

# COMPLEX

## How Tremaine Emory is Sharing The Legacy of Alvin Ailey, an Icon He Says Is 'Just As Important As Michael Jordan'

By: Aria Hughes  
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“He’s just as important as Michael Jordan,” said Tremaine Emory.

Emory was referring to Alvin Ailey, the Black activist and choreographer who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958, when Black stories weren’t being told onstage through modern dance. His name isn’t as familiar as Michael Jordan’s, but his impact is far reaching.

Ailey passed more than three decades ago, but his name still lives on through the dance company that he founded and the work he contributed. In 1960 he produced “Revelations,” a piece that tells the story of African American culture from slavery to freedom, and is still being performed by his company [today](#).

Emory, the designer behind Denim Tears, wanted to honor that with his newest project, an apparel collection called Cry/Revelations that was produced by Champion. Emory said Champion approached him about a collaboration and he immediately knew he wanted to do something connected to Alvin Ailey.

“Dance in general is one of the highest forms of art and sports,” said Emory. “Champion is associated with all of these sports that are typically hetero and machismo sports. And I wanted to show that women, men, every part of the spectrum, the LGBTQ community, and intersexual as well are the highest level of athletes, too, the highest level of artists, too, and the highest level of creatives as well.”

Robert Battle, the Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, says this type of partnership is the first of its kind for the group, but he was open to it because of the synergies between the stories Ailey told through dance and the stories Emory tells through his brand Denim Tears, which is best known for its denim covered in cotton wreaths that symbolize the legacy of slavery in the US.

“When I learned about Tremaine and how his work leans into that space of social justice, I thought, ‘Wow. What a symbiotic opportunity,’” said Battle. “People don’t often think of fashion as having had a history of political and social statements, and they don’t often think of dance as having that same history. So it was an opportunity to educate people, but also to put Alvin Ailey in that space of fashion and represent his influence on fashion.”



Emory said there wasn’t an Alvin Ailey apparel archive to reference, so he looked at photographs and rare books he found at Lee Kaplan’s Arcana bookstore in Los Angeles, including a book of photographs of Alvin Ailey dancers taken by Jack Mitchell in 1993. The line includes satin coach jackets featuring the American and Pan African flag, crochet tops, sweatsuits covered with photographs of Alvin Ailey dancers, trench coats influenced by Alvin Ailey’s [Hobo Sapiens piece](#), and lots of madras. Emory said in his research he found that the [madras print was an Indian fabric](#) appropriated by European and then Western culture and he wanted to bring it back to Black and brown people.



CTRL+Click photo to watch short film.

Emory promoted the line with a short film directed by Taylour Paige and styled by Hanna Yohannz featuring Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's [Samantha Figgins](#) and [Yannick Lebrun](#) dancing throughout the Queens Museum. Battle said it was important to tie the clothing back to dance and show that it is a live expression and not just an artifact hanging on a wall.

Over the past couple of years, Alvin Ailey's name has had a resurgence. A documentary directed by [Jamila Wignot](#) on Ailey's life titled "Ailey," was released earlier this year and is now available to rent on iTunes, and Barry Jenkins is [set to direct](#) an Alvin Ailey biopic. Battle, who says there is also an extensive exhibit in the works, is ensuring that Alvin Ailey's legacy remains relevant to a younger generation.

"We have this whole generation of folks who didn't grow up going to see performances in the theater, let alone seeing dance, so how could we humanize Alvin Ailey, the man, in a way that lives on people's apparel. Because it will make people ask questions," says Battle. "So that was really important to me that we struck a chord with the younger generation that are fashion forward."

Emory, who signed a two-year partnership with Levi's earlier this year, wants to continue to use his line as a way to tell stories about the Black experience.

"With Spike Lee's *Forty Acres and a Mule* he told stories, he made clothing, he published books, he made documentaries, and he still does. So with *Denim Tears* I always see it as a mix of *Forty Acres and a Mule*, *Willi Smith*, *Cross Colours*, *FUBU*, and the sportswear brands I grew up on like *Stüssy*, *Supreme*, *SIR*, *Union New York*, and *Ralph Lauren*," says Emory. "So I will continue to reference those brands and tell stories that are African diaspora centric."