

CHAPTER V

A CONVERSATION WITH PERCY DANFORTH

May, 1985

Ann Arbor, Michigan

BL: How old were you when you first heard of the bones?

PD: About eight years old. When we moved to Washington, D.C., I started school at Webb School in northeast Washington. At recess time that first day, some of the kids out on the playground pulled these spare rib bones out of their pockets and just started rattling them. I was flabbergasted, of course, went home and told my dad all about this. I started to tell him a little bit about it and he said, "Oh yes. Those are the bones of Mr. Endman in the minstrel show." He told me a little something about the minstrel shows and we got slats out of an old shutter. He showed me how to hold these and how to get some initial rattles out of them. That was in the fall of 1908.

But it was the next summer we kids used to play out in front of Isaac Clayman's grocery store down on the street corner. There was an expanse of concrete sidewalk there at the intersection and at the curb was an old gas lamplight. Street lights weren't electrified in Washington yet. Fifteenth and F Street was just on the border of town then. Beyond there were fields and marshes and there was a

black community where there were no paved streets, no street lights, nothing. The streets were still macadam out in that part of Washington. These black fellows used to like to come over to this street corner. And no conversation--nothing. They'd get some sand out of the gutter and sprinkle it on the sidewalk under the old gas lamp light. We kids would get back into the background. They'd get these standing rib bones out of their pockets and soft-shoe sand dance under there. So I watched that all summer and it kind of gave me a feeling down in the soles of my shoes that this would be kind of fun. So through the years I rattled the bones a little bit. And I say "rattled" because I like to differentiate between "rattling the bones" and "playing the bones." So that's how I found out about them.

But at that time, everybody knew about the bones. Everybody knew about minstrel shows, and everybody knew about "Brother Bones," the endman in the minstrel shows. They knew about Mr. Tambo, Mr. Interlocutor, and the whole thing. But the bones were what people kind of concentrated on in their appreciation of the minstrel show.

BL: What do the terms "endman" and "interlocutor" refer to?

PD: The format of the troupe was usually something like this: they came out on the stage, right out to the footlights and formed part of the arc of a circle, with the two ends of the arc out toward the audience. On one end of this arc was Mr. Tambo, who played the tambourine. In the center was the suave M.C., Mr. Interlocutor--of course these fellows were blackface--and on the other end was Mr. Bones who played the rhythm bones. In between this trio were fiddlers and banjo players and singers. That was the part of the minstrel

show that was--of course there were other parts to it too--but this
 as the part that everybody was so excited about.

BL: Would they all play together or take turns, or . . .

PD: They all played together, "The Camptown Races,"¹ "Oh! Susanna,"
 and a lot of bouncy stuff like that.

Mr. Bones of course used bones that were ebony bones or bone
 bones, that is, made out of bone, so that they would make plenty of
 noise because he wanted the bones to be heard above everything.

BL: Where did people get ebony bones? Now, ebony is rather
 expensive and hard to come by, isn't it?

PD: Yes. I have ebony bones. But I'm surprised at how many ebony
 bones there are. They turn up. I don't know where people got them.

BL: Where did you get yours?

PD: The first pair of ebony bones I got was at a flea market out at
 Arborland.² I had stopped by, was looking around, and among other
 things saw some ebony bones. I asked the man about them and he said,
 "Well frankly, they've been lying around my place so long I haven't any
 idea what to do with them. If you want them, you can have them."

There was another one of these flea markets out on Ann Arbor-
 Saline Road. A friend who was in a workshop of mine brought in two
 pairs of ebony bones to the workshop. I asked him where in the world
 he got them and he said that he got them at this flea market. He had,
 as I recall, half a dozen pairs of these bones.

¹The actual title of Foster's song is "Gwone to Run All Night" or
 "The Camptown Races."

²A shopping mall in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Then I got another pair. I played with the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra and after that I got a letter from a woman in Plymouth [Michigan] who said, "My husband used to play the bones. But he had different kind of bones--they're black. If you would be interested in them--they have a historical background--I'd like to send them to you." And she did; they were two pairs of ebony bones. So there were lots of them. But I've never played with them. I just have them to show audiences what a piercing, disagreeable sound they make. They wouldn't fit into any kind of ensemble at all.

BL: But weren't ebony bones used in the minstrel shows?

