

Jarrell, Thomas Jefferson ^[1]

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by Cecelia Conway, 1988

1 Mar. 1901–28 Jan. 1985

Thomas Jefferson Jarrell, musician, born and raised near Round Peak in [Surry County](#) ^[2], was the oldest child of [Benjamin Franklin](#) ^[3] and Susan Letisha Amburn Jarrell. He was an exceptional instrumentalist, singer, and tale teller. His music and life story provide the means for reaching beyond the written record to an understanding of the complex roots



Image of Thomas Jefferson Jarrell [date unknown], from Tennessee Wanderer's Flickr, published in 2010. Jarrell's nickname is Tommy. Presented on flickr.com and used under Creative Commons, CC BY-ND 2.0.

^[4] of southern culture. [The National Endowment for the Arts](#) ^[5] awarded Jarrell one of the first [National Heritage Fellowships](#) ^[6] at the [Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife](#) ^[7] on 4 July 1982; his life stands as a tribute to his heritage, artistry, and cultural contribution.

Tommy Jarrell learned most of his tunes before the influence of commercial recordings and radio. He preserved two generations of the old instrumental styles and repertoires that thrived in the region before 1925. In addition to being a remarkable musician, Tommy was a singular vocalist with a powerful style; his repertory included many unusual fiddle and banjo songs, ballads, and Primitive Baptist hymns. An exceptional storyteller, he related family reminiscences and regional lore with a fine wit and was an inspired performer and transmitter of regional styles and repertory. To his last days he continued to add imaginative and subtle variations to his stories and tunes.

Tommy first learned to play banjo when he was eight years old from "Boggy" Cockerham, a man hired to help on the farm. When he was thirteen, he took up the fiddle; he learned from watching his father, his Uncle Charlie, and other neighbors. By the time he was sixteen, Tommy played for dances at Round Peak. In his last years he played sometimes in the same house and for the same people who had been courting when he played as a boy.

Several of his fiddle tunes were acquired from men who were [Civil War](#) ^[8] veterans. He learned "[Sail Away Ladies](#) ^[9]" from "Old Man Pet" McKinny when they met on the road. The old man borrowed his fiddle and played the tune for him twice. Another time, Tommy went up to visit Zack Payne near Lambsburg to learn "Billy in the Low Ground." Instead, he came home having learned "Flatwoods" and "Devil in the Strawstack." He also added to the mountain tradition already influenced by Afro-American banjo music in the nineteenth century. He learned "[Boll Weevil](#) ^[10]" from a black woman singing at a traveling tent show and later "Rylan Spenser" from Jim Raleigh, a Mount Airy stoneworker and guitar player.

Educated in a one-room schoolhouse, Tommy was always interested in words, sounds, spellings, and new ideas. He liked television because he felt that it presented accurate pronunciations of words that he had read but not heard spoken. He told wry anecdotes about spelling crow "Krow," and in 1978 he named his dog "Boliver" after a Spanish revolutionary. Tommy had an ear for a good story and could mock the voices of the old folks, as well as the style of several local musicians.

When he was seventeen Tommy helped his grandfather farm, but they lacked \$2.47 to cover the fertilizer bill. Later he worked at the sawmill. During those years, he could have gone back across the hill and made moonshine that would have sold for \$20 a gallon.

Tommy married Nina Lowe, the daughter of Charlie Barnett and Ardena Leftwich Lowe, and lived with them in Lambsburg. Two years later Nina's parents died, and the couple moved to Mount Airy, where Tommy's folks lived. They had three children: Ardena, a good flat-foot dancer, who worked in a clothing factory; Clarence Wayne, a dancer and caller, who became a storekeeper; and Benjamin Franklin ("B. F."), a [bluegrass](#) ^[11] fiddler, who became a disc jockey in Dobson.

When his children were young, Tommy worked with the highway department and ran a motor grader for thirty years. Over these hard years, he played music only on holidays with "Adam's Charlie" Lowe, an excellent banjo player who knew all of the old tunes and had incredible time. Tommy would say, "Music is like a wheel. It goes around steady—not steady by jerks but steady. That's what my Daddy used to say. It goes around like a wheel, like the wheel of a tape recorder, and never misses a beat." Tommy kept the music going steady.

After his retirement, Tommy had enough time for music again. His playing inspired local elderly musicians from his own region (Fred Cockerham, Kyle Creed, and Sydna Myers) and those slightly younger who had learned from him as boys (Earnest East, Benton Flippen, Paul Sutphin). He traveled to nearby fiddlers' conventions where his brothers Fred Rufus and Early Columbus judged the music. His sisters Julie Lyons and Ottola "Togie" McGee were both good dancers and singers in their own right. They often held get-togethers for Tommy's family, including sisters Ida Elizabeth Gentry and singer Edith Sylvia Hicks, children, neighbors, visiting musicians, and folklorists. Tommy enjoyed his musical life increasingly in his old age and took his growing national reputation in stride. The time had come when Tommy was the one who remembered the old and the new tunes of his father's generation.

Inquisitive friendliness, humor, and generosity characterized Tommy Jarrell. He performed concerts and festivals across the United States and Canada. Apprentices from many states frequently visited his North Carolina home to learn from him; at the time of his death, they gathered in Mount Airy from as far away as the West Coast and France to honor him. In addition to passing his music on in person, Tommy recorded homemade tapes for visitors, made albums for County Records, and appeared in videotapes and films. The film about his life and music, [Sprout Wings and Fly](#) ^[12], won awards, was translated into Spanish, and was played at international festivals in Scotland, Spain, and South America. The summer before he died, Tommy made another album of previously unrecorded material, [Rainbow Sign](#) ^[13] :

I'll tune up my fiddle, I'll rosin my bow;
I'll make myself welcome wherever I go.

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