

I'm Heather Beal in East St. Louis.

We're gonna show you how the dances
of the African Diaspora became so deeply rooted
in East St. Louis
because of the legendary Katherine Dunham.

[Ruby] Ms. Dunham was a phenomenal woman,
an educator, an activist.

[Keith] She saw the need for us to make connection
to who we are as a people,
to your whole self.

[Heather] I wish that people knew about
Ms. Dunham's legacy in East St. Louis.

I want people to look on that stage
and see a beautiful reflection of themselves
as Black people.

🎵 Afro-Caribbean rhythms 🎵

🎵 Old skool hip-hop grooves & funky b-lines 🎵

🎵 Lively drum-kit-led track with skittering rimshots 🎵

[Heather] I say I'm from East St. Louis
with as much pride as can be.

People just take care of themselves
versus waiting for resources to the city,

like they provide the resources to suburbs.

♪ Lively drum-kit-led track with skittering rimshots ♪

My dance philosophy is black joy.

I represent how we are at our backyard barbecues,

how we are in our basement house parties,

the places that we are free.

♪ Lively drum-kit-led track with skittering rimshots ♪

And I use Dunham technique as my vehicle to do that.

Katherine Dunham is the mother of modern dance,

not just Black dance.

She could've settled anywhere in the world

and she chose to settle in East St. Louis.

♪ Authentic percussion from Haiti ♪

I grew up dancing

at the Katherine Dunham Museum Children's Workshop.

Growing up in a Black cultural institution,

words of affirmation were poured into us

and they were drilled into us.

So, in my mind, well East St. Louis is a city of champions.

[Ruby] I have been affiliated with the Dunham legacy

for 52 years.

Her whole thing as an anthropologist was,
why do people like to dance?

Ms. Dunham went to Haiti to study dance.

She went to Cuba, Martinique, Jamaica.

[Heather] Her peers were creating work based off
images that they saw, posters and whatnot.

Ms. Dunham actually went to these places
and she captured the dances on film.

I can see where it came from.

🎵 Afro Cuban jazz with a 6/8 rhythm 🎵

Dunham Technique

is a Afro Modern Caribbean dance technique
that embodies your heart, your soul, your spirit
and your body.

So there is a series of center floor work that we do.

Barre work, progression work across the floor.

She was definitely a pioneer.

The world maker.

That's like, my dance mama.

She was Beyoncé before Beyoncé was Beyoncé.

🎵 Afro Cuban jazz with a 6/8 rhythm 🎵

[Ruby] It was the late '60s.

And she wanted to quell the violence that
the young people were experiencing in East St. Louis.

♪ Lively African percussion ♪

Dance, percussion, African studies, anatomy for the performer.

We had a complete program.

[Keith] The class just blew me away.

And I was just engulfed by that rhythm.

It touched my soul.

♪ Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums ♪

It was a cultural mecca that everybody
from St. Louis' metropolitan area came there
to get that spirit, to get that oomph.

And it was needed.

♪ Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums ♪

(train passing)

♪ Groovy West African drums ♪

Ms. Dunham saw the value of connecting
to her cultural identity.

That connection is not limited to one particular place.

Whether they came from Africa and went to Cuba,
or went to Haiti, or they ended up in Mississippi.

That African Diaspora is very important.

🎵 Groovy West African drums 🎵

🎵 Live drumming by Montra Mumphard 🎵

[Ruby] I'm most proud of being able to

let Ms. Dunham pass her baton to me.

And I've taught thousands of kids.

🎵 Live drumming continues 🎵

One of my favorite sayings from Ms. Dunham was

"to go inside every day to find the inner strength,

so that the world will not blow out your candle."

🎵 Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums 🎵

[Ta'Shayla] I was that kid that

was walking around with my head down, not feeling confident.

Ruby Streate had a tremendous effect on me.

She engraved in me to never walk with my head down.

🎵 Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums 🎵

It takes blood to be related,

but it takes love to be family.

And I feel like we all have that.

🎵 Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums 🎵

[Ruby] Miss Streate choreographed Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman".

Imagine what that's like for a 15 year old girl to embody it.

You don't have any option but to be a phenomenal woman.

Everybody who has come through that program
has now gone on and have done things
that the world and society tells us
that we could not have done.

But we doing it.

♪ Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums ♪

[Keith] I did a piece right after Mike Brown was killed
that was in response to the unrest,
the social justice challenges and struggles
that were happening right here in St. Louis.

And so, it does not stop in the classroom.

It does not stop on the stage.

We are important voices to make a change.

♪ Percussive balafon, tambin, djembe and Burundi-style drums ♪

[Heather] I have an army of people here
physically with me that's powerful.

You ain't even seen my ancestral army.

And that's infinite.

And so that's what it brings to the movement.

Thanks for watching, everyone.

Let us know where you would like to see

"If Cities Could dance" next.

Drop your comment below.

We out.

We out.

🎵 Afro-Caribbean rhythms 🎵