PD: Oh yes. They definitely were.

BL: They sounded just as disagreeable then?

PD: But what could sound more disagreeable than anything in the minstrel show? (laughter) Just loud and sharp.

BL: When you were growing up, did you get to see minstrel shows? Were they still around then?

PD: There were lots of them, but I didn't see any minstrel shows. I just heard about them. Everybody would talk about them, but I never got to one.

The first minstrel show I ever really saw or got involved with was over in Dexter [Michigan]. There was a man from Atlanta, Georgia that came up and organized it. I remember distinctly at our first meeting that he was talking about the organization and somebody in the group said, "But of course we can't blackface." He said, "The hell we can't blackface! Down in Atlanta when we give a minstrel show we blackface and we're going to blackface here!" So there was blackfacing!

BL: When was that?

PD: Oh, that was six or seven years ago.

BL: Is the list of rudiments¹ we've talked about before something you've come up with yourself, or were those things taught to you when you learned how to play?

PD: I think I've refined that somewhat to rudiments and elements.²

There are only two rudiments, the staccato tap and the triplet. Out of those two, all these other things can be made. Now I've listened to recordings of the Chieftains,³ and I've watched many, many people play the bones. I think the difference between them and me is that I've been fortunate to spend about 75% of my life with musicians. And musicians are a gang of perfectionists. They look at their instruments and wonder what they can do with them, talk about what they have done with them, and so on. So I looked at my simple bones and began to wonder about them. Of course I'm interested in rhythm patterns. You can't be involved that way without beginning to have things happen. So the more I wondered about this, the more potential I saw. For example, you can put two of these fundamental triplets together with a tap and make a seven tap roll. So just playing with them and playing with them and thinking about it, being sensitive to what you accidentally do, you begin to recognize some of these things. So we get a list of elements.

¹The term "rudiments" as used in the world of traditional Western percussion usually refers to a specific rhythm pattern.

²Danforth defines "taps" and "triplets", the two basic sounds made by the bones, as rudiments. He defines "elements" as specific rhythmic patterns consisting of taps and triplets in various combinations.

³An Irish folk ensemble.

BL: So the list of elements is pretty much your own creation.

PD: Oh, nobody has ever looked at this the way I have.

BL: What types of music do you like to play with, or what types of music do you think are appropriate to play with?

PD: I like to think of it in these terms. I find that now that I have played the bones as much as I have, I don't have to think of how I hold them anymore. I know just by going through the motions what it would sound like if I had bones in my hands. And so I have enjoyed the bones, for example, while I'm soaking in the shower. (chuckle) I started this with Gottschalk's Bamboula. I could repeat Gottschalk's Bamboula five times on one side of a ninety-minute tape. I'd start the tape going and the shower going and play the bones--except that I wouldn't have any bones. In a situation like that I have enjoyed the kinesthetics of playing the bones. I can hear the bones because I know what every move would sound like if I had the bones. That's all apropos to the fact that I have felt about the bones in the same terms that a dancer must feel relative to him and the dance or her and the dance. So I try to show people who are interested in the bones that essentially this is a dance. You play the bones from the soles of your shoes right up. Sometimes I'd say "from the seat of the pants up" but it's better "the soles of the shoes up" because that gets all of you involved in it. Then, anything that you can dance to, you can play the bones to.

BL: That covers a lot of territory!

PD: When I began playing the bones with C.P.E. Bach and Mozart and a few folks like that, Fran¹ had big crocodile tears! I think we've done "Turkish Rondo."²

BL: Yes.

PD: Well for heaven's sake, it invites everything the bones can contribute! It's a long way around about answering the question, but that's the way I feel about it. Now there's a tendency for people who play the bones to think in terms of reels and hornpipes and jigs and so on. But you can get over into all this other stuff that invites much, much more.

BL: In other words, you play with a wide variety of music.

PD: I've experimented quite a bit with the eastern end of the Mediterranean: $\frac{11}{8}$ meter, $\frac{7}{8}$, $\frac{15}{8}$ --that kind of stuff. I went to

Princeton to do some workshops and a fellow there was very much interested in the folk dancing of the eastern end of the Mediterranean. He took me over one night after a workshop to watch these dances. I think one of the nicest things I've ever watched relative to folk dancing was to see about forty people in a circle, all doing these dances to music that really curls your hair! Those dances are really involved. To see every foot doing just the same thing--it was beautiful. It's hard stuff to do bones with! (chuckle)

BL: Yes, I imagine it would be! Most of the music we play with is in duple or triple meter, not in an odd meter.

