

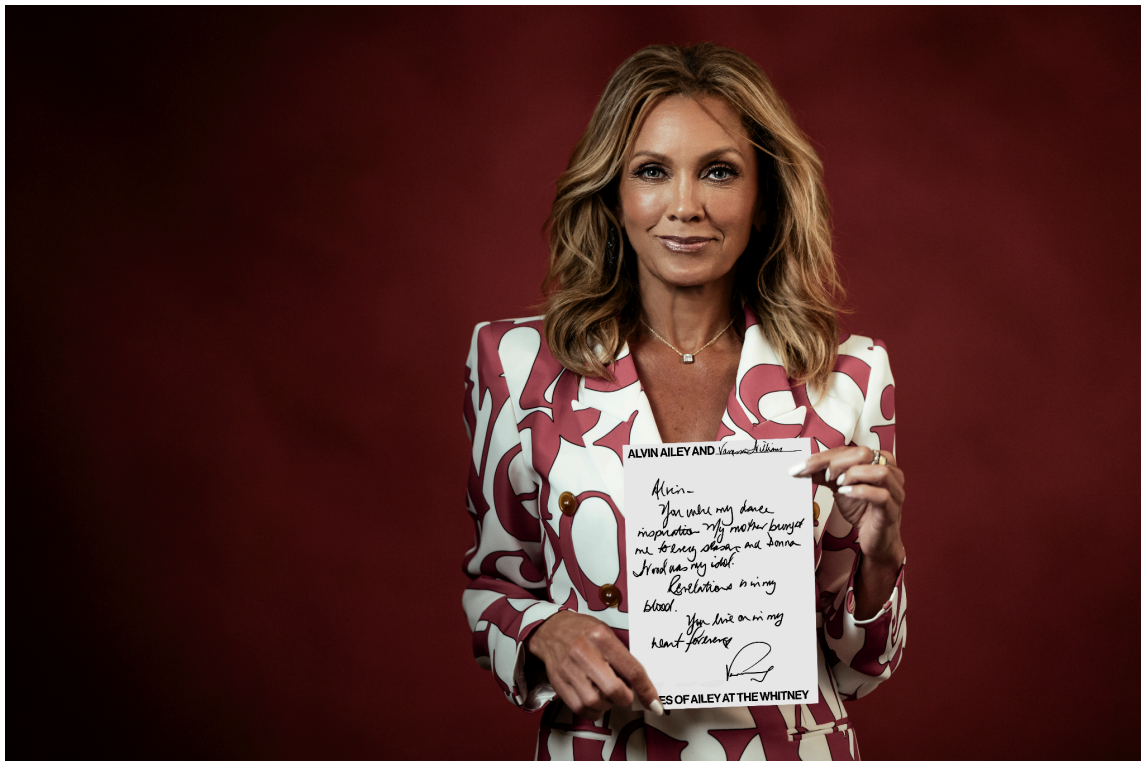
# PRESS RELEASE

## HUNDREDS SHARE INSPIRATIONAL STORIES ABOUT ICONIC AMERICAN ARTIST ALVIN AILEY AS PART OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM'S NEW PROJECT 'ALVIN AILEY AND ME'

Vanessa Williams, Debbie Allen, Lorraine Toussaint, Kara Walker, Ryan Jamaal Swain, Tremaine Emory, Darren Walker, and hundreds of others share personal letters, drawings, and videos about how Alvin Ailey's legacy has moved and inspired them

The project—launched today at [whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe](https://whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe)—showcases Alvin Ailey's continued relevance and influence in all aspects of culture, a key theme of the Whitney's renowned exhibition *Edges of Ailey*, on view until February 9

Anyone in the world can now contribute their story via the website



**New York, NY, November 26, 2024** — The Whitney Museum of American Art is celebrating the enduring legacy and influence of iconic dancer, choreographer, and artist Alvin Ailey with the powerful new project “Alvin Ailey and Me.”

The project—officially launching today at [whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe](https://whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe)—invites members of the public to share personal stories of how Alvin Ailey’s life and work has impacted, inspired, or changed them. When taken together, the stories showcase the lasting, far-reaching impact that this influential artist continues to have: a key theme of the Whitney’s renowned exhibition [Edges of Ailey](#), the first museum exhibition to explore the life and legacy of one of the most important artists in American history. The show is on view until February 9 as part of a season of Ailey in New York City that includes [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s annual engagement at City Center from December 4 to January 5](#).

