

Pop Hitman Tommy James

by Tina Hall

Legendary musician and recording artist Tommy James has 9 platinum albums, 24 gold singles and has sold over 100 million records worldwide. His songs have been covered by over 300 artists worldwide including *R.E.M.*, Prince, Dolly Parton, Kelly Clarkson, Tom Jones, Joan Jett, Billy Idol, Cher and even *the Boston Pops*. His music is in 25 films to date and current tv shows and commercials. His autobiography, *Me, the Mob and the Music* was just recently published by *Simon & Schuster*. A major motion picture based on the book is now in development and negotiations to bring the story to Broadway are in the works with John Osher, producer of *Jersey Boys* and *Hairspray*. Tommy will be involved with the soundtrack.

Tina Hall: What were some of your biggest musical influences and otherwise.

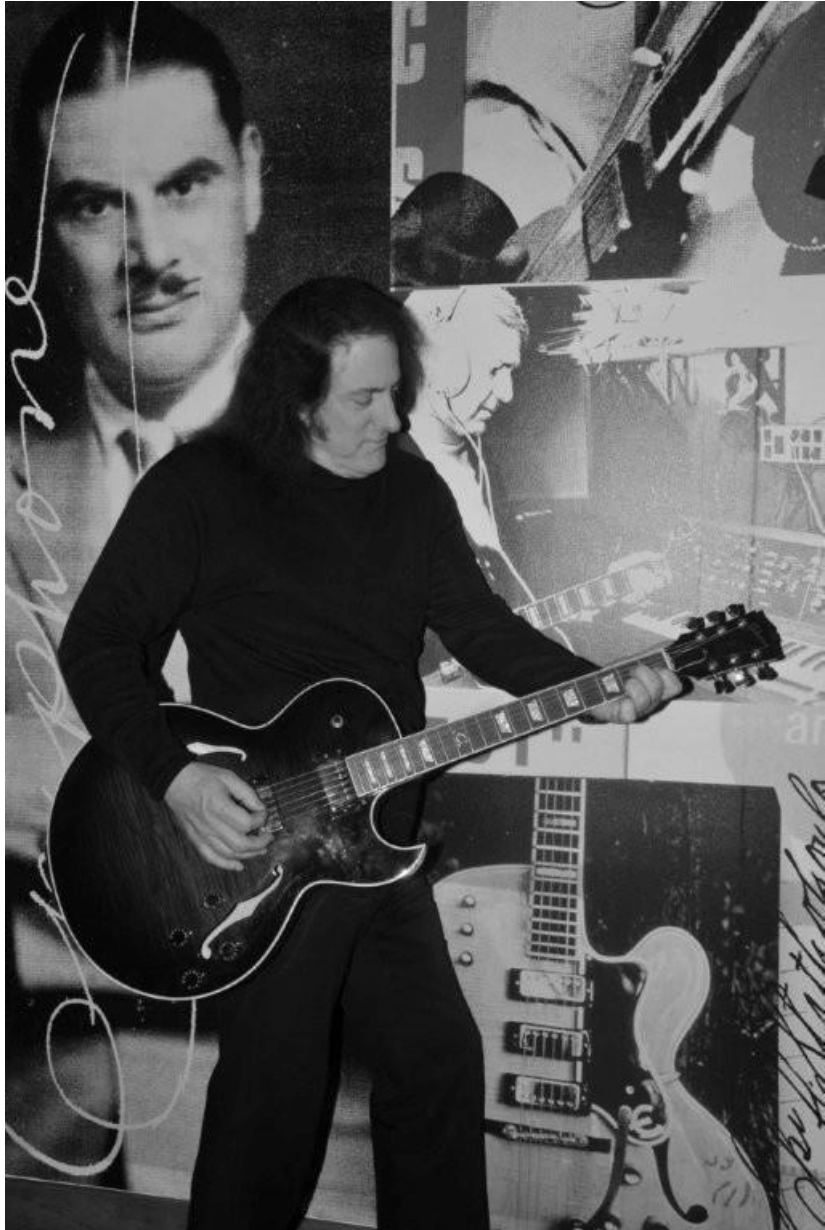
Tommy James: I started playing the ukulele at nine and switched to guitar at age twelve. My big heroes were Elvis, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, and Little Richard. As I got older, I listened to *the Everly Bros*, *Beach Boys* and the early *Beatles*. After I started having national hits and I was on the bill with other artists, I'd listen closely to the production values of their records, including those by *the Beatles*, *the Beach Boys*, *the Animals*, and *the Rascals*.

TH: What was it like to form a band at age 12 (who became *the Shondells*)?

TJ: Well, after Elvis appeared on TV and just exploded, every kid in America wanted to play guitar and sing. I was one of them. Things were very different back then and it was possible to go from performing at a school talent show to the top of the record charts almost overnight, or so I thought. And that was my dream.

Like most local bands, mine had different names at different times. I finally settled on *the Shondells* - a name I came up with in study hall -and that's the name that appeared on the label for "Hanky Panky," which we recorded in the studio of the local radio station in Niles, Michigan."

