

Tommy Steele

Sir Thomas Hicks, OBE (born 17 December 1936), known professionally as **Tommy Steele**, is an English entertainer, regarded as Britain's first teen idol and rock and roll star. He reached number one with "Singing the Blues" in 1957, and *The Tommy Steele Story* was the first album by a UK act to reach number one in his native country.

Steele's film credits include *Half a Sixpence*, *The Happiest Millionaire* and *Finian's Rainbow* (musical) and he has made many stage tours in the UK. He is also a songwriter, author, and sculptor.


In 2012, Steele was among the cultural icons selected by pop-artist Sir Peter Blake to appear in "Vintage Blake", a montage to celebrate Blake's 80th birthday.

[toc]

Biography

Early life

Steele was born in Bermondsey, London, England in 1936. His father Darbo was a racing tipster and his mother Betty worked in a factory.


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Singer

Steele worked in various jobs, including a brief period as a merchant seaman. He was not eligible for national service because, at eighteen years old, he was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. In his autobiography, *Bermondsey Boy: Memories of a Forgotten World*, he reports that he failed the medical because he had flat feet. Whenever not working, he played guitar and banjo and sang in two coffee houses in Soho, the 2i's Coffee Bar and the Cat's Whisker, both as a solo performer and with Wally Whyton's Vipers Skiffle Group.

When a ship Steele was serving on docked in Norfolk, Virginia, U.S., he heard Buddy Holly[citation needed] and fell in love with rock and roll, turning his back on the British skiffle craze. He was discovered by freelance photographer John Kennedy, who believed Steele could be Britain's answer to Elvis Presley. Later co-manager Larry Parnes was incorrectly credited with creating the stage name 'Tommy Steele'. It was Steele who adapted the surname of his Scandinavian paternal grandfather, Thomas Stil-Hicks (pronounced Steel-Hicks), adding another E to the spelling.

Steele became famous in the UK as the frontman for a rock and roll band, the Steelmen, after their first single, "Rock With the Caveman", reached number 13 in the UK Singles Chart in 1956. Steele and other British singers would pick known hit records from the United States, record their cover versions of

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these songs, and release them in the UK before the American versions could enter the charts. Most of Steele's 1950s recordings were covers of American hits, such as "Singing the Blues" and "Knee Deep in the Blues". Although Steele never proved a serious threat to Presley's popularity in the UK, he did well on the 1950s UK chart and "Singing the Blues" got to Number 1 in the UK before Presley did so. Guy Mitchell was number 1 with "Singing the Blues" on 4 January 1957 and Tommy Steele on 11 January 1957. Steele's 1957 album, *The Tommy Steele Story*, was the first by a UK-based act to reach No. 1 in the UK.

Only four months after his first chart presence, he was filming his life story. To do so, Steele and his songwriting collaborators, Lionel Bart and Mike Pratt, wrote twelve songs in seven days. His first three single releases were issued at a rate of one every three weeks. In 1957 Steele bought a four-bedroomed house in South London for his parents. In August 1959, Steele undertook a three-day concert visit to Moscow.

In 1958, Steele had the opportunity to work with his younger brother, Colin Hicks, during a tour in which the latter replaced one of the other performers, Terry Dene, who had withdrawn for psychiatric reasons.

In late 2009 his greatest hits collection, *The Very Best of Tommy Steele*, reached the Top 40 in the UK Albums Chart. This

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was the first UK chart entry, of any kind, that Steele had enjoyed for over 46 years.

Actor

The increase in home-grown musical talent during the 1950s and 1960s allowed Steele to progress to a career in stage and film musicals, leaving behind his pop-idol identity. In 1957, he was voted the seventh-most-popular actor at the British box office.

In 1960, a tour of Australia had not been particularly successful, and on his return to England he received two offers, one to star in the play *Billy Liar*, the other to join the Old Vic Company. He chose the latter.

In the West End, he appeared in *She Stoops to Conquer*, and played the title role of Hans Christian Andersen. On film, he recreated his London and Broadway stage role in *Half a Sixpence*, and played character roles in *The Happiest Millionaire* and *Finian's Rainbow*, although many critics[who?] found his personality to be somewhat overwhelming on screen. In this latter film, probably his best known appearance in the films, he played Og, the leprechaun turning human, and co-starred with Petula Clark and Fred Astaire. In 1968, British exhibitors voted him the fourth most popular star at the local box office.[16] The following year, he starred with Stanley Baker in the period drama *Where's Jack?*.

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In April 1971, Steele starred in his own show Meet Me in London at London's Adelphi Theatre.


In 1978, Steele performed in a TV movie version of Gilbert and Sullivan's The Yeomen of the Guard (misspelt as "The Yeoman..."), singing the role of the hapless jester Jack Point.