¹Frances Danforth, Percy's wife.

²The third movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A, K. 331, also known as "Alla Turca." When I was studying the bones with Percy, this movement was one of the first pieces he gave me to practice.

PD: That's just what I was going to say . . . three beats, two beats, three beats, three beats, two beats. But there have been a lot of other things to work on so I haven't concentrated on that.

BL: When you've traveled to different folk festivals, have you noticed a difference in the way people play the bones or how a bones player plays with music?

PD: What has happened generally at folk festivals is that people haven't seen the bones.

BL: They're not very common?

PD: Except where I've been before. So many, many people come up and they're flabbergasted to see this white-haired old bunny come out and play the bones. But frequently, somebody will come up who will pick up a pair of bones and rattle them a little bit. He used to do it, his granddaddy showed him how to do it, or yackety-yak. But all they know is just a simple rattle. And not even rattles with taps in between . . . no patterns; they just know how to rattle them. I was shipped down to the Florida State Folk Festival to play the bones. They have a bones player down there that has been considered the champion bones player of Florida. He did a lot of bones rattling and then he had the jawbone of some critter with the teeth loose in it. He could rub some kind of a stick over it and rattle the bones. Then he invited me to play. Obviously he was amazed. When I finished, I stood down by the little stage. He put his jawbone down and whatever else he had and got off the stage and walked over to me and stuck out his hand and said, "You're the champ!" (chuckle)

There are people who have been associated with the bones like
 — Nicholas Driver in England; he sent me a record he made over there.¹
 On the jacket there was a blurb about how he had made the recording
 to preserve the ancient art of bones playing. The bones playing on the
 album is very, very simple. No change in dynamics, no change in
 anything.

BL: He just plays straight rolls?

PD: It's just straight; there's a little break but nothing very exciting
 that happens. Now I played with him over there.² We went up to
 Ipswich where his mother and dad live. His dad is an old bones player.
 The only things we played were some "marchy" kinds of things--slow--
 and I think they were in $\frac{2}{4}$ time. Now the old gent could throw a bone
 up in the air and catch it without missing a beat--this kind of stuff--
 — but it was no bones playing. The potential of the bones has not been
 recognized. So these are the kinds of things I keep running across.

BL: Is the technique of holding the bones the same in the British
 tradition as the way you play?

PD: No. You see, they have a different kind of bones. They're made all
 together different than our bones. They're thin on one end and get
 heavy on the other; they get wide and flat. The reason why they're
 heavy on the one end is because the movable bone³ is a kind of
 pendulum; it swings in there. It's just held in there so it can swing,

¹The recording referred to here is Bare Bones: The Traditional
 Art of Bones Playing, Greenwich Village, GVR 202, 1978.

²Danforth did a tour in England in 1980 with Clare Jones, piano,
 and Alistair Anderson, English concertina and Northumbrian
 small pipes. The repertoire consisted of traditional British folk
 music.

³The bone which is held between the second and third fingers.

instead of being spring-loaded so that you can get a nice series of fast taps. Those are rosewood bones that Nicholas Driver makes and sells over there. He gave me a set of them, but I can't use them. I would use them the other way around for a change in sound, but that's the opposite of the way they play.¹ Now do you know the Chieftains?

BL: Yes.

PD: Do you remember on the cover of one of the Chieftains' albums they have a picture of all their exotic instruments? Down in the foreground is a pair of standing rib bones. Those are the bones that their bones player uses, just one pair. They use those bones for the sole purpose of introducing a color, like a French horn.

BL: Just to add variety.

PD: It just adds variety. The beat is very, very simple, but the color is nice. Then the bones player will put those down and will pick up his bodhrán² and do the same simple things with the bodhrán.

BL: It sounds like there's a really different conception of playing in England.

PD: Oh yes, altogether different. One hand.³

¹When Danforth uses these bones he plays them with the heavy ends between his fingers and the light ends hanging down. British bones players play with the light ends up and the heavy ends down.

²A large single-headed drum resembling a tambourine without jingles, whose diameter is approximately 22".

