He used to dance on N.J. city streets. How this local dancer made it to his Ailey II debut.

By Jacqueline Cutler
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For Christopher Taylor, dancing in the street led to dancing on the stage.

Taylor had a blast dancing in Military Park, he says, while growing up in Newark. He recently made his debut as a member of Ailey II, where he takes the stage at Manhattan’s Alvin Ailey Citigroup Theater, playing until April.3

“I’m so excited,” Taylor, 22, tells NJ Advance Media. “I’m also excited because it’s Robert Battle’s 10th anniversary as the company’s artistic director, and we’re doing ‘Alleluia!’ and so many physical pieces that I love. It’s something that we really saw in the studio when we’re giving so much of ourselves — like not even just dancing, but also acting and deep within the dance, giving so much emotionally. We were just joking about it yesterday like we don’t need therapy; there is so much emotion and whatnot (in dance).

Taylor will dance, take the bow, then return home to New Jersey. He lives in the Newark border, just over the line in Hillside. His roots here are deep. His grandmother owned Hillside’s Lillian’s Soul Food Restaurant (now closed). His mom, whom Taylor refers to as a “free spirit,” was not around much, and his father wasn’t at all, but his grandmother, whom he calls his rock, was always there. And she loved music.

As he talks over a Zoom interview, a smile creases his face as he mentions how the tunes from house parties back in Newark had him moving. Taylor was someone who could always feel the music, he says. He recalls when he realized how much he loved it and that others liked watching him dance.

“Three times my grandmother had taken me to Military Park in downtown Newark, that park would have house music even during the summer,” he says. “From since I was 5 to like 12, I was going there, just dancing, and people would give me money. People who knew me would say, ‘Oh, that’s Lillian and her grandson, little Christopher. They know me and everything, and it’s like a community.

In middle school, Taylor started to learn about more structured dance through summer camps — one of which would change his life.

Taylor had the opportunity to study at AlvinAileyCamp when he was 11. The camp’s then-director, Felicia A. Swoope — now executive director of NewarkArts — recalls Taylor as a young stand-out.

“Christopher Taylor was already a star as a middle school,” Swoope says. “I remember that he excelled at everything during. AlvinAileyCamp in Newark and arrived each day with an energy that was contagious and exciting. We could all see a star in the making. I am elated that he is now a member of Ailey II.”

The AlvinAileyAmericanDanceTheater has hugely influenced Taylor, from his days to studying at AlvinAileySchool Senior Division. When he learned there was a scholarship to take classes at the iconic Manhattan studio, he tried out and made it. Initially, his grandmother took him into Manhattan on weekends, but when he turned 13, she taught him how to navigate NJT from Newark to midtown west.

He found he loved learning ballet and the Horton method of modern dance. Taken by the Horton method, he showed him there was another way as some of his friends fell prey to the lure of the streets. He lived in different neighborhoods around Newark.

“Don’t live in a best of areas,” Taylor says. “I’m not saying my area is horrible, but it’s not the best, and I wish my neighborhood was better. My friends, they got stuck in the street, gone to jail, or they’ve given up.”

With dance, Taylor says, he was introduced to a new world. But more is needed, he adds.

“In Newark, yes, we have NJPAC, and I’m glad we have outreach programs. I think we need more,” he says. “We need more theaters, schools, and we need more art. I need to be appreciated.”

Like if I’m in New York, you can dance in the street and record yourself, pie be like, ‘OK, he’s doing a little dance, you must be an artist,’” Taylor continues.

“In Newark, New Jersey, if I’m over here trying to make a video in the street, people are like, ‘Is he crazy?’ Literally, somebody came up to me like, ‘Are you OK? Are people driving up to me? I’m like, I’m just recording a video for something. I’m a dancer.”

Between Alvin classes and graduating from ArtsHigh School, it’s been a decade of dance for Taylor. He also runs and boxes to keep in shape — supplementing the eight hours Ailey gives in the studio.

“I always get nervous, I feel uncomfortable before I get on stage, but as soon as I take my first step and get into it, it’s just amazing. This is a beautiful feeling, it is euphoric.”