In 1983, Steele directed and starred in the West End stage production of Singin' in the Rain at the London Palladium. In 1991 he toured with Some Like It Hot the stage version of the Jack Lemmon/Tony Curtis/Marilyn Monroe film. In 2003, after a decade-long hiatus, save his one-man shows An Evening With Tommy Steele and What A Show!, he toured as Ebenezer Scrooge in a production of Scrooge: The Musical, an adaptation of Scrooge. Following this return, he reprised his role at the Palace Theatre, Manchester over Christmas 2004, and brought the production to the London Palladium for Christmas 2005. In 2008, at the age of 71, Steele toured in the lead role of the stage musical Doctor Dolittle, and has reprised his role as Scrooge every Christmas season since 2009.

He was the subject of This Is Your Life in 1958 when he was surprised by Eamonn Andrews at the BBC Television Theatre.

Sculptor

Steele is a respected sculptor and four of his major works have been on public display. Bermondsey Boy at Rotherhithe

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Town Hall in London, was stolen in 1998: its current whereabouts is unknown. Eleanor Rigby, which he sculpted and donated to the City of Liverpool as a tribute to the Beatles, stands in Stanley Street, Liverpool, not far from the Cavern Club. Union, featuring two rugby players, is on display at Twickenham Stadium. Trinity, designed during the regeneration of the docklands area in Bermondsey, stood outside the Trinity building in Bermondsey. When Steele lived in Montrose House, Petersham, Surrey, his life-sized sculpture of Charlie Chaplin as "The Tramp" stood outside his front door. He is also an artist of some note and has exhibited at the Royal Academy.

Personal life and other talents

Steele was born in Bermondsey, London. His father was Thomas Walter Hicks, and his mother was Elizabeth Ellen Bennett; they had married in 1933, in Bermondsey. There is a London Borough of Southwark blue plaque on Nickleby House, in the Dickens Estate in Bermondsey, commemorating Steele.

Steele and [Winifred] Ann Donoughue married at St. Patrick's Church, Soho Square, London, in spring 1960. They have one daughter, Emma Elizabeth (1969).

In the 1980 New Year Honours, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his work as an entertainer and actor.

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In 1981, Steele wrote and published a novel titled *The Final Run* about World War II and the evacuation of Dunkirk.


He also wrote a children's novel, entitled *Quincy*, about a reject toy trying to save himself and his fellow rejects in the basement of a toy store from the furnace the day after Christmas. Released in 1983, it was based on his own television film, *Quincy's Quest*, from 1979, in which Steele played Quincy and Mel Martin played Quincy's girlfriend doll, Rebecca.

Steele is mentioned briefly in Ian Fleming's James Bond novel *Thunderball*.

Steele co-wrote many of his early songs with Lionel Bart and Mike Pratt, but he used the pseudonym of Jimmy Bennett from 1958 onwards.

On 7 November 2019, Steele was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the British Music Hall Society, at a Celebratory Luncheon in Mayfair's Lansdowne Club. Those paying tribute to his then 63 years and 2 days in show business included Sir Tim Rice, Wyn Calvin MBE and Bill Kenwright CBE.

In May 2020, Steele announced a new project which he had been working on titled '*Breakheart*,' which was available exclusively online throughout May. Announced via a specially recorded video during the Covid-19 lockdown, '*Breakheart*' was a seven-episode audio thriller, written by Steele and set

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during the Second World War. A new episode was released each day for a week.

He was knighted in the 2020 Birthday Honours for services to entertainment and charity.

Claimed meeting with Elvis Presley in Britain

For many years it was thought that Elvis Presley had never set foot in Britain, apart from spending a few minutes on the tarmac at Prestwick Airport in Scotland where his military plane, en route to the United States after completing his army service in West Germany, stopped to refuel. However, on 21 April 2008, in a BBC Radio 2 interview with theatre impresario Bill Kenwright, it was claimed that Presley, then 23, had visited Britain for a day, after a phone conversation with Steele in London in 1958.

According to Kenwright: "Elvis flew in for a day and Tommy showed him round London. He showed him the Houses of Parliament and spent the day with him". Kenwright admitted in 2008 that he was not sure whether he should have told the story. Steele said: "It was two young men sharing the same love of their music. I swore never to divulge publicly what took place and I regret that it has found some way of getting into the light. I only hope he can forgive me."

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Press officers employed by Stagecoach, the company that owns Prestwick Airport, rapidly issued a statement requesting proof, photographic or otherwise, of the said meeting. Until such proof is provided, they will continue to describe their property, Prestwick Airport, as being the only place in Britain where Elvis Presley ever set foot, and will not be removing the marker, photographs and special lounge at their airport which relate to their claim.[]

Lamar Fike, a former member of the Memphis Mafia, who lived with Presley at the time, has posted a claim that it was he, not Presley, who visited London and Steele for a day in 1958.


