



The Toy Factory's Old-Fashioned Dancing Man

The Dancing Man is a traditional toy that has delighted young and old for centuries. Like many traditional wooden toys, the Dancing Man achieved its peak popularity in the late 1800's, before radio captured the attention of families gathered in the parlour after the evening meal.

But the Dancing Man is still a part of Saturday night "get-togethers" in many rural areas of the Maritimes and Quebec, when the fiddles and accordions keep toes tapping around a kitchen wood stove until the wee hours of the morning.

One of the many variations of the "jig dancing doll", the Dancing Man wasn't originally a toy at all. It was a tool – the stock in trade of minstrels and gypsies who travelled around medieval Europe performing for Kings and Queens, or earning their supper and a bed for the night by amusing the patrons at the local village inn.

No one knows who actually invented the first "jig dancing doll"... the Celts of Wales and Ireland both lay claim to creating the concept of a loosely-jointed doll that would dance to the music of the pipes or fiddle.



About 200 years ago, a vast number of people from western and central Europe and Scandinavia emigrated to North America.

Almost without exception they were enterprising and resourceful, and most were skilled in the use of hand tools. Along with their few possessions, they brought along the "jig dancing doll".

It was a brilliant idea, quick to catch on, and the source of countless variations. In the southern U.S.A. for instance, it was known as a "clapboard dancer", and was often painted as a black woman called "Dancing Dinah".

All in all, the animated dancing dolls provided a fine and amusing way to pass a long winter evening for the whole family.

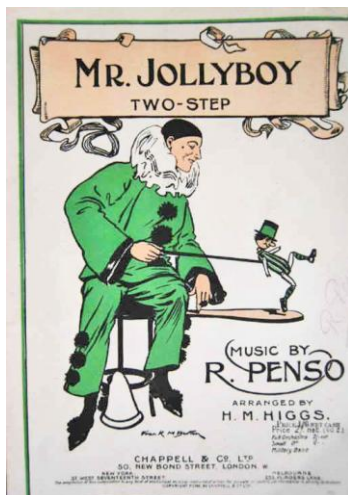
By the end of the 1800's, toy-making factories had sprung up and begun to flourish, especially in the New England states. Wooden jig dancers were designed to imitate famous people of the day – the "Uncle Sam" Dancing Doll was immensely popular throughout the United States of America.

Soon, there were metal dancing dolls, and dolls designed to dance on phonographs as the record revolved. Another variation popular in Quebec at the time was known as "les marionettes à la planchette", which involved 2 dolls dancing together on a board. Still another inventive variation was the "knee-britch marionette", with the doll secured to the knee and made to dance on the foot.



HOW TO MAKE HIM DANCE

To see the Dancing Man at his best is a wonderful experience, but it takes a little practice.



Sit on a "hard" chair with a flat seat, and slip the smaller end of the dancing board underneath your leg. The board must be wedged between your leg and the seat, so it's fairly snug. It needs to be secure enough under your leg that when it's tapped halfway along the board, the other end – the wide end, or dancing platform – will vibrate or bounce rapidly up and down.

Hold the stick protruding from the Dancing Man's back, and suspend his feet so they're in the air about 1/4" above the dancing platform. Your Dancing Man is ready to dance.

Get your fiddle tuned up, and it's a lively jig ...

Tap the board with your free hand in time with the rhythm of the music, holding the dancing man's feet suspended above the dancing platform. As the board bounces up and down, allow his feet to drop slightly to hit the platform – and his legs will dance around.

By slightly varying the distance you hold him above the dancing platform, and changing the angle of his body from side to side, you can adjust the tapping patterns of his feet, so it looks like he's dancing in time with the music.

Before long, you'll have all the children (and the young-at-heart) lining up to have try. Aren't you delighted to have your own Dancing Man – isn't he just a treasure !

The Toy Factory

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