Since the exhibition opened in September, the Whitney has asked Museum visitors and others to participate in a soft launch of the “Alvin Ailey and Me” project, a collaboration with ad agency FCB New York. Hundreds of people from celebrities and artists to young aspiring dancers and visitors—including entertainers **Vanessa Williams** and **Debbie Allen**, actors **Lorraine Toussaint** and **Ryan Jamaal Swain**, actress and Whitney Trustee **Stephanie March**, artists **Kara Walker** and **Mickalene Thomas**, designer **Tremaine Emory**, philanthropist **Darren Walker**—have already shared their stories. Countless dancers from the Company’s history who are playing important roles in carrying on the Ailey legacy have also contributed their stories, including: [Sylvia Waters](#), [Nasha Thomas](#), and [Matthew Rushing](#), choreographer of *Sacred Songs*, which was seen as a work in process during *Edges of Ailey* and will have its world premiere at Ailey’s upcoming season this December.

These poignant letters, drawings, videos, and portraits by photographer Mark Mann can be viewed through [whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe](https://whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe), and create a beautiful tapestry of gratitude, appreciation, and love for Alvin Ailey and what he stood for. The emotional tributes touch on many themes, including how Ailey’s work fosters intergenerational tradition and connections, how Alvin Ailey’s legacy uplifts and amplifies the voices of Black dancers and artists, particularly Black women, and how it continues to inspire generations of artists, creatives, and dreamers.

“Thank you for not pausing at the limitations placed in front of you,” stated one letter from “D.J.R.” “Thank you for being unafraid, or for being afraid but forging ahead anyway. What you built is beautiful, it is Black, and it is eternal.”

Members of the public can participate in the project by submitting digital letters online through [whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe](https://whitney.org/AlvinAileyandMe). They are also invited to write letters in person at the Whitney during Free Friday Nights from 5 to 10 pm every Friday, and at City Center during Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s engagement. Accepted submissions will be shared on the site until early 2025.

The Whitney also projected several of the letters on prominent NYC buildings last Friday, November 22, including its own building at 99 Gansevoort Street as part of its popular Free Friday Nights free admission program.

"Over the course of organizing the exhibition, I have been consistently astounded by how many people have an Ailey story of their own, from those who worked closely with Mr. Ailey or received their dance training at the school to people I met at dinner parties, to the artists whose works are featured in the exhibition, to the students I've taught, to those I've met through my many travels throughout the United States and abroad," said **Adrienne Edwards**, curator of the Whitney's exhibition *Edges of Ailey*. "I am truly excited that we are capturing their experiences through the "Alvin Ailey and Me" initiative. *Edges of Ailey* has been built through archives and now becomes the basis to create a new one."

"*Edges of Ailey* has captured the very essence of Alvin Ailey's genius and generosity of spirit, which has forever changed my life and that of so many others," said **Matthew Rushing**, Ailey's Interim Artistic Director. "Mr. Ailey's legacy will continue to inspire us all through the Whitney's unprecedented exhibition, the stories shared through the "Alvin Ailey and Me," and all of AILEY's programs and performances, especially now during the Company's holiday season at New York City Center."

A small sample of excerpts from tributes below:

"Alvin - you were my dance inspiration," wrote **Vanessa Williams** in a letter to Alvin Ailey. "*Revelations* is in my blood. You live on in my heart forever."

"Alvin Ailey, your incredible choreography, your company, your legacy has created a cultural fusion that has resounded around the world," said **Debbie Allen** in a video submission. "You gave us a sense of our identity and a sense of purpose and our power in your work and it made us all understand and rethink what we were doing and why we should be doing it. I was so, so blessed to meet you, to be trained by you and your incredible company . . . It changed my whole life and I'm now dedicating my life to passing that baton how I can to the younger generation of millions of young people that need this kind of inspiration and guidance. Thank you for the path."

