

# When Roy met Tillie, bliss

By [John Barry](#), Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA

Roy was a 42-year-old ex-ballroom dancing champ. Tillie was a 90-year-old grandmother, twice-widowed. Her childhood ended after the sixth grade. She rarely danced.

Tillie: "My husband didn't care to see me dance at Centro Austuriano."

Roy: "He was jealous."

Tillie: "He was old-fashioned. I was modern."

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Roy Stone met Tillie Mellor in 1990 at the Coliseum in St. Petersburg. He asked her to dance. It was a waltz. She wouldn't tell him how old she was, because she was with a boyfriend who was younger.

She'll be 99 in November. She and Roy are still dance partners. They put on a show at the Coliseum about twice a month. During the winter, hundreds of people come every week in midafternoon. Most of them are older. The men wear jackets. The women wear dresses that show their legs. They waltz away the dull afternoons.

Last year, Roy and Tillie danced a swing. She slipped and came down hard on her hip. He thought that was that. From the beginning, they never knew when the last dance was coming.

She hopped back up.

Her hip turned black and blue. It was three months before they danced again.

No more swing, Tillie told him, no more samba. Just waltz me.

Tillie: "I'm old."

Roy: "You mean you're *older*."

He put on a cha cha.

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Roy picks up Tillie for dance practice. She wears a flared, rose-colored skirt. She lives at the San Lorenzo apartments for the elderly on one end of MacDill. His Lavelle Hall studio is on the other end. She never learned to drive. That was always a heartbreak.

They start a waltz.

"*Curtsy.*"

"*Turn. One-two-three-four.*"

"*Rock, step and up.*"

He raises her in a shoulder lift and they spin, her leg extended. He's 6 feet and 200 pounds. She's a tiny thing, a rose petal.

They stop for a rest. Tillie sits. She smiles demurely.

Roy breathes hard. He's sweating. He ripped a seam in his shirt.

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Tillie couldn't stay in school after the sixth grade. She couldn't pay for her books. She dreamed of being an actor. But she wrapped cigars at the Garcia Vega factory where her father worked. She got married at 22. She had two babies.

"Things were bad. I couldn't buy dresses for them."

She taught herself to sew and made clothes for her daughters until they got married.

Her husband died after 42 years of marriage.

About three years later, she met Walter, an Englishman. He liked to dance even if he wasn't great at it. He took lessons for a year at Arthur Murray's. He liked to spend money on her. He liked to watch her try pretty dresses on and then he'd buy them.

They had 10 years together before he died, too.

She never learned to drive with Walter, either.

Tillie told herself, "Now I'm going to do what I want to do."

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They like to joke when Roy drives. They pass a bus stop where a man waits.

Roy: "You're looking that man over."

Tillie: "I'm not dead."

At his studio, he has photos of his *other* dance partner, Perri Adair Johnson. Roy and Perri once ranked first in Florida in the theatrical-cabaret division and third in the United States. She retired in 1990.

When he lifts Tillie and spins her, that's how he spun Perri.

Tillie lives a disciplined life. Every morning she has cream of wheat with bananas and canned peaches. She never has wine in the evening, because who can afford wine? Life is a little slow at San Lorenzo.

But when Tillie is with Roy, she never knows what he'll do. "I don't want to end up in a wheelchair," she tells him, and he repeats that speech he has about not getting old, only getting *older*.

Then he puts on a cha cha.

Every dance is an adventure. Every dance is like getting behind the wheel of a car and just taking off someplace.

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