



CULTURE

'Man of steel' jams his way into retirement

Two Saturdays ago, while attending and performing a song at the funeral of Shartlesville icon



Dave Kline
Mountain
Folklore

John Messner, fellow musician Bruce Shollenberger approached me and let me know that our long-time friend

Tommy Vollmer's health was declining, so would I please come to that Sunday's steel guitar jam where Tommy would be watching and enjoying among fellow musicians, family and friends.

"He probably won't play," Shollenberger said. "It's just too much for him anymore."

The next day I traveled to jam host Rodney Loeb's garage in rural Hamburg. It was a gorgeous Sunday afternoon, and I enjoyed meeting and greeting everyone. It had been almost five years since I'd been to this magical place of music in the air, food on the table, beverages at the ready and smiles on everyone's faces as they relaxed with their instruments or on their lawn chairs.

Tommy was sitting up, alert and enjoying music, at some points directing players to take solos, as he always has during the jam. We exchanged a very warm and pleasant greeting.

Tommy thanked me for coming, and I thanked him for being him, a member of Berks County country music royalty. He was relaxed in his folding chair, no pedal steel in front of him, oxygen attached to his nose to aid in breathing, but that didn't stop him from launching



Tommy Vollmer plays his beloved pedal steel guitar.

COURTESY OF DAVE KLINE

into several animated stories about music, the pedal steel guitar and life in general.

Please understand that Tommy was on hospice care, but typical of Tommy, who to me always exemplified a powerful, congenial life force vibrating with music and the love of music, there he was, in his chair, directing the jam, smiling big as you please.

I've never been with such a robust hospice care individual before, and I found his enthusiasm for life and total lack of anything resembling self-pity

to be incredibly inspiring. At the same time, the experience was bittersweet because Tommy is a gifted musician who has touched thousands of lives in a positive way during his career, but now time and circumstances are forcing him to have to think about retiring.

I thanked Bruce for giving me a heads-up that this day would also be a celebration of Tommy's birthday during the closing chapter of Tommy's long and prestigious music career.

Tommy, 87, has been battling cancer for more than a decade, but it never slowed him up from playing live shows. Just this past holiday season Tommy, Dave Lewis, Ken Gehret and I recorded and released two original Christmas songs in the singing cowboy style as Dave Kline & the Hex Highway Rangers.

You can listen to them on YouTube. They're titled "Hex Highway Rangers Christmas Ball" and "When I Come Home for Christmas," and Tommy's pedal steel playing is as smooth as a baby's bottom, per his usual delivery.

At the jam, we sang "Happy Birthday" to Tommy, and his friends gave him a beautiful cake that had an icing inscription of some of his many prestigious accomplishments in the world of music: played with Happy

Jack & the Sunshine Valley Boys; played live on WLBR radio with Sonny Miller and the Happy Valley Boys; influenced by his musician father Freddy; did shows with the Outlaws and Crazy Elmer; played live with Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Oak Ridge Boys, Taylor Swift, Willie Nelson and one of Berks County's favorite country crooners, songwriters and entertainers, Pat Garrett; plays lap steel, pedal steel, fiddle, banjo, accordion; and makes time to mentor and encourage emerging talent like Haley (Sheeler) Fox.

Tommy really grew close to Haley, and when I was casually talking to Bruce about what he thought Tommy was most proud of in his life and career, Bruce replied, "For sure that girl right there, (points to Haley as she's singing a gospel song), he's really proud of her."

After the birthday song, someone handed Tommy a microphone. All of a sudden it was like show time had begun. Tommy welcomed everybody, told a few funny stories and then launched into a bawdy joke.

"You see this cord attached to me," he said, pointing to his oxygen tank hose, "that reminds me of when some old boy was deep in the woods and he found out what the second most painful thing I his life was."

We silently listened as he continued: "Yup, that old boy was deep in the woods and he had to take a number two, (crowd laughs), but when he squatted down to do the deed, he sat right in a bear trap, (crowd laughs again), that was the second most painful experience in his life, (someone in the crowd says, 'Well what was the most painful experience,' and right on cue Tom delivers the punchline as smoothly as Johnny Carson himself would have and says, 'Oh, the first most painful experience was when he got up and ran and found out how short the trap's chain was.'"

The entire room erupted in laughter, and Tommy sat back with a Cheshire cat grin on his face. Next, someone brought our Tommy's pedal steel and set it up in front of him. Tommy groaned a bit. Not wanting to appear weak or unable to play, it took a little coaxing and a few

of us to help ease him into his playing chair, to get him to go ahead and join the jammers in song.

When Tommy's turn came to take a ride on a solo, he put his heart and soul, not to mention his back, into it and, manipulating the instrument's levers with his legs while coaxing a butter-like melody out of the top end, Tom lifted the jam to a new height. Everyone could feel it, and when the song ended, Tommy and the others received a well-deserved round of applause.

I was sitting next to Tommy and he whispered, "Man, it's hard to push those levers anymore."

He kind of slumped forward, over his beloved pedal steel, to catch his breath. I could see that he was perspiring a bit.

I thought, "Well, OK, this is it, but that was wonderful."

Then, without warning, Tommy sat back up and let the jammers know that it was time to play another song. He played that song and then another one, getting stronger, more animated and livelier as each song presented him with an opportunity to blend with his instrument as one to make glorious music.

I thought to myself, "My God, this truly is the Man of Steel."

After the third song, his oxygen tank now reading in the red zone but his aura and dignity totally intact, Tommy announced that what he had just played would be his last song. He received a resounding round of applause, a thank you for his life and his amazing career in music.

"Tommy, that is an incredibly difficult instrument to play yet you make it look easy and effortless," I said.

