

TOMMY EMMANUEL

Biography

www.tommyemmanuel.com

Two-time Grammy nominee Tommy Emmanuel is one of Australia's most respected musicians. The legendary guitarist has a professional career that spans almost five decades and continues to intersect with some of the finest musicians throughout the world. A household name in his native Australia, Tommy has garnered hundreds of thousands of loyal fans worldwide. Tommy's unique style - he calls it simply "finger style" - is akin to playing guitar the way a pianist plays piano, using all ten fingers. Rather than using a whole band for melody, rhythm, bass, and drum parts, Tommy plays all that - and more - on one guitar. Guitar legend Chet Atkins was one of the first to inspire Emmanuel to try this "fingerpicker" style as a child. Decades later, Atkins himself became one of Emmanuel's biggest fans.

Emmanuel's unusual talent and life are common lore in Australia. Born into a musical family, Tommy and his older brother Phil were considered child prodigies. Tommy got his first guitar at age 4 and was taught by his mother. He learned by ear, with no formal instruction, and has never read music. By the age of 6, he was already working as a professional musician in the family band, variously named The Emmanuel Quartet, The Midget Surfaries and The Trailblazers. Tommy played rhythm guitar and his older brother Phil played lead, along with their brother Chris on drums and sister Virginia on slide guitar. The Emmanuel siblings earned the family's sole income for several years. Tommy doesn't remember such responsibility as a hardship: "I've spent all my life from the age of four playing music and entertaining people. I never wanted to do anything else." By age 10, Emmanuel had played his way across Australia.

In 1962, Tommy heard Nashville guitarist Chet Atkins' music for the first time and was riveted by the complexity of Atkins' solo sound. He spent hours trying to figure out the "fingerpicking" style and gobbled up each of the American star's albums as they came out. Shortly after his father's death of a heart attack in 1966, Tommy even wrote Chet a letter and, to his surprise, the famous artist and producer wrote him back. Chet would grow to become Tommy's mentor and primary influence, but it would be another 15 years before the two would finally meet in person.

After his father died, the Emmanuel family was approached by Australian country music star Buddy Williams, who took them on the road until they were forced by the Australian child welfare department to stop traveling. The children were then sent to a regular school. During these years, Tommy was playing in The Trailblazers on weekends. He also taught guitar and made numerous television appearances in musical competitions. Emmanuel's first brush with fame came when The Trailblazers won two televised talent contests and were able to produce an album.

Leaving school and home in his early teens, Tommy embraced big city life in Sydney in order to pursue his career as a professional guitarist. By the 70's, he was playing in clubs all over the city and soon found himself in high demand as a session player and sideman known for his versatility and easy-going personality. During the mid 70s through the early 80s, Emmanuel played on recordings for Air Supply, Men at Work and dozens of other popular bands and artists, as well as thousands of commercial 'jingles.' He became known as one of the best modern guitarists in Australia. Some of his most notable appearances were on the Air Supply hit singles *Lost in Love*, *All Out of Love*, *Every Woman in the World*, and *Now and Forever*.

In 1985 Emmanuel joined one of the decade's biggest Australian rock bands, Dragon, and recorded the platinum-selling album *Dreams of Ordinary Men*. In 1987, Dragon toured with Tina Turner on her 'Break Every Rule' tour. As a songwriter (co-writing with 1960s Australian star Steve Kipner), his compositions have been recorded by Olivia Newton-John, Al Jarreau, and Sheena Easton. It is for his successful solo career, however, that Emmanuel is best known.

In 1980 Emmanuel made a trip to the United States and finally met and got to play with his hero, Chet Atkins, in Nashville. From that magical moment forward, the Tennessee master guitarist and producer took the twenty-something Australian ace under his wing and began introducing him to other guitar legends. Tommy speaks of his mentor with the love and gratitude of a son and Atkins' influences are evident throughout his music and personal philosophy. Emmanuel's technical precision, his virtuosic improvisations and his unusually broad repertoire - which encompasses not only country and bluegrass, but pop, jazz, blues, gospel, even classical, flamenco, and aboriginal styles - bespeak Chet Atkins' legacy.

