

Westminster ventriloquist launches online course

By JACOB DENOBEL
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Ventriloquism isn't generally considered to be a 21st-century art form, but Westminster resident Tom Crowl is attempting to change that perception with a ventriloquism course created for the Internet era.

Crowl, along with ventriloquists Mark Wade and Ken Groves, has taken the reins of Maher Ventriloquist Studios, originally established in 1934. The studio originated as a correspondence course, with students receiving 30 educational pamphlets and submitting a video of their performance after their study was complete. Crowl said the course, aside from some minor stylistic changes, had remained largely the same since it was revamped in the '70s. Now, the trio have created an interactive course that includes Skype sessions between students and tutors as well as downloadable video lessons.

Crowl first came to ventriloquism in 2006, after working for years as a magician. Crowl said he is lucky to have gotten into the art form almost immediately before Jeff Dunham became an international success and raised the profile of ventriloquism. Crowl said another ventriloquist who has helped popularize the

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Tom Crowl
Ventriloquist

art form is Terry Fator, who won "America's Got Talent" with a ventriloquist act in 2007.

"I had done a family show with my wife and son, and my wife decided she wanted to pursue her own career," Crowl said. "So I was left doing basically a kids' show. I had always liked ventriloquism, so I began to study to set off on my own."

Crowl primarily works corporate banquets and events throughout the country for most of the year. In the summer, he branches out to fairs, libraries and street festivals.

When Maher Studios executive director Clinton Detweiler passed away suddenly in 2013, Crowl said the Detweiler family decided to pass the organization

on to Wade, children's entertainer and executive director of the Vent Haven ventriloquist convention.

Wade said he recruited friends and fellow ventriloquists Groves and Crowl to help him re-imagine Maher Studios for a more computer-literate generation of ventriloquists.

"Tom's a great professional ventriloquist, and he's also a great friend," Wade said. "He's very computer savvy, and we couldn't have done this without him."

Crowl had experience with his own digital ventriloquism course, Learn Ventriloquism, which consists of 36 time-released video lessons covering topics from breathing control to character development that he launched in 2011. Crowl said he developed the course after attending a seminar on creating online informational products.

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"After my shows, a lot of people would ask me if I taught ventriloquism, and my schedule was always such that I could never devote the time," Crowl said. "I thought this was a great way to do this, because I can do virtual lessons with them without having to sit down individually."

Crowl said word spread about his online ventriloquism course, with prominent ventriloquists and puppet makers recommending his lessons to new students. It was the success of Learn Ventriloquism that put him on Wade's radar, Crowl said.

Teaming up with Wade and Groves, Crowl helped develop the new Maher Interactive Ventriloquism Course, which goes live Monday. The course consists of nine video lessons, broken down into three segments. After each package of three video lessons, the student has the opportunity to have a Skype session with one of the three instructors. During the Skype session, they perform what they've learned and receive one-on-one critiques from the instructors.

"You can't beat sitting down with a working vent and studying the techniques and having them say, 'No, you're doing this wrong,'" Crowl said.

In addition to the interactive course, the group has created digital versions of the original 30-lesson pamphlets for students to download to their computer or e-reader. Crowl said the three ventriloquists pooled their knowledge of the art to develop new methods for sound reproduction.

"We took everything we knew, and we tried to figure out new ways of doing things. You can't say the letters 'B,' 'M,' 'P' or 'F' without using your lips, and ventriloquists have always been taught to substitute another letter, like saying 'D' instead of 'B,'" Crowl said. "In this course, we teach sound modification. You can actually say the letters, it's just a matter of the proper teaching."

In the course, Crowl said they teach students to produce the labial consonants — letters that are said with the lips — by reproducing the sounds with the tongue inside the mouth. Even more important than lip control, Crowl said, is proper breathing technique. Crowl said many students want to skip past the fundamentals for the more flashy parts of ventriloquism.

"In ventriloquism, one of the big problems is that some people think the minimum is good enough, and it's really not. That's why for years, ventriloquism was a step below the party clown," Crowl said. "It hurts the business as a whole. If you see a singer and they're bad, you've seen enough singers to know that it was just a bad singer. People don't see ventriloquists that often, so if you catch a bad ventriloquist, you decide you don't want to see them again."

Wade said he estimates there are only about 4,000 professional ventriloquists worldwide.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ventriloquist Tom Crowl is shown.

MORE INFORMATION

The Maher Ventriloquist Studios catalog is available at www.maherstudios.com. The catalog features the original Maher Course pamphlets, Tom Crowl's Learn

Ventriloquism course and the Maher Interactive Ventriloquism Course.

The interactive course goes live Monday and will cost \$397.

In addition to the technical aspects of speaking with lip control, Crowl said they focus on the presentation and theatricality involved as well.

"Ventriloquism is the illusion of life. If you don't have a well-defined character, you're not going to succeed," Crowl said. "A lot of people pick up the puppet and think it's going to be a character, but it's not, it's just a tool."

Crowl's main puppet is Dangerous Duck, a sarcastic duck who is always looking for a way out of the show.

"Dangerous likes to mess with me. He likes to mess with the crowd. He likes to tease and get me in trouble," Crowl said. "He's never happy, and would always rather be somewhere else."

An aspect of ventriloquism Crowl said he would like to see explored in the future is the technique's relationship with speech therapy. Crowl said there have been local experiments with ventriloquists working with speech therapists, but never anything on a global scale.

"What we've created with the Maher course, teaching someone to say 'B' without using their lips, can be applied to a burn victim who has to learn to re-enunciate everything," Crowl said. "I think it's going to take a ventriloquist to start pursuing that market."

When looking at the young attendees at the Vent

Haven convention, Crowl said he is continually impressed with how forward-thinking the new generation of ventriloquists are.

"We do an open mic, and they do stuff that is so unique and so different. They're their own person. They're not doing what Jeff does; they're not doing songs like Terry Fator does. They're doing their

own thing," Crowl said. "I think ventriloquism will continue to grow. A lot of people for years thought it was a dying art. I think success stories like Jeff and Terry bodes well for its future."

Reach staff writer Jacob deNobel at 410-857-3316 or jacob.denobel@carrollcountytimes.com.

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