Alvin Ailey was a dancer and choreographer who revolutionized modern dance, paved the way for African-Americans in the arts, and created one of the most famous dance companies in the world.

Alvin was born in Texas in 1931. When Alvin was 11, he and his mother moved to Los Angeles so she could find work and leave the South, which was segregated at the time. In Los Angeles, he became interested in dance after a friend introduced him to a dance teacher named Lester Horton. He took classes with Lester, but wasn’t sure if he wanted to pursue dance or go on to college. He moved to San Francisco in 1951, where he met a woman named Marguerite Johnson, who later changed her name to Maya Angelou and became a famous writer. Marguerite was a dancer, and the two performed around town. He soon moved back to Los Angeles to study dance full-time.

In 1953, he began performing with his friend Lester’s dance company and danced in many Hollywood movies. However, later that year, Lester died suddenly. Alvin became the new director of the company and dedicated their first piece to his friend and teacher.

The next year, he was invited to New York to perform in a Broadway show. There, he found the dance world strange and constricting. He felt it lacked the passion and freedom that he loved so much about dance. He started his own dance company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The dances he choreographed for the company were modern, but also used typical African-American dance styles like jazz and blues, and traditional African dancing as well. Drawing on his experiences growing up in the South, his dances often evoked African-American struggles. For the first few years, the company was made up of African-Americans, and as time went on it began to include people from all different backgrounds. Alvin prided himself on hiring dancers based on their talent, and not the color of their skin.

Alvin continued his work with his dance company, and also opened schools and started programs that offered dance and arts classes to people from all backgrounds. He was awarded the Kennedy Center Honors in 1988. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues to entertain people all around the world to this day.