³Nicholas Driver and his father, Aubrey Driver, have been photographed while playing the bones with a pair of bones in each hand. (See liner notes, Bare Bones, Greenwich Village, GVR 202, 1978.) Yet Danforth maintains that in actual practice, Nicholas Driver and his father only played with one pair of bones. Their style of playing differs from Danforth's in that they tend to play one pattern repeatedly, or they will follow the rhythm of the tune they are playing. Danforth's playing tends to have more variety and is much more syncopated.

BL: Just one hand?

PD: When I played over there I played in pubs. Those people weren't particularly interested in what I was doing. I think they thought it was kind of cute that an old guy would be doing those things with a pair of bones. They were amazed that the bones were made of wood. But there wasn't much comment about them at all.

BL: Were you doing things that people there usually wouldn't do?

PD: They wouldn't begin to do those things.

BL: You mentioned that when you played with Nicholas Driver and his father you played some "marchy" kinds of things. Did you ever hear a bones player there do anything else?

PD: No.

BL: The Chieftains play a lot of jigs, hornpipes and reels. Of course they're Irish, but from the same part of the world.

PD: Oh yes. But the philosophy in the British Isles seems to prevail. I didn't see any two-hand bones playing there.

BL: When you were taught how to play, did most people just play with one hand, or did people play with two hands?

PD: My dad showed me one hand. And all through the years I just rattled the bones with one hand, one pair. But then Fran took a graduate course in the history of music. I think I told you about how the question about the bones came up and I was invited to demonstrate the bones. I thought, "Boy, just to go over there and show them about the bones with one hand isn't anything. I better get busy and do this with two hands." For two or three weeks or so I just worked my tail off getting to the place where I could do this with two

hands. Then I began to see the potential of the bones. I worked, I think, every night.

Then I began to hear Fran do things on the piano that sounded as if they'd be swell with the bones--playing three beats with one hand and two with the other hand. Those are nice rhythm patterns! So I've been subjected to stuff that would make you wonder about the potential of the bones.

BL: From the time that you learned how to play to the time that you began playing with two hands, did you play with other groups very much?

PD: No, not with other groups. What would happen would be if I was setting the table I might pick up a couple of knives and play. Or when I was the elementary art teacher in the Monroe [Michigan] school system I thought, "Well gee, these kids ought to have rulers." So I went out into the community and got somebody to contribute a bunch of rulers. I passed these rulers out the first day. Of course the kids were fencing with them and were banging them around. I said, "Now just wait a minute. If you want to hear what you really ought to be doing with these rulers, I'll show you what to do." So I picked up a couple of rulers and rattled the bones. And we didn't have any more trouble after that!

BL: After playing for Fran's class did you begin to play more with musicians?

PD: Well sure. Right off the bat Professor Borroff¹ said, "Gee, this is swell. We're giving a colloquium on early American music around 1840. And it would be swell if you could do the bones for us." This was in Pease Auditorium.² So Evelyn Avsharian, who was on the violin faculty at EMU, and I got together and worked up the first thing we ever did in public, "Devil Among the Tailors."³ Bones and fiddle. Of course I was flabbergasted when this thing just about brought the house down. Nobody had ever seen anything like that before. I had learned to do it with two hands in a very elementary kind of way. I didn't really know how to play the bones yet. Just enough so that we got away with it. In other words, I hadn't concentrated on playing the bones the way I have in recent years.

BL: It seems like you've done a lot of playing in the past few years.

Don't you go to quite a few folk festivals in the summer?

PD: Oh yes.

BL: Where have you gone?

PD: This summer I was scheduled for Boston--I was at Boston last year--but I didn't go. That's the New England Folk Festival. I had a conflict. I'm scheduled for the Summer Solstice Festival in Los Angeles the weekend after next. I've been invited to Winnipeg. I go to The Mariposa Folk Festival just outside of Toronto, the Old Songs

¹A former Professor of Music History at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in Ypsilanti, Michigan, now teaching at SUNY in Binghamton, New York.

²The performing arts hall at EMU.

³Performed as part of a Collegium Musicum concert at EMU, March 21, 1972. "Devil Among the Tailors" is a fiddle tune included in "John Turner's Liber," 1788, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

Festival at Altamont, just outside of Albany, and the Philadelphia Festival. Next weekend I'm scheduled to be in Marshall, Michigan. And then Albion and Jackson and the Wheatland Festival up in Remus, Michigan. And of course a lot of local stuff.