Emmanuel got his solo instrumental career off the ground with the release of the gentle and textural *Up from Down*

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Under album in 1988. In the 90's his efforts blossomed and began to be recognized and rewarded by the Australian music industry and media. Sales of his albums set records that have yet to be broken.

His versatility has taken Emmanuel from international Jazz Festivals to shows with the Sydney Philharmonic, The Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, and performances for the Masai people in remote areas of Kenya. Tommy's dream of recording with Chet Atkins came true in 1996 when the pair made an album titled *The Day the Finger Pickers Took Over the World*, for which Emmanuel received his first Grammy award nomination.

Tommy was well-known in Australia, Asia, and Europe long before his presence was felt in the U.S. However, in 1997 his album *Midnight Drive* was in the top five for 16 weeks, which made him the "most added artist" on the NAC radio charts that year. In Nashville in 1999, Tommy was honored by his mentor, Chet Atkins with the title of "Certified Guitar Player" for his contribution to fingerstyle guitar, a rare distinction shared by only three other people in the world (Jerry Reed, Steve Wariner and John Knowles). It was a crowning moment for Emmanuel and a title the self-proclaimed "humble, uneducated, country kid" from Down Under takes very seriously.

After Tommy's appearance with his brother Phil in the Closing Ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic Games and his debut at the famous Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, in late 2000, Americans wanted to know who this mysterious Australian guitar virtuoso was. In 2001, Emmanuel released his first solo-acoustic album, *ONLY*, and in 2002 it debuted in the U.S.

Emmanuel's popularity in the US has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few years, aided by a non-stop touring schedule and increasing exposure in the media. 2005 kicked off a stream of US honors and awards. Tommy was inducted into the National Thumbpickers' Hall of Fame in Muhlenberg, KY (the only non-American ever to be selected) and awarded with Thumbpicker of the Year and Album of the Year by the group, as well. He played Carnegie Hall for Les Paul's 90th birthday Tribute Concert. His *The Mystery* album earned a Grammy nomination in 2006 for Best Country Instrumental for 'Gameshow Rag/Cannonball Rag'. In 2008, Guitar Player Magazine and Acoustic Guitar Magazine named him Best Acoustic Guitarist and Gold Medalist - Fingerstyle category in the Readers' Choice and Players' Choice Awards, respectively.

His newest solo album and DVD *Center Stage* were produced in 2008 based on the popularity of Emmanuel's episode of a PBS series called Sierra Center Stage filmed live at the famous Sierra Nevada Brewery venue in Sierra Nevada, CA. Tommy's *Center Stage* video has been featured on PBS stations around the country during 2009, drawing ever-larger sellout crowds to his live shows. Tommy was also honored with Guitar Player Magazine's most prestigious annual Guitar Legend award in 2009, as well as being named Thumbpicker of the Year for the second time. Most recently, Guitar Player's 2010 Readers Choice awards named him Best Acoustic Guitarist for the second time!

In all, Emmanuel's catalogue includes 20 musical recordings running the gamut of solos, duets, ensembles, cover tunes, originals, both electric and acoustic guitar. He has made 3 live performance DVDs, 3 additional instructional DVDs, and regularly teaches master classes on the road. At 54, performing live is more important to him than ever and he tours constantly, playing over 300 concerts a year for the last five years. Guitar players of all levels come to his shows to watch the magic hands of the 'guitar Wizard of Oz,' but his appeal goes far beyond musicians. His live shows are known for their humor, passion, and infectious joy. The power of his charismatic showmanship will be an enduring part of Emmanuel's legacy. Tommy Emmanuel's message is pure love for the music and his delight in sharing it with the world, one audience at a time.

"...run, do not walk, to a Tommy Emmanuel concert near you. True happiness is in tragically short supply right now, all over the world, but you will definitely find it there."

- Richard McFalls, *Cactus Cafe Show Review (Austin, TX)*