer known for her stunning elegance in such legendary performances as *Cry* (1971), a dance portraying the lives of black women.



Renowned choreographer, Alvin Ailey

Renowned choreographer **Donald McKayle** (b. 1930), who studied with Pearl Primus, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and others, composed dances for concert halls, Broadway, television, and film.

In 1967 **Eleo Pomare** (b.1937) founded **Dancemobile** (1967), which brought concert dance forms to the New York City Streets. He also helped to create *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance* (1981–1992), a



Judith Jamison Performing *Cry* (1971).

project designed to exhibit and preserve classic modern dance performances by African-American choreographers. Other notable modern dance artists include **Garth Fagan** (b.1940), **Ulysses Dove** (1947–1996), **Debbie Allen** (b.1950), **Bill T. Jones** (1952), and **Blondell Cummings**.

As early as the 1950s, African Americans also began to make significant contributions to the field of ballet, which traditionally had been comprised of all-white dance companies. **Arthur Mitchell** (b.1934), the first African-American principal dancer of a major company, danced with the New York City Ballet for twenty years. He later founded the **Dance Theatre of Harlem**, which provides classical ballet training for African-American students and has performed worldwide.

Janet Collins (1917–2003) was instrumental in opening the door for African Americans into the world of ballet. When, as a condition for her entry into their troupe, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo informed Collins



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater troupe performing *Grace* (1999).

that she would be required to perform in white face, she promptly refused. She went on to become the first African-American *prima ballerina* for the Metropolitan Opera in New York and made numerous guest appearances with other companies. As a teacher at the School of American Ballet in New York City and Manhattanville College, she also inspired and trained many aspiring dancers.

Other prominent ballet dancers include **Geoffrey Holder** (b.1930) and **Carmen de Lavallade**, both dancers with the Metropolitan Opera who also appeared in Hollywood films, and **Virginia Alma Fairfax Johnson** (b.1950), a prima ballerina in the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

In addition to concert hall forms of dance, African-American contributions to urban-derived dance forms, such as **tap**, **break dance**, **popping**, and **hip-hop**, deserve mention. Although popular interest in tap dance declined in the 1960s (for a discussion of earlier developments in tap history, see Unit 3, page 470), this form flourished outside the media's eye and, by the late-twentieth century, had grown in popularity once again through the efforts of such figures as **Gregory Hines** (1946–2003) and **Savion Glover** (b.1973). Urban dances have also made their way to theater performances. The **Rennie Harris Puremovement Company**, founded by **Rennie Harris** (b.1963) in 1991 is dedicated exclusively to hip hop and has performed throughout the U.S. and abroad. The all-female company

Urban Bush Women, founded in 1984 by **Jawole Willa Ja Zollar** (b.1950), also interweaves urban dance with live music, vocals, literary readings, and other dance styles in performances that explore and educate about the history, spiritual traditions, and literary heritage of African Americans.

There are also many African-American dance companies dedicated to preserving and performing traditional African dances. **Charles Rudolph Davis** (b.1937), founder of the **Chuck Davis Dance Company**, studied African dance styles in Senegal, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast and is a leading proponent of African dance in America. Davis also founded the **African American Dance Ensemble** and the **Alayanfe Children's Dance Company** in Durham, North Carolina, and created the **DanceAfrica festival**, celebrated yearly at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM).

Additional performing ensembles devoted to African dance include **KanKouran West African Dance Company; Ko-Thi Dance Company; Dinizulu and His African Dancers, Drummers, and Singers; Muntu Dance Theater of Chicago; Universal African Dance and Drum Ensemble; and BAM/Restoration DanceAfrica Ensemble.**



Restoration DanceAfrica Ensemble Performing at the DanceAfrica Festival held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (1998).