BL: Yes, you seem to make your way around here too! You've been all over.

PD: Oh yes. We've covered the country pretty well except down in the South and Southwest. Although I've played in Arizona.

BL: In your travels have you ever come across another bones player in addition to the fellow in Florida?

PD: Again, there are one-handed rattlers.

BL: But "rattlers," not bones "players."

PD: They're just all rattlers. They don't think in the same terms as I do. They don't think in terms of ensemble. Of course, I do a lot of bones a cappella, just bones improvisation alone. You walk out on the stage in a place like Alice Tully Hall of Lincoln Center,¹ just me and the bones; it's quite an interesting challenge. Unless you have a very deep-seated feeling that what you do people are going to be interested in, you haven't any idea when you walk out. You just can't imagine what you're going to do. And when they hear all this variety of patterns, it's something else!

BL: That concert was pretty well received, wasn't it?

PD: Oh yes. (chuckle) But to get back to the question of other bones players, nobody had ever thought of this kind of thing. I think I've told

¹Danforth gave a performance in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center with Joan Morris and William Bolcom on Sunday, March 6, 1983.

you that I play with Madcat Ruth.¹ He plays his jew's-harp and you have to think in terms of ensemble again. So I use a white pine bone and a strip of the thin end of a cedar shingle. This makes a series of butterfly touches that's perfectly compatible with what comes out of a jew's-harp. Nobody has ever done anything like that with the bones.

BL: When you're going to play with somebody, what issues do you think about? What sorts of things do you think about to make an ensemble a good ensemble?

PD: If I'm going to play with a banjo, that's different from playing with a classical guitar. Now if it's a banjo, I just play the bones normally--just normal stance on the bones. If it's a classical guitar, in order to control the dynamics of the thing, that's when I like to play the bones "off side"² a little bit so that I'm playing on the edges of the bones. It controls the dynamics and the color of the sound.

When I recorded with a rock band I found out that the bones, like crumpling paper, "take" on a recording. Since then, whenever I've done any recording, I usually choke the stationary bone.³ But even then they stick out. The people at the controls have to turn the bones down. It's surprising. So these are all the ensemble considerations. Sometimes I've kept the same idea in mind when I've played Lamb's

¹A well-known folk musician, originally from Ann Arbor.

²A technique used to change the timbre and dynamic level of the bones. (See Chapter II, Varying Tone Color and Pitch, #1, p. 91.)

³The bone held between the first and second fingers is raised so that there are approximately two inches of the bone below the second finger and approximately three and one-half inches of the bone above the second finger. (See Chapter II, Varying Tone Color and Pitch, #3, p. 93 for a photograph and further explanation).

— Ragtime Nightingale. I used a white pine bone and a balsa bone for a soft-shoe effect.

BL: What sorts of things do you consider when you're preparing to perform a particular piece?

PD: I don't quite follow.

BL: When you've worked with me on a particular piece, you've said, "Here's a nice place that invites a change of texture. There, 'X' would work better than 'Y.'" How do you go about deciding things like that?

PD: I guess just down inside of you something says, "This sounds like this and it would be swell to have this kind of something to go with it." Either that or a counter rhythm. It's just something you kind of have to feel.

BL: Have your ideas of what is appropriate to play with certain kinds of music changed over the years as you've played?

PD: Yes. I think they're more refined. I've thought so deeply into some of these things and the feel for rhythm patterns keeps growing; -- the feel for getting into counter rhythms instead of just following along with the music. There are two ways bones playing can be monotonous. One is to always play with the same kind of music--bing bing bing. That's the reason I like to go from Stoptime Rag to maybe Solace¹ then to "Irish Washerwoman." And then to another rag-- maybe a rag like Bill Bolcom's Old Adam Chicken Scratch, which is a blues kind of a thing. And then just something like "Turkish Rondo." O.K. That's variety of music. The other way bones playing gets monotonous is if your rhythms lack variety. A variety of music invites

¹Stoptime Rag and Solace by Scott Joplin.

a variety of rhythms and textures from the bones. Sometimes you want to follow the rhythm of the tune, and other times you want to play a counter rhythm.