"How do you be an artist, a Black artist, certainly, and not know about Alvin Ailey and the company," asked actor **Lorraine Toussaint** in a video submission. "The core of Ailey is a level of artistry that, if you are a serious artist, you aspire to, because that's a universal sense, that thing that gives you goosebumps when you see it, when you hear it, when you see it on screen. I get that every time I see Ailey . . . I don't think it was all smooth sailing with him. As it never is for artists. We just turn the adversities of life into something beautiful, into something transcendent. And I would just say to Alvin, for whatever you've suffered, however many ways that you have suffered, your suffering has not been in vain. Your struggles have not been in vain. Your artistry has transcended time. Here we are so many decades later and it will be centuries later and we will still be getting goosebumps looking at your work. So brave. Standing ovation."

Artist **Kara Walker**, who has a piece in *Edges of Ailey*, remembered how watching a performance of *Revelations* on cable at age 12 “turned my fledging love for dance into a full on passion. No unoccupied living room was safe from my long, flailing legs kicking and swooping around. I made a habit of modern dance. I moved to NYC in 2002 with my 4-year-old and IMMEDIATELY tried to place her in the Ailey school for children. She wasn’t having it - she complained vociferously. I didn’t force her to live out my truncated dreams . . . Even though she never took classes, I took my daughter to City Center every December or so to see Ailey performances, a present for my birthday.” Walker also recalled when she met legendary Ailey performer Judith Jamison—who just passed away: “Judith Jamison came to visit my public art work ‘A Subtlety’ at the Domino Sugar Plant in 2014 and I became a tongue-tied fan girl. It’s rare you get to meet your pre-teen idol and rare still to have her bless your work with her understanding.”

“I am from a small town in Texas, as was Alvin Ailey. I’m also a Black, gay man, as was Alvin Ailey,” current Ford Foundation president and philanthropist **Darren Walker** recalled in a video submission. “I remember seeing for the first time, this company perform *Revelations*, which was a revelation for me. The music. The costumes. The choreography. The iconography of the Black church . . . a Black experience. An experience rooted in poverty and exclusion and racism, and yet there was so much joy on that stage and in that beautiful production of *Revelations* . . . Seeing Alvin Ailey on that stage, hearing him after the performance speak with such eloquence, such confidence, such a sense of self awareness and self assuredness, gave me confidence. I knew he was a gay man. I knew I was a gay man. And I knew that we both were Black and that seeing people like him for me was transformational in terms of my own coming to terms in a positive way with my identity . . . What I experienced from Alvin Ailey was a relationship that was for me very personal, and that’s the genius of an artist who is a rare and unique artist. He or she can speak to you as if you are the only person the art was made for.”

“You are my North Star,” wrote actor **Ryan Jamaal Swain**, who trained with Ailey for his role as a dancer on “Pose.” “Your prowess, incredible vision, and your love for people restores in me my own love for humanity. Your ability to shine an incandescent light on your woes, joy, and family, have given me the strength in my own life. I think about a quote from your friend James ‘Jimmy’ Baldwin that says, ‘It took me many years of vomiting what I was told about myself and half-believing before I walked on this Earth as though I belong here.’ Your resilience, your power in truth-telling and being as synergistic in your walk is powerful. Simply powerful is what I feel when I think of your dance, your soul, your dream. I am so happy that you came into my life to show me that if I can think it, feel it, dance it, be it — then I can do it. A great gift from an even greater giant!”

---

## PRESS CONTACT

For press materials and image requests, please visit our press site at [whitney.org/press](http://whitney.org/press) or contact:

**Ashley Reese, Director of Communications**

Whitney Museum of American Art  
(212) 671-1846  
[Ashley\\_Reese@whitney.org](mailto:Ashley_Reese@whitney.org)

**Whitney Press Office**  
[whitney.org/press](http://whitney.org/press)  
(212) 570-3633  
[pressoffice@whitney.org](mailto:pressoffice@whitney.org)

---

## ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

### **Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment**

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum’s Land Acknowledgment, [visit the Museum’s website](#).

---

## VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed

Tuesday. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. The Museum offers FREE admission and special programming for visitors of all ages every Friday evening from 5–10 pm and on the second Sunday of every month.

**Image credit:**

Vanessa Williams. Alvin Ailey and Me. Photo by Mark Mann

###