



Reflections on Mel Tillis and Stuttering in Movies

Tim Mackesey, CCC-SLP, BCS-F

Country singer and movie actor, Mel Tillis passed away in November, 2017. His rags-to-riches story was especially compelling because he had a significant stuttering problem. He was one of the first celebrities to openly portray and discuss stuttering. To this day people ask me why Mel could sing without stuttering. Mel was most relevant at a time when it was acceptable to laugh at and mock stuttering. Mel's story inspires me to reflect on society's reaction to stuttering.

In Mel's 1984 autobiography, *Stutterin' Boy*, he reflected back on his casting in the Smoky and the Bandit movies with Burt Reynolds and Sally Fields. Mel's often dramatic stutter was used as a punch line of sorts. If he did not stutter while filming a scene, the director would yell "cut" and they would film the scene again until he stuttered.

My first exposure to Mel Tillis was as a child watching him make a guest appearance on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. Mel was talking about the swans he had in a pond at home. Once he started blocking on the word swan he made a big arm movement that was to look like a swan's neck. Johnny Carson bit his lip and grinned, as he always did, and the crowd exploded with laughter. As a child being teased about my stutter I was mortified watching adulthood the audience roar in laughter.

Hollywood went through a very dark time period in which stuttering was a joke. *A Fish Called Wanda (1988)* and *My Cousin Vinny (1992)* are brutal movies to watch if you stutter or care about someone who does. I do not recommend these two movies to anyone.

While working as a speech language pathologist who specializes in stuttering I integrate cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in therapy to help uncover beliefs and emotions related to stuttering. If Hollywood and television portray stuttering as a joke and society makes fun of it right before your eyes, it is easy to form beliefs such as "people

think I am stupid if I stutter,” or “I will be seen as incompetent at work if I stutter,” and “If I stutter, I will be made fun of.” These negative thoughts increase anxiety and can lead to avoidance and shame. From 2nd grade and through my undergraduate degree I lived with the notion that the world was against my stuttering. As an impressionable child watching adults laughing at Mel’s stutter on the Johnny Carson it is hard not to develop strong negative feelings about stuttering.

The King’s Speech (2010) finally delivered us a hero who stutters. Earning four Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor (Colin Firth), the movie told the story of King George VI and his stuttering. George endured belittling by his father and mocking by his brother. The culmination of his efforts with his speech therapist, Lionel Logue, was his brave radio address declaring the U.K. was joining the allied forces to end Hitler’s atrocities. David Seidler, who grew up with a stutter in the U.K, won an Academy for his outstanding screen play. I cannot thank David enough for his work.

Directing a character to stutter is a delicate proposition. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Professor Quirrell - the guy with the turban that was hiding Voldemort underneath his hat-faked a stutter to appear aloof and to go without suspicion. When he faces off with Harry Potter he says: “...who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-professor Quirrell.” More recently, Benicio Del Toro and the director of the new *Return of the Jedi* added a stutter intentionally. In a TV interview Del Toro said that his character-a brilliant code breaker-needed a “deficiency.” Del Toro appeared respectful and sincere in his decision to insert a mild stutter on purpose.

Ironically, I have now trained three actors to stutter for live theater. One was in the play *Carapace*, one was the character Billy Bibbitt, from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and the other a new screen play. If you would have told me as a kid watching the Johnny Carson show that I would one day teach someone to fake stutter, I would have been shocked. In teaching a fake stutter I make sure that it looks and sounds authentic and it is consistent (i.e., particular sounds are stuttered in the same way). I will not rest until it looks real and the audience feels compassion toward the person stuttering. If the audience concluded “that was so fake and silly looking,” a phony looking stutter could possibly disrespect stuttering.

World Series MVP George Springer, James Earl Jones, Emily Blunt, and several other celebrities are modern day role models for pws. Their messages are one to embrace your stutter and not let it stop you.

Mel Tillis was a pioneer. He stuck his neck out and revealed his stuttering in a time when it was ok to laugh at him and people who stutter. In some ways he was exploited for his stuttering. We all need to stay vigilant and make sure that pws are respected on television, theater, and movies.

*Rowling, J.K. 1997. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. New York: Scholastic Press

*Tillis, Mel. 1984. *Stutterin’ Boy*. Rawson Associates Publishing