BL: I'm sure when you first started playing with different kinds of music you would try different things.

PD: Of course when you first start out, the problem is to keep up with the musicians! And to do something, just something. Generally speaking, it was pretty much folk music at first. With the folk music you do something until you get tired of doing that and then you do something else. Oh, there's a variety of invitations, but not nearly as subtle as when you get into some other kinds of things.

BL: Do you think it's possible for somebody to overplay the bones, or to play several pieces so that it all begins to sound alike?

PD: That's one of the problems, I think. But I've gotten into situations where I have told the person I was playing with that this would be a good time for the guitar to take off. That's why I've showed audiences that when I'm playing with the guitar, I'm playing with the bones "off side," very quietly. Then the guitar player says, "O.K., Perc. Take it." Then I make the bones parallel¹ and the bones cut capers for a bit. When it's time for the guitar to come in again, then I quiet down. Now when I play "The Grouchy Old Man and the Cackling Woman" with Vincent Tufo,² I just play along and I only play with one hand because

¹The normal playing position. (For details see Chapter II, pp. 85-86.)

² When Danforth plays this tune, he makes the pitch of the bones high for the voice of the old woman and low for the voice of the old man. (For details on this technique, see Chapter II, Varying Tone Color and Pitch, *4, p.94.) Vincent Tufo is an Ann Arbor folk musician who plays the fiddle.

what's important is a decided change in the color of the sound. The patterns are as tricky as I can make them with one hand. Or something like the Stars and Stripes Forever. There's the low stuff with the trombones and the high part with the piccolo obbligato.

BL: Do you ever drop out completely in a piece?

PD: Oh yes.

BL: Then hop back in?

PD: Yes. It's all a matter of planning. That's why I like to work with a person and figure out what we're going to do rather than just to wing it all the time. We decide where I'm going to drop out; there are even times when the music, the instrument has dropped out and the bones just take off.

BL: That's primarily how you approach a piece. If you're going to have a performance you get together with the other performer and . . .

PD: Yes. I always try to! But until they've played with the bones, some people don't know that there's this potential, I mean that you really have a plan and can do a nice variety of things.

BL: You try different things and discuss a few options and decide how you're going to do it.

PD: Yes.

BL: When you perform the same piece more than once do you try to play it exactly the same way each time, or is it always different?

PD: I think it's different every time because every time it's pretty much improvised within a frame. But now with something like Mozart's "Turkish Rondo," I think that turns out pretty much the same each time because that's divided into such nice areas. You just feel like doing a certain thing when you get to a certain part.

BL: What different types of instrument combinations have you played with?

PD: I've played with everything from a symphony orchestra down to a jew's-harp.

BL: That covers quite a lot of territory! What types of pieces did you play with the orchestra?

PD: We played Rossini's La Danse,¹ Percy Grainger's Country Gardens, and I've forgotten what else.

BL: It sounds like you've done a variety of music.

PD: Oh yes . . . a real variety. And I've played with dance. Did you know Liz Bergmann? She was head of the dance department here at the University of Michigan. She's now in San Diego, I think. Anyhow, it's a long story. She heard the bones and I saw her about three years afterwards. This was in the kitchen in the old Ark.² She had heard the bones in the Power Center³ from up in the lobby and went over and peeked down. There I was with one foot in the footlight playing the bones. She had thought it was a tap dancer or something like that. She thought it would be swell with dance, so she said, "Would you be interested?" Of course I was interested! So Liz and I spent about three months just establishing rapport. It got to the place where, within a broad frame of reference, we established a program. We did four performances at the School for Dance.⁴

¹La Danse (French) or La Danza (Italian).

²A coffee house in Ann Arbor.

³A performance hall at the University of Michigan (U of M), Ann Arbor. The lobby has a balcony. Apparently Ms. Bergmann was on the balcony and heard Percy playing on the ground floor of the lobby.

⁴Danforth is referring to the Dance Department at the U of M.

BL: What sorts of things were you doing with her?

