

Tomlinson, Mel A.: Rubber-Band Man ^[1]

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Mel A. Tomlinson: Rubber-Band Man

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 3/11/2007. Copyrighted.
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Mel A. Tomlinson was one of America's most brilliant dancers in the 1970s and '80s. Raised in Raleigh's Chavis Heights public housing project, he became a star in Agnes de Mille's Heritage Theater, the Dance Theater of Harlem and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Later, he performed a tour de force in George Balanchine's New York City Ballet.

On stage, Tomlinson was, as The New York Times once said, "electric." He nearly died of AIDS in 2000, but recovered, earned his doctoral degree and is now a dance teacher, an artistic translator for the deaf and blind, and a Baptist pastor. We talked at his apartment in Charlotte.

In Mel A. Tomlinson's words:



Mel A. Tomlinson. Photo by Chris Seward, 2007. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

When I got sick, I began to think about living and dying. I'm OK with it all now, but dying is a serious business. I mean, the blindness, the hallucinations. One reporter asked, 'Did you see the light at the end of the tunnel?' I told him I got so close I wanted to come back from New York to be home. I wanted my mother to show some comfort, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. I was alone. I asked myself, 'Why me?'

I was scared to death, ashamed, embarrassed, and my whole personality changed. I was evil and uncomfortable to be around.

But I had no control. I was in a wheelchair, could barely feed or bathe myself. I lost my sight. I got darker. I was blacker than Wesley Snipes at midnight with the lights off.

I finally said, 'I'm leaving here alone. I'm going to a better place.' Then, miraculously, I got better. I went through it with a higher power. But when you're alone, you do go back to your childhood. You go back to your memories.

My earliest memory is of my mother's father. His name was Rev. John David Henry and he lived in Clayton, Johnston County. He was a principal, a lawyer and a preacher. Very smart. He was strong, had big hands, blue-gray eyes.

He was my friend. He made me feel as if he needed my help, so I held his hand. He passed away when I was 5.

I was a precocious child. I was a nerd. I loved getting an 'A' in school, and I wanted attention.

The first sign of any talent that I had was doing flips that nobody else could do. I had a unique stretching ability, and I rode a unicycle wherever I needed to go. I was nicknamed Clown or Rubber-Band Man, and I was proud of it.

I wanted to get everybody's attention. Like, I would skateboard backwards or doing a headstand -- 'Hey, I'm getting ready to go down the hill backwards, but on my hands!' -- I do it and I bust myself all up.

But I'm Capricorn, and don't tell me I can't.

Dance chose me. It chose me at Carnage Junior High School in the ninth grade. It was halftime at a football game, and I'm performing. I rode my little one-wheel cycle, and I did flips and gymnastics.

You know, kids are mean. Some of them threw bottles. I didn't know what they meant when they said things like 'taggot.' I knew it wasn't nice. But the majority of the school took pride in me: 'Look what we have at our school!'

That day, there was this lady, Betty Kovach, who was there with her son. She looks on the field and she saw me on my unicycle and doing my back flips with such grace and control.

A few days later, I get a letter. She writes, 'I have a ballet studio, and I'd like to talk to you about dancing and your future.'

Mrs. Kovach's studio is on the other side of town, where the golf courses are, and I'm there in the projects. So I took the bus and went across town. I was thinking: 'Boys don't do this.'

I saw the little girls, white, about my age. Some were younger. I was the only boy.

She said, 'Sit down. Watch the girls.'

After a while, she goes, 'Girls, rest.' And she goes, 'I want you to show me something.'

So I remembered what the girls had been doing and I did it back exact. She said, 'We've been working on this for months and you came in and did what they did.' She says, 'Will you dance with us?' I said, 'I live way over there, and I don't need.

But every week after that, I put stuff in a gym bag and I went over there.

I learned a lot watching Betty Kovach. She was quiet-natured, but strong. Exacting: not to do well, but to do the best.

I loved dancing. I loved pleasing the audience. I loved the escape of it. I could be anything I wanted: a snake, a soldier, anything at all. Betty Kovach told me, 'You can be a dancer if you want to be.' And I told myself, 'That's what I want to do.

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