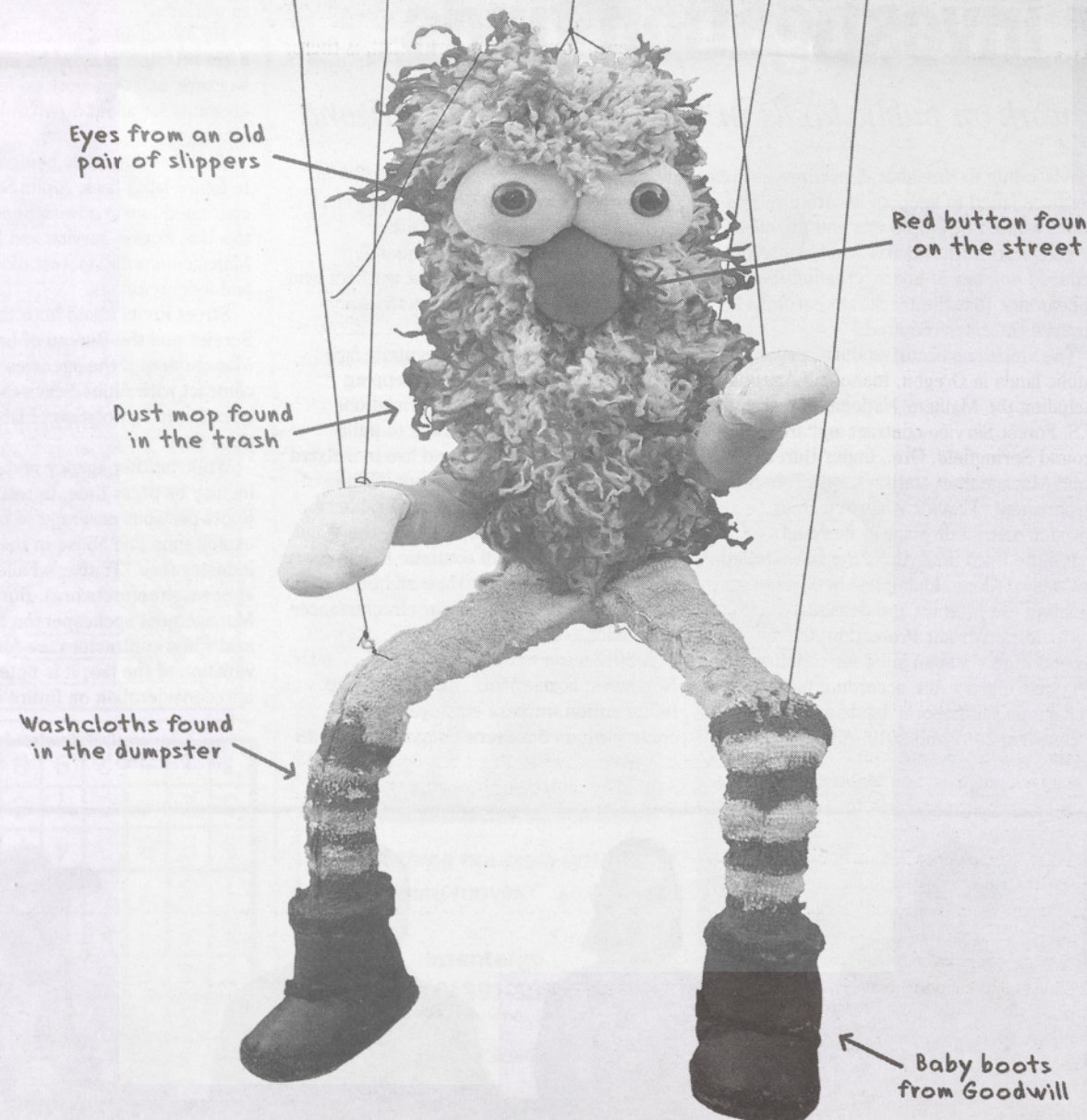


PUPPET MASTER



Jack Howell makes all of his puppets out of discarded and abandoned materials that he finds on the streets of Oklahoma City.

PHOTOS BY WHITLEY O'CONNOR

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At Northwest 23rd Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, Oklahoma City's very own puppeteer, Jack Howell, is likely busking on the sidewalk with his handmade marionettes. Often out with his eccentric puppets, Jack performs for anyone willing to spare a minute to enjoy the show.

Jack started making puppets a year ago after he and his wife separated.

