

Rogers honors legendary choreographer

By: Crystal Dominguez

February 24, 2016



Rusty Schramm/Telegram

Joking around with the mayor

Troy Powell, artistic director of Ailey II, jokes around with Rogers Mayor Tammy Cockrum and members of his dance troupe during a historical marker unveiling Wednesday at the Rogers City Hall recognizing choreographer Alvin Ailey who was born in Rogers.

dance. He was influenced by “church services, music and the movement in the Black community,” as it is also written on his marker inscription. He started his own company and school in New York. That is where he became a familiar face on the big screen and on Broadway.

He died 25 years ago, but his story is kept alive with every graceful move, leap and bend.

“His work reflected his Central Texas birthplace,” Patricia Benoit, Bell County Historical Commission marker chairman and a Telegram staff writer, said at the ceremony. “His choreography told important stories about African-American life. We wanted to honor his story, and the lives of hundreds of thousands of unnamed African-Americans who grew up in difficult times and who endured and thrived, nonetheless. This was an important story to remember for everyone, no matter their background.”

Benoit said a lot of work goes into placing a state historical marker, from the expense to the approval, but said the collective effort is what made it a success.

Rogers has a boulevard, a day and now a historical marker named after Ailey. Cockrum said the only thing next is to see the Ailey II dance troupe perform at the Cultural Activities Center in Temple at

ROGERS — A crowd filled the little steps of City Hall Wednesday morning for the historic marker dedication for legendary hometown dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey.

Rogers Mayor Tammy Cockrum, who emceed the event, said she was not only impressed by the town’s response with more than 50 residents and almost 150 students in attendance, but also from people who traveled to Rogers from across Central Texas and even as far as Houston.

I can’t even tell you the last time something like this has happened,” she said. “It is very, very cool.”

The marker is located at the Rogers Civic Center at the intersection of Alvin Ailey Boulevard and State Highway 36.

Ailey was born in Rogers in 1931 and is internationally recognized as a pioneer in modern



Rusty Schramm/Telegram

Giving the benediction

The Rev. Dr. Sylvester Duckens of Houston, second cousin to Alvin Ailey, gives the benediction Wednesday morning to a group attending a historical marker unveiling for his cousin at Rogers Texs City Hall.

7:30 tonight. The event is sponsored by the Central Texas Orchestral Society.

Cockrum said she appreciates and looks forwards to seeing the troupe perform Ailey's ballet "Revelations," one of his most well-known pieces of choreography that tells the story of struggle and perseverance capturing his upbringing while growing up in Rogers with his single mother.

"It just commemorates what we are and who we are in Rogers, a small town, where everybody is family," Cockrum said. "We are not strangers to one another, because in small-town America, when the whole entire United States might be in an uproar — we are not."

Cockrum said the city has had the marker for more than a year, but after working with the Bell County Historical Commission, they decided to wait for the Ailey II troupe to be in Central Texas to make the dedication special.



Rusty Schramm/Telegram

Marker unveiled

Lauren Shelton and Bentlee Baldwin, both 17 and juniors at Rogers High School, remove a covering from a historical marker Wednesday morning in front of a group attending the event recognizing choreographer Alvin Ailey at Rogers City Hall.

"The Ailey dancers came through about six years ago once before," Cockrum said. "There was no big hoorah. They just came into town and saw the church that he (Ailey) went to. So this year we thought we would do it up right."

The timing was also perfect as students from the schools in Rogers just finished learning about Ailey, not only as a hometown hero, but as a part of Black History Month.

"They had all just finished studying about Alvin Ailey," Cockrum said. "So this all just worked out perfect."

After the ceremony, students had the chance to get autographs and have lunch with the Ailey II dancers.

Carol Whitley, assistant principal at Roger Elementary School, has lived in the area for more than 28 years and said Ailey is a successful hometown figure who has pioneered the way for other Rogers' residents to fulfill their dreams.

"The second-graders made a sign that said, 'Thank you for helping us believe in our dreams,' so I think that says it well," Whitley said. "It was an honor for our town to receive this because at various times we have studied about the history of Ailey and who he was and the accomplishments that he made."

The Rev. Sylvester Duckens of Houston is Ailey's second cousin and attended the event. He gave the benediction at the ceremony.

Cockrum said it is amazing that the troupe dancers have had the opportunity to be influenced by someone who was near and dear to Ailey himself.

"The troupe's artistic director, Troy Powell, was hand-picked by Mr. Ailey when he was just 9 years old," she said. Benoit reminded Cockrum at the ceremony that they would soon see this come to fruition.

"Remember what I said four years ago" she told the mayor. "Our plan was that the state would pay for the marker, we would do all the work, and the city of Rogers would get the glory. We love it when a plan comes together."