

Tomlinson, Mel Alexander ^[1]

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January 3, 1954 – February 5, 2019

See also: [Mel A. Tomlinson: Rubber-Band Man](#) ^[2], from "[Listening to History](#)" ^[3]."



"Dance Master Mel Tomlinson studies, corrects, and demonstrates to students at the N.C. School of the Arts." Photograph by James Parker. 1987.

Image courtesy of DigitalNC.org.

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Mel Alexander Tomlinson, dancer, was born in Raleigh on January 3, 1954 to Tommy and Marjorieline (Henry) Tomlinson. Tomlinson became interested in dance after participating in gymnastics in high school. He grew up in the public housing projects of Chavis Heights in Raleigh, one of six children, and attended Ligon High School in the 1960s. The school was segregated during that era. He attended the Governor's School in Winston-Salem the summer of 1970. In 1971, Tomlinson was given a scholarship to study dance at the North Carolina School of the Arts (NCSA). He received other scholarship offers related to his academic excellence. Tomlinson was ranked fourth in his junior class, was the president of the National Honor Society, and had been awarded Best Actor of the Regional and State Drama Festivals.

While a student at the NCSA, Tomlinson toured the state with the school's dance company to perform *The Nutcracker* ballet. This same year, he traveled to Georgia to dance with the Augusta Civic Ballet and the Southern Atlanta Ballet Company. In 1973, Tomlinson spent the summer in Italy studying dance and serving as an interpreter.

He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from what is now the [University of North Carolina School of the Arts](#) ^[5] (UNCSA) after studying there for only two years. After graduation, Tomlinson began touring the country with the [Agnes de Mille Heritage Theatre](#) ^[6], which was founded at the school.

In 1974, Tomlinson switched his focus from modern dance to ballet and joined the [Dance Theater of Harlem](#) ^[7], where he quickly rose to the position of soloist. In Harlem, he performed in "Manifestations," "Swan Lake" and "Scheherazade." He took leave for a time to join [Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theater](#) ^[8], which produced mostly modern pieces.

Tomlinson joined the New York City Ballet in 1981 and was at the time the company's only Black dancer. He became a soloist with the Ballet shortly thereafter. His November 27, 1981 debut in Balanchine's *Agon* earned him immediate notice by the audience and critics. A write-up in the New York Times a few days later called the performance "electrifying." Tomlinson stayed with the Ballet until 1987.

In 1983, Tomlinson received the first annual North Carolina Prize. The North Carolina Prize is given to an artist in the field

of visual or performing arts from a group of four North Carolina newspapers owned by the New York Times Company.

In 1987, he returned to his home state of North Carolina and joined the faculty at UNCSA. After leaving UNCSA, Tomlinson joined the North Carolina Dance Theatre as a dance instructor and Director of Educational Services. Through this role he continued to teach and perform. Tomlinson also performed with other institutions including the Boston Ballet's CITYDANCE program, Boston Conservatory of Music, Harvard University, University of North Carolina-Charlotte and the North Carolina Dance Theatre (now the Charlotte Ballet).

By the mid-1990s, Tomlinson was diagnosed with Human Immunovirus (HIV) and developed Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) as a result. He became seriously ill and was hospitalized, but made a dramatic recovery. During this time he also received a Master's degree and Ph.D. from Carolina University of Theology through correspondence courses and was ordained as a Baptist minister. After his recovery, he continued to teach dance, lecture, and appear as a motivational speaker.



Tomlinson (center) during dance rehearsal with Eva McCollum (left) and Thomasina Craig (right). October 1997. Image courtesy of DigitalNC.org.

Tomlinson's successful career challenged many social norms. He penetrated racial barriers when he became New York City Ballet's only Black dancer in 1981. His career also challenged ideas of masculinity. According to a 1996 Greensboro News and Record ^[10] interview, Tomlinson stated that he persisted in his dance career even though "I was supposed to be a basketball player or a preacher... my talent was questioned by my family, my neighbors and my teachers."

Tomlinson's disability and sexuality also challenged conventions. Tomlinson was openly gay from age eighteen, and stated that he was consistently asked to apologize "for being a homosexual" throughout the course of his career. Tomlinson's HIV-AIDS diagnosis, coupled with his survival, also challenged social ideas of the virus and its implications. Tomlinson spent much of his later career in the 1990s and 2000s educating people about himself and his career. On one such occasion, on Friday February 23, 2001, he addressed the Women of Vision of New Jerusalem Baptist Church ^[11] congregation. He addressed the social stigma of gay people and the AIDS virus, and stated that "the number one killer of people today isn't cancer or high blood pressure. It is ignorance and negligence. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Try to learn as much information as possible."

Mel Tomlinson died at the age of sixty-five on February 5, 2019 of pancreatic cancer.

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Image Credits:

Johnson, Sue Ann. "Ballet Dancer, Mel Tomlinson..." Photograph. Published in *The Charlotte Post*, October 30, 1997. <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn88063138/1997-10-30/ed-1/seq-10/...> [9] (accessed December 14, 2023).

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[21st Century \(2001-present\)](#) [25]

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[LGBTQIA+ People](#) [28]

[People with Disabilities](#) [29]

[Performing arts](#) [30]

[Religious Leaders and Clergy](#) [31]

[Social Justice](#) [32]

Authors:

[Agan, Kelly](#) [33]

[Miles, Jeff](#) [34]

[Smythe, Andrea](#) [35]

Origin - location:

[Forsyth County](#) [36]

[Winston-Salem](#) [37]

[University of North Carolina School of the Arts](#) [38]

[Mecklenburg County](#) [39]

[Charlotte](#) [40]

[Wake County](#) [41]

[Raleigh](#) [42]

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