

Tommy Jackson and His Dancing Shoes

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by Susan Marquez

As he ties his dancing shoes, Tommy Jackson has a feeling of euphoria. Taking the stage, it's obvious he is in his element. Dancing is Tommy's passion, and preserving the art of clogging, buck dancing, and square dancing is his mission in life. "It's not something I do for the money," he laughs. "I've danced for barbeque chicken, and I've danced for a chocolate cake. I do it for the pure joy of it. You don't put in all the work and hours it takes to dance at this level unless you are having fun."

Tommy, an east Tennessee native, says he began going to barn dances with his parents when he was five or six years old. "There was a barn dance every Saturday night at Cherokee Orchard in Nolensville. There was also a regular barn dance in downtown Franklin at what is now the rescue squad building." But Tommy didn't dance until he was 23 years old.

"My interest was in racing cars. I didn't really care about dancing too much." It had been a while since he had been to a barn dance, and his parents encouraged him to go with them to Tennessee City. "I walked in and saw the most beautiful young woman. My friends said I needed to forget it because she only dated dancers. I jumped up and started dancing. I suppose all those years of watching dancers taught me more than I realized." Tommy dated the talented lady for two years; then, she went on to the Grand Ole Opry. "We stayed friends for many years until she passed away."





Tommy discovered that dancing was a lot of fun, and he loved being around others who loved music and loved to dance. “My mother asked me to start a dance team, so I did. I realized that dancing was ideal for kids who weren’t athletes. All kids want to belong and to fit in. Dancing gives kids that opportunity to be a part of something.” To this day, Tommy says the lessons he gives are free. “I’m not the best, but I teach them the basics and let them choose which direction they want to go.”

Some may argue that Tommy is one of the best. In 2017, the Clogging Hall of Fame in Spartanburg, South Carolina, inducted Tommy and, at the ceremony, recognized his forty-year-plus contributions to the dance form and training the next generation of dancers. He still dances his Rocky Top Revue, which Tommy claims is the longest-running square dance team name in the United States. The troupe practices for their upcoming shows on the Public Square in Franklin every Sunday afternoon, giving those who happen to be there a free show.

“I have no kids of my own, but these kids are like my family. I’ve been to a lot of weddings over the years, and now their

children are my students. I'm out there having a blast. There are dancers, and there are entertainers. I want my students to be entertainers." And many of them are, performing regularly on stage at the Grand Ole Opry. "That is such a huge deal for these kids," he says. "I tell the kids that dance isn't about thinking; it's from the heart. I love to watch their expressions when they finally get it down. They become real hambones. To see kids that I've taught dancing on stage at the Grand Ole Opry gives me so much satisfaction."

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The Rocky Top Review is comprised of five dance teams, starting at age three through adults. "Everyone has to learn to work together. I give a lot of credit to Robyn Durdin, who has been with me for close to thirty years since she was ten years old.

She runs all our operations and handles costumes and so much more. She also trained under Robert Spicer. Knowing Robyn is there gives me peace because if anything happens, she can keep things going for as long as she wants to be involved.”

Tommy says that age isn’t an issue when it comes to clogging. “It’s a skill that is acquired over time. I’ve seen a 95-year-old win a state championship. I love watching the old-time dancers. I learn a lot about showmanship, professionalism, and skill from those masters.” One of those is Robert Spicer, a man known as “The Master” among dancers. “I studied under Robert for two years and learned so much,” says Tommy.

Tommy co-owns a radio station, WAKM, with his sister. “So many of the old-time artists are being nudged out of the spotlight, and we work to make sure they are given their due.” Just as he wants to preserve old-time music, he is committed to the future of this form of dancing. “I’ve been blessed to be the vessel to introduce kids to dancing and to help them come up in it if they choose. We had a six-year-old kid not long ago who danced on a TikTok video that went viral. Ellen DeGeneres saw it and called him, and he was even cast in a commercial. That’s exciting stuff.”

If you’re in the Nashville area, you can most likely catch Tommy dancing on Friday and Saturday nights at the Nashville Palace. “People come in from all over.”

<https://youtu.be/fxNQCizMY6w>

Tommy also dances each year at Bluegrass Along the Harpeth, a festival put on each summer in Franklin by his dance team.