When it became a hit in Pittsburgh two years later, the original *Shondells* had broken up and the other guys weren't interested in reforming the band. So I went there myself and hired a band that was playing at a club called *the Thunderbird Lounge*. They were called *the Raconteurs*. I really liked their sound. I sang a couple of numbers with them that



[Tommy James continued on next page](#)

night and everything clicked perfectly. So I asked them if they wanted to become *the Shondells* and fortunately they said yes.

TH: What would you have done if you hadn't become a musician?

TJ: I was very interested in science and I may have become an astronomer.

TH: What does it feel like to have your music covered by so many different artists?

TJ: I'm really thrilled. Most people know me as the guy that sang "Mony Mony" or "Crimson and Clover," but don't really know that I wrote or co-wrote most of my records. So it's very flattering when other artists think enough of your songs to cover them. It's a real honor to have legends like Tom Jones, Dolly Parton, *R.E.M.* or Prince record one of my songs. Plus, I'm always fascinated to hear how they're reworked because another artist or producer hears something in the song and emphasizes that. I just heard a great version of "Crimson of Clover" by *Kings of Spade*, a rap group from Hawaii.

TH: I understand you turned down *Woodstock* on the advice of an agent?

TJ: Well actually I turned it down all on my own, but I had a very good reason. I was in Hawaii for a couple of gigs and staying at the most beautiful mansion I'd ever seen. My hardest decision of the day was whether to relax by the pool or go to the beach.

One day I got a call from my assistant back in New York. She tells me that Artie Kornfeld - a friend of mine - was putting together some kind of music festival at a "pig farm" in New York State, and wanted to know if I'd be interested in playing. And I said, "He wants me to leave paradise to play on a pig farm!?" I passed and suggested that he start without me. Needless to say, after watching the news coverage the Friday of *Woodstock*, I realized that I'd made a big mistake.

TH: What was it like to write your autobiography?

TJ: When I was going through all the things I describe in the book -writing and recording one record after another, touring non-stop, dealing with the characters at *Roulette Records*, and trying to have some kind of personal life - I didn't have the time to reflect. I just did it.

By the time I started writing the book with my co-author, Martin Fitzpatrick, I had put a lot of time and distance between me and those events, and I was able to look and re-experience those times as an adult. Both good and bad memories came up and it gave me an opportunity to relive the good times and do some emotional healing on the bad ones. I sort of came full circle on my life. It was a truly amazing experience.

TH: How do you feel about the book becoming a movie?

TJ: I'm just blown away. This whole thing - the book and the movie and the other things surrounding them - are truly unbelievable. I'm very thankful for the career I've had and figured that the high points were past. When I started writing the book, I had absolutely no idea it would be picked up by a huge publisher like *Simon & Schuster* or lead to a film.

And the amazing thing is that Martin Scorsese's people came to me! They'd heard about the book and that there were some folks interested in securing film rights, and called me.

What's so ironic is that my whole career's been like that! I recorded "Hanky Panky" - my first hit - in 1964. It made some noise around Michigan where I lived, and then disappeared. Two years later a disc jockey in Pittsburgh started playing it, someone bootlegged it, it became #1 there, and I had nothing to do with that!

There's no way I could have planned for this to happen; I'm just standing on the sidelines with everyone else, with my jaw hanging open. It's truly God winking at me.

TH: Are you looking forward to talking to university students?

TJ: Absolutely. I learned everything about songwriting, playing, recording, touring, and managing a career on my own. And I'd love to pass along what I've learned to a new generation.

In the past year my music has been enthusiastically received by college radio stations around the country, and I've had the pleasure of doing interviews with many of them. I really enjoy talking about how the music business is changing and where I think it's going in the future.

I feel this is my chance to give something back and if I can help even one musician, I'll be happy.

TH: What advice do you have for aspiring musicians? What's the most valuable thing for them to know?

TJ: Learn how to play your instrument! Seriously. Everything starts with mastery of your craft, and for a musician that's being the best player or singer you can be. Beyond that, you also need to learn

about all the other aspects of making a record; producing, arranging, and so on.

And it's critical that you learn as much as you can about the business aspect of this industry. Even after you hire a manager, lawyer, and accountant to handle the day-to-day details, you still have to know enough about the business to choose the right people and make the right decisions.

TH: Which are your favorites among your hits and why?

TJ: Each one of them is special to me in their own way. "Hanky Panky" because it was my first big hit and a #1 record. "Crimson and Clover" because I wrote it, played on it, and produced it, and because it took me and the band to another level.

I'm particularly fond of "Crystal Blue Persuasion." It was a very different record for me at the time and I've always really liked the way it turned out and I love the message.

TH: What was it like to work with Linda McCartney when she was starting out as a photographer?

Linda and I lived in the same building in New York and we'd bump in to each other. When she started doing photography, it just seemed natural to use her. I thought she was very talented.

TH: Of all the artists you've met, which ones made the most lasting impression on you and why?

TJ: *The Beach Boys* because I was so impressed with how they recreated their records on stage which was hard to do because of the relatively primitive technology most rock 'n' roll bands used at that time.

TH: How does writing the *Cash Box* magazine column differ from writing songs/being a recording artist?

TJ: With the *Cash Box* column, I'm writing about business and other factual aspects of the music industry. It's mostly a brain activity. Writing, recording, and producing songs is more of an emotional or "organic" process for me. There's more of "me" involved in it.