Discography

Partial discography:

Singles

With the Steelmen

- "Rock With the Caveman" / "Rock Around the Town" – UK No. 13 (Decca 1956)
- "Doomsday Rock" / "Elevator Rock" – (Decca 1956)
- "Singing the Blues" / "Rebel Rock" – UK No. 1 (Decca 1956)
- "Knee Deep in the Blues" / "Teenage Party" – UK No. 15

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(Decca 1957)

- "Butterfingers" / "Cannibal Pot" – UK No. 8 (Decca 1957)
- "Water, Water" / "A Handful of Songs" – UK No. 5 (Decca 1957) with lyrics partially based on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*
- "Shiralee" / "Grandad's Rock" – UK No. 11 (Decca 1957)
- "Hey You!" / "Plant a Kiss" – UK No. 28 (Decca 1957)
- "Happy Guitar" / "Princess" – UK No. 20 (Decca 1958)
- "Nairobi" / "Neon Sign" – UK No. 3 (Decca 1958)
- "The Only Man on the Island" / "I Puts the Lightie On" – UK No. 16 (Decca 1958)


- " Princess" / "Happy Guitar" – (Decca 1958)

Solo

- "It's All Happening" / "What Do You Do?" – (Decca 1958)
- "Come On, Let's Go" / "Put a Ring on Her Finger" – UK No. 10 (Decca 1958)
- "A Lovely Night" / "Marriage Type Love" – (Decca 1958)
- "Hiawatha" / "The Trial" – (Decca 1959)
- "Tallahassee Lassie" / "Give! Give! Give!" – UK No. 16 (Decca 1959)
- "Give! Give! Give!" – UK No. 28 (Decca 1959)
- "You Were Mine" / "Young Ideas" – (Decca 1959)
- "Little White Bull" / "Singing Time" – UK No. 6 (Decca 1959)

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- "What a Mouth (What a North and South)" / "Kookaburra" – UK No. 5 (Decca 1960)
- "Happy Go Lucky Blues" / "Girl with the Long Black Hair" – (Decca 1960)
- "Must Be Santa" / "Boys and Girls" – UK No. 40 (Decca 1960)
- "My Big Best Shoes" / "The Dit Dit Song" – (Decca 1961)
- "The Writing on the Wall" / "Drunken Guitar" – UK No. 30 (Decca 1961)
- "Hit Record" / "What a Little Darling" – (Decca 1962)
- "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" / "Butter Wouldn't Melt in Your Mouth" – (Decca 1963)
- "He's Got Love" / "Green Eye" – (Decca 1963)
- "Flash Bang Wallop" / "She's Too Far Above Me" – (Decca 1963)
- "Egg and Chips" / "The Dream Maker" – (Columbia 1963)
- "Half a Sixpence" / "If the Rain's Got to Fall" – (RCA 1965)
- "Fortuosity" / "I'm a Brass Band" – (Vista 1967)
- "King's New Clothes" / "Wonderful Copenhagen" – (Pye 1974)
- "Half a Sixpence" / "If the Rain's Got to Fall" – (Safari 1984)
- "Singing the Blues" / "Come On, Let's Go" – (Old Gold 1985)


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Albums

- *Tommy Steele Stage Show* – UK No. 5 (Decca 1957)
- *The Tommy Steele Story* – UK No. 1 (Decca 1957)
- *The Duke Wore Jeans (Soundtrack)* – UK No. 1 (Decca 1958)
- *Tommy Steele Everything's Coming Up BROADWAY* – (Liberty 1965)
- *My Life, My Song* – (Pye 1974)
- *Hans Andersen* – Original London Cast 1974 (Pye 1974)
- *Hans Andersen* – Revival London Cast 1977 (Pye 1977)
- *Singin' in the Rain* – Original London Cast 1984 (Cast Masters 1995)
- *Some Like It Hot* – Original London Cast (First Night Records 1996)
- *Scrooge: The Musical* – Original London Cast (BK Records)
- *Half a Sixpence* – Original London Cast 1963 (Must Close Saturday 2006)
- *Cinderella* – Original London Cast 1958 (Hallmark 2011)

Filmography

- *Kill Me Tomorrow* (1957)
- *The Tommy Steele Story* (1957)
- *The Duke Wore Jeans* (1957)
- *Tommy the Toreador* (1959)
- *Light Up the Sky!* (1960) known as *Skywatch* in the US

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- *It's All Happening* (1963) known as *The Dream Maker* in the US
- *Half a Sixpence* (1967)
- *The Happiest Millionaire* (1967)
- *Finian's Rainbow* (1968)
- *Where's Jack?* (1969)
- *Twelfth Night* (1970) (made for TV)
- *Tommy Steele in Search of Charlie Chaplin* (1971) (TV special)
- *The Yeomen of the Guard* (1978) (made for TV)
- *Quincy's Quest* (1979)

Notes

1. his mother's maiden name