Blues Suite
(1958)

Dedicated to the memory of our Brother John Sellers.

Choreography by: Alvin Ailey
Restaged by: Matthew Rushing, Ronni Favors, Clifton Brown
Music: Traditional
Décor and Costumes by Ves Harper
Costumes redesigned by Normand Maxon
Costume design for “Yancey Special” by Jose Cornado
Original Lighting by Nicola Cernovitch
Lighting redesigned by Chenault Spence

“Been down so long
Getting up don’t cross my mind...
When you see me laughing
I’m laughing to keep from crying...”

From the fields and barrelhouses of the Southern Negro sprang the blues --
songs of lost love, despair, protest, and anger hymns to the secular regions of his soul.

"Blood memories" of rural, Depression-era southern Texas come to life in Blues Suite, Alvin Ailey's popular ballet that launched Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958. With the rumble of a train and the toll of distant bells, a cast of vividly-drawn characters from the barrelhouses and fields of Alvin Ailey's southern childhood are summoned to dance and revel through one long, sultry night. Ailey's first masterpiece poignantly evokes the sorrow, humor, and humanity of the blues, those heartfelt songs that he called "hymns to the secular regions of the soul."

It is extraordinary that Alvin Ailey was just 27 years old when the dance premiered and it was only the sixth ballet that he had choreographed. It is recognized as the moment where he found his own miraculous voice as a creative artist presenting real people on the concert dance stage, and defining his choreographic genius. Filtering the barely understood images of boyhood through the sensibilities of a man, Mr. Ailey imagined beloved but troubled characters as they gather for a bawdy night of partying and blues in an old barrelhouse. Joe Nash, the African American dance historian, said, “When I saw Blues Suite, it was almost as if you were peeking in on the lives of people.”

Beginning with the blues, Alvin Ailey was subsequently able to take us through a wide range of emotional and kinetic experiences in his choreographic output. The characters in Blues Suite, reflections of people he knew from his childhood in Texas, went to the Dew Drop Inn on Saturday evening to relax and have a good time while preparing to repent at church on Sunday morning. This is the repentance later seen in Revelations, which was created two years later. As Mr. Ailey said, “In dance, I deal with these two very different worlds.”

“Blues Suite galvanized the crowd and announced the arrival of a major choreographer. The rest, as they say, is history.”

Dance Magazine

“...vivid choreographic evocations of the passion, the sorrow and the grim humor of the blues.”

The New York Times

“It remains one of Mr. Ailey’s best pieces.”

The New York Times
Original soundtrack sung by Brother John Sellers.
Good Morning Blues
I Cried
Mean Ol’ Frisco
House of the Rising Sun
Backwater Blues
In The Evening
Yancey Special
Slow Drag – Going to Chicago
Sham
Good Morning Blues