"It's not really that hard to play, but it really is hard, but not that hard I guess," Tommy said. "Just takes 70 years of practice (laughs)."

Once again, he brought the entire place down with laughter.

Tommy again rose to the challenge and played his pedal steel on a final series of songs, then officially retired. What an astounding testimonial to the power of music to lift spirits, sustain and heal.

As the jam ended Tommy pulled me close, held and squeezed my hand tightly and said, "Keep the music and shows going, Dave."

I gave him a reassuring smile and promised him that I would honor his request as long as I could. He smiled. What a giant of a man Tommy Vollmer is.

Tommy, I thank you for all of the good and light you brought into this world with your music. If you'd like to write an email of encouragement or thanks to Tommy Vollmer, he'd love to hear from you. His email address is tom_vollmer@verizon.net.

Dave Kline is an award-winning writer, photographer, show host and producer, singer-songwriter, travel guide and community advocate. Reach him at davesmountainfolklore@gmail.com. Dave Kline is an award-winning writer, photographer, show host and producer, singer-songwriter, travel guide and community advocate. Reach him at davesmountainfolklore@

Calendar

April 29:

■ Community yard sale, New Jerusalem Zion United Church of Christ, 1456 Krumsville Road, Greenwich Township, 7 a.m.-1 p.m., \$10 for a 10-foot-by-10-foot space. Bring your own tables. Rain or shine. Call 484-547-2356 to reserve your space.

■ 25-cent sale, indoor and outdoor flea market and basket raffle, Calvary United Church of Christ, 1231 Route 100, Washington Township, 8-11 a.m.

■ Roast Beef Takeout: 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Trinity Lutheran Church, 1749 S. Main St., Bechtelsville. Tickets: \$14, must be purchased in advance at the church office Monday-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Information: 610-369-1281.

■ Soup, sandwich and bake sale, New Jerusalem Lutheran Church, 27 Lyons Road, Rockland Township, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., with chicken noodle soup, potato soup, chili, meatball sandwiches, hamburgers/cheeseburgers, pasta salad, assorted baked goods and beverages for sale. For more information, call 610-682-6064.

■ Chicken BBQ for Pagoda-Skyline Inc., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., William Penn Fire Tower on Skyline Drive in Lower Alsace Township. Proceeds benefit the tower restoration. Information: Corrie Crupi Zana at 484-219-1527.

April 29-30:

■ Spring show, the Old Time Plow Boys Club, 22 Luckenbill Road, Kutztown, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. both days, featuring operating steam tractors, displays, demonstrations, tractor pulls.

April 30:

■ Benefit concert, Kissinger's Church, 715 Berkshire Blvd., Wyomissing, 4-5:30 p.m.. Proceeds benefit the relief efforts of the RM Palmer explosion. Come on out and hear oldies, the music of John Denver and gospel music. A free will offering will be taken.

■ Kauffman's chicken BBQ sale, Friends of Mifflin Community Library, Walgreen's parking lot, 2203 Lancaster Pike, Cumru Township, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Tickets on sale at the library, 6 Philadelphia Ave., Shillington, or at the sale until sold out. \$12 for 1/2 chicken, baked potato, applesauce. For more information, call 610-777-3911.

May 1:

■ Berks Photographic Society presentation, GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, Suite 326, 201 Washington St., Reading, 7 p.m. BPS member Dutch Bagley shares "The Competition Journey — Why and How I Do It." Bagley has entered, been accepted and received awards at many juried photography and art competitions. Learn more about the Berks Photographic Society at <https://berksphotographic.org>.

May 4:

Hamburg Area Historical Society features "Show and Tell," Hamburg Area High School, LGI room, 701 Windsor St., 7 p.m. Bring any artifact, photo or story to tell.

May 6:

■ Community giveaway (clothing, shoes, books, household items and more), Calvary United Church of Christ, 1231 Route 100, Washington Township, 8-11 a.m.

■ Spring Valley Boutique, Spring Valley Church of God, 2727 Old Pricetown Road, Muhlenberg Township, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Park in the upper parking lot; boutique is set up in the gym. Most items are free. Featured items vary by month (depending on donations) but frequently include clothing for women, men and children, shoes, handbags, jewelry, etc. Anyone looking to donate used items to this ministry can do so during boutique hours.

May 7

■ Maifest Service featuring the Reading Liederkrantz Choirs, 11 a.m. to noon, former St. John's Lutheran Church, 521 Walnut St., Reading. Traditional German service with Renewed Spirit Church. Parking available at Henninger Funeral Home, 229 N. Fifth St.. The service will be broadcast live on WEEU 830 AM.

■ Jeff Krick Jr. performance, 3 p.m., Olive Leaf Chapel, 846 Fritztown Road, Spring Township. \$10 donation at the door. Accessible to the disabled.

May 9:

■ Wyomissing Area Garden Club meeting, Wyomissing Public Library, 9 Reading Blvd., Wyomissing, 1 p.m. Dee Dee Kerscher, a Penn State Master Gardener, will present a program titled "Bulbs." Contact kathyg261@gmail.com for more information.



COURTESY OF BRUCE SHOLLENBERGER

Tommy Vollmer laughs while sharing a story with Dave Kline.

BERKS FAMILY FUN DAY

the Y

5K Run • Pig Roast • Kids Color Run
Heritage Center Opening Day • Wagonworks Tours
Mac&Cheese Cookoff • Games • YMCA Events
Build & Fly a Kite • Vendors • Food Trucks
Canal Museum • Schoolhouse Games

Saturday
APRIL
29

11am-3pm
BERKS COUNTY
HERITAGE CENTER

FOR MORE INFO WWW.COUNTYOFBERKS.COM/PARKS