

Mark “Tuba” Smith from New Orleans

A lotta people is scared of the tuba. They say it’s too big, it’s too heavy, let me play a trumpet, let me play a saxophone. But me, I see that tuba as a challenge. See with the tuba you have to fight with that tuba and that tuba gonna make you a man. I’m telling you, in my forty years playing tuba, I’ve had all kinda ups and downs and in between, but one thing I ain’t never did was put this tuba down.

During Katrina, I had lost me the neck to my old tuba, and I was up in Texas using a piece of garden hose to stick the mouthpiece. The thing is all bouncing up and down. I had to stick my hand up to hold the hose and my hand got stuck like that. I can’t move my left hand — but I ain’t let it stop me from playing. Oh no. I’m sitting down eating dinner, everybody say, Tuba what’s wrong with your hand? I said, man, just leave me alone, I can’t move the shit.

I get back to New Orleans, they had agencies was giving away instruments to all the musicians. Everybody getting brand new horns, but me and a brand new horn. Oh no. A new horn you gotta nurse it like a baby. The horn gotta grow up with you. I ain’t got time for that shit. I said let me get this here tuba, some forty years old, donated from Wichita, Kansas. Everybody saying, Tuba what’s wrong with you getting that old horn? Let me tell you something, ain’t nothing like a horn that’s ass done been whipped and beat up on. That way before the horn can beat me up, I’m beating up on the horn. It’s gotta have the seasoning, the flavor. Just like frying chicken. You can’t fry no chicken unless that skillet been seasoned. See, with chicken they got something called Tuba’s chicken, you know my momma and daddy done taught me. And that’s the best damn chicken. Now, I could tell you how to make Tuba’s chicken, but you go home and your chicken ain’t gonna taste the same. Why? Cause you ain’t go the same pot. Your pot ain’t been seasoned. See, me and my music done been seasoned. I gotta have me a horn that got the same flavor.

I was born and raised in the Magnolia Projects, nineteen hundred and fifty nine. They closed Magnolia down because all the violence, but back then it wasn’t like that. People had a winning attitude. If a young man wanted to do something with his life, then



the people was gonna help him. I was brought up right. Whatever I wanted to do, my people was gonna be there for me. You know what I wanted to do? Play tuba.

Picked up my first tuba in the old hurricane shelter at Thomy Lafon Middle School right across the street. It was in the back corner all dusty ain't been played in years. I put that big old tuba to my mouth and WHOOMP! First time I tried. Man, I just loved that sound. Used to practice my tuba walking from project to project WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOOMP! I went all the way from Magnolia down to the Seventh Ward. I got so good that everybody wanted me in they band. I had a name that just wouldn't quit. Something about me, I was like the golden child, like I had a beam of light coming down on that tuba.

My momma was my motivator. I'm the baby. Wasn't nobody messing with me. She had a little twenty-two on her side, you mess with my baby, momma shoot you and all that crazy stuff. When they hired me for a gig, they had to go through Ernestine Smith to get to me. Let me tell you, my first bar room gig, I'm no more than seventeen years old, my momma came running out to the car saying, "Don't you never come and get my baby out there playing at this hour." Ain't nobody didn't mess with my momma.



Tuba gives some pointers to the Young New Orleans Traditional Brass Band

My first band was Doc Paulin. He taught me all the traditional. Man, I had that down solid. Then here come the Dirty Dozen, playing that funk. I said, man, I wanna play me some of that there. Now Doc Paulin, he said no no no, that ain't no good. I said I gotta do my own thing, so I went and joined The Pinstripe Band. Man, we were the baddest thing on the street. I used to dance with the tuba getting down on my knees, shaking and crawling doing all that acrobatic shit. Man, we was funky!

You play in a traditional band, they want you to play way down low. Bluuurp Bluuurb Bluuurp Bluuurb. You just holding it down and the other horns got the melody. I'm playing with the Pinstripe, I say that I'm still gonna hold me down that Bluuurp Bluuurb, but let me get some of that Ba Dippy Doo Bop. I'm playing all over that chord. See, I was playing how I feel. Never played it the same way twice, 'cause I never felt the same way twice. Everybody else in Pinstripe is doing they own thing too. Man, that band wasn't nothing nice. Uptown, downtown people were amazed. We got big, playing on television, we went on tour in Europe. We were at a gig in Spain and I stepped on a old rusty nail backstage. My foot got all infected, and they had to send me back home.

Now I ain't gonna lie. Sometimes when the music gets slow, you have to have something else to fall back on. Growing up, I used to sell cold drinks or cut grass. They used to have a program in the projects where kids could get a lawn mower. But now, I'm a grown man. I said, I think I'm gonna follow in my daddy's footsteps, be a working man. I'm gonna go to Southern University, be a chef.

I went to college and met my wife. She played basketball for Louisiana Tech. I always did like strong women. I was in one of these little frat things, and they set my ass up. They said, Tuba, "This broad so fine, I bet you ain't never gonna fool with her."

Know what I told 'em? "Boy I can win her over." And I did, I went into her real sweet and she was kinda throwed off, because she wasn't used to that. We got married. Had a daughter.

We're raising our daughter. I got me a job working as a chef at the Maison Dupuy. But my wife, she started to develop a attitude. See, when she was growing up her daddy was a long shore man, and she watched her daddy beat up her mama and her mama jumped off a

Sidewalk Saints

bridge when she was like twelve, thirteen-years-old. She's like, I ain't never letting no man do me like that. She started developing a attitude where she gonna beat up her man. Every man she was with, cut his tires, beat him up. She started beating on me, I got a divorce. I'm all over it, but we got a child together. Jesus Christ, that's a rough road.

After that, I said I'm gonna get back into playing more tuba. Started going down to Jackson Square. That's where you had the man with the plan, Tuba Fats. He used to have twelve, thirteen people down there. Tuba Fats, he had a big heart. He did not discriminate. But if you're gonna play with Tuba Fats, you gotta play the way he want you to. But see, me, I can't play the tuba like nobody else. I'm gonna play the song, but it gonna sound different. I'm gonna do me. They say, that don't sound like the same song we playing. I said, yes it is, but they still screaming and hollering, trying to send my ass home. You get tired of getting your ass whipped. So you know what I said? I had the nerve and the guts to tell Tuba Fats and the rest of the band, you all suck out my face. I'm staying. I'm gonna play. I'm gonna show you. So, Tuba Fats, he tell me to go ahead and play. He made everybody be quiet, gave me the opportunity to play all by myself. I played from my heart and they respected that. They said man, you're crazy but you can stay. After that they started calling me The Missing Link, saying I look like a cave man and shit.

In '91 my momma died. Then in '92 my daddy died. Man that hit me hard. For a while I couldn't do nothing but sit there. That was the hardest thing I ever been through. Man, I tell you that was rough times. I'm not even gonna get into all the shit I been through and I put myself though. But you know what helped me? Getting on that bus and coming down to Jackson Square. That's where the people know me. I'm telling you, these people out here on these benches are like my family.

Mark "Tuba" Smith



Photo: Irwin Thompson courtesy of The Dallas Morning News

9/2/05 Tuba heads for the bus to Texas after being rescued by boat and taken to the Convention Center.