"I had a bunch of time left over after the old lady left with the kids. I was trying to get over her. ... My wife's name was Maranelle, and I started to Google her name one day. But in the middle of doing so, I thought, 'Nah, I shouldn't do that.' I looked, and 'marionettes' had popped up on the screen. And I thought, 'I can do that. That's cool.'"

Jack uses his current experience with homelessness, which followed the split with his wife, as artistic inspiration. He makes all of his dolls out of discarded and abandoned materials that he finds on the streets of Oklahoma City. Since starting, Jack has made over 30 puppets. But with being on the streets, more than half have been lost, stolen, or damaged along the way. But Jack doesn't let that stop him. "I'm always working on a new one. Before I've finished one, I've got another one

started."

Jack finds inspiration for his dolls in overlooked knickknacks.

"I find a lot of stuff in the garbage and in dumpsters around Oklahoma City. If I want or need something specific, I'll go to Goodwill or thrift stores. I get a lot of hair for my dolls in the trash behind a wig store." You can find everything from vegetables to dominoes to dog chew toys incorporated into the designs of Jack's puppets.

One of Jack's puppets is Abraham Lincoln.

"I found an old shower mirror in the trash and thought, 'This could be the rim of Abraham Lincoln's hat.' So I just went from there," he said. But Jack put his own spin on the president, giving him drum sticks and a drum kit that he likes to play in Jack's puppet band. Also in Jack's puppet band is a rocker grandpa who strums a toy guitar and a skeleton on lead vocals.

Each of Jack's puppets has a specific purpose and motion to accommodate its existence for entertainment. His puppets have no limits to their abilities from a rabid raccoon that gnaws on a rubber chicken leg to a puppy dog that can hike its leg up and spray real water onto a fire hydrant. "They all have their own stuff that they do that's unique. And there's a little bit of me in all of them."

Jack's life and the people he

encounters also play a role in his creative process. He has one puppet modeled after a cashier from Wal-Mart that he saw, whose style Jack admired. The gentleman has a cane and an eye patch, which Jack found to be "groovy." Jack made a puppet of him and plans to surprise him with it as a gift in the future.

While Jack had never done puppeteering, he has dabbled in art for most of his life.

"Painting and drawing. I go through phases," he said. "I was really into melting vinyl records and making them into bowls, flowers, etc., for a period of time. I once even melted them to myself and made a life-size statue of Auguste Rodin's 'The Thinker'."

But unlike Jack's former art endeavors, he doesn't seem to think this one is just a phase.

"This is more than just art for me. I phased out of art projects in the past, but this one is different," he said.

For Jack, his marionettes bring purpose back into his life after his separation and losing his kids.

"What would I do with my life without this? Sit out in the sun and bake all day? I find meaning in this... Building them is an escape. Sometimes I don't want them to be done because then it's over with."

Without his wife and kids in his life anymore, Jack sometimes feels unsure about the future. He knows he wants to

Oklahoma City's homeless puppeteer finds solace in marionettes he creates from trash

get back in housing and find steady employment. He used to work construction and at a convenience store. Sometimes Jack worries that his kids are embarrassed by his new hobby.

"No one's saying, 'Man, my dad's the puppet dude at 23rd and Penn!' I'd rather have my children back in my life. I'd probably give (the puppets) all to my kids and tell them to go play with them and be done."

But until that day, Jack is certain that nothing will stop him from creating puppets.

"I'll die if I stop," he said. "That's what I keep telling myself. I won't let anybody talk me out of doing this. People like them. I like them. There ain't nothing wrong with that, is there?"

And Jack isn't joking when he says that nothing can stop his passion. Jack recently served a short period of time in county jail and continued to make puppets to perform for his fellow inmates.

"I made the puppets in jail out of soap and paper that I mixed together," he said. "I made little outfits for them by ripping up fabric from our jumpsuits. They were little inmates too." It wasn't until his puppets were confiscated as contraband that he had to stop.

While Jack doesn't think anything serious will ever come from his performances, he does think it would be fun to create an entire stage show with his puppets. Unlike other major cities, Oklahoma City doesn't have a very vibrant busking scene. Busking is when people perform for donations in public spaces. It is common in cities like New York, Los Angeles and Portland. Jack is one of the few street performers in OKC to experiment with alternative forms of entertainment.

While Jack receives tips for his performances, that has never been the main motive for his act.

"I do it to keep my mind busy. To keep me sane or insane, either way," Jack joked. "I never ask nobody for anything. I just like the smiles on the kids' faces. It makes me laugh as much as them."

Courtesy of INSPingo / The Curbside Chronicle