PD: Roughly what happened was that everything was dark, and there was a spotlight over here. I started playing the bones a little out to the back and then I walked into the spotlight, playing. Liz came in through the other door, obviously intrigued with what was going on. The place began to light up. I went on playing, but I first didn't notice that she had begun to swing into this dance. Very quietly I began to notice, "Gee whiz. I have company!" So I had just been "meditating" with the bones. I began to steam it up a little bit. We got to the place where we were really going round with this thing. She danced so hard she finally collapsed. Of course that surprised me; I didn't know what to make of it. So I moved over to where she was, but just did some little things to see if I could "bring her to" again. Played over her and she could see what was going on. She finally got up and we changed time signature and some of these kinds of things so she went into something else. It got to the place where, because we had done this, and were doing this, we'd both feel like doing the same thing next. That's what rapport does. She was surprised when she "came to" and saw me standing over her doing these simple little things. So she got up and backed off, but I talked her back. Then we began to dance. This was the way the thing was worked along; it was just a whole sequence of things.

BL: So there was somewhat of a plot or story line?

PD: Oh yes. We had in mind, again, a frame of reference and we just knew we were going to be doing something; there wasn't any choreography designed for it. It was just Liz and me and the bones.

BL: Have you worked with dancers since then?

PD: Yes. I've worked with the dance department, and the vocal department with Joan Morris. Every year for several years I've worked with her group. There are always a couple of numbers that we do. And I've worked with Mary Ellen Guinn¹ in the dance department. She teaches tap dance. We've done recitals with Joanie Morris. So the bones get around!

BL: Earlier you mentioned something about recording with a rock band.

PD: Oh yes. That was with a couple of rock bands. There was Rough Water String Band from Rochester, Michigan and the other was a local group. I have the recordings; they didn't come out very well.

BL: When you played with the rock bands, what kind of music did you play?

PD: Fast country kind of stuff; all fast and all loud.

I also recorded for New World Records.² That was minstrel show music. We got a vocal quartet in from Dearborn. They had once come out second in a national contest; they were good. This was Bob Winans' group. He teaches at Wayne State University.³ His thing is the banjo. He's done a lot of work on banjo and minstrel shows. Matt Heumann and Vincent Tufo also participated. So there was fiddle, banjo--that was a fretless banjo, which is kind of nice--tambourine and the bones and this quartet. We did minstrel show music. I think that record was supposed to have come out last October. We did this

¹Adjunct Lecturer in the Music Theatre Dept., School of Music, U of M.

²The Early Minstrel Show, 1985.

³Since January, 1987, Robert Winans has resided in Washington, D.C., where he works for the National Endowment for the Arts.

a couple of years ago. Of course I'm recorded and "TV'ed" at all these music and folk festivals I go to too.

BL: Has the record you made with the quartet been released yet?

PD: No, it hasn't come out yet.¹

BL: What sorts of things do you think about when you play the bones unaccompanied? How do you like to structure the performance to make it what you consider to be a good performance?

PD: That's a little bit subtle. I like to start out with something kind of simple and then elaborate on that a little bit. Then you just kind of think, "Well I've done this long enough. I think I'll do something else; I guess I'll do this."

BL: Do you ever change tempo when you're playing by yourself?

PD: Yes, especially from $\frac{4}{4}$ to $\frac{6}{8}$ time. It's nice to speed things up because you feel like speeding things up a little bit and then slow things down. Changing the color of the sound is nice too, to some of the real low and real high stuff.

BL: I know you and Nancy Udow² have done some improvised duets and we tried it once. What sorts of things do you consider in that context?

PD: What we've done is the same sort of thing I've done alone, I think. For example, I've done a stretch of just roll, then tried various patterns to see what works well with that and what doesn't. I've found that just as I can play two against three, for example, I can do the same kind of thing with a seven tap roll against three taps. I think we found out the other day that there's something kind of nice about

¹The recording was released in the fall of 1985.

²A member of the dance/percussion duo Equilibrium.

that. Of course we've played stretches and have found that certain things are nicer to listen to and be involved with. You gain a feel for what's going on, for rhythms and counter rhythms.

BL: When I improvised with you, the thing I noticed right away was that we were both listening to each other. Sometimes we'd play things that complemented each other; sometimes you would be more soloistic and I'd lay back, and then we'd switch roles.

PD: Yes. I think some of this stuff could be worked out so that it would really be nice, but we've never really gotten down to really nailing it down.

BL: When you teach somebody what to play, what things do you like to focus on? What things do you think are the most important right away?

PD: The big problem right away is concentrating on how to hold the bones. I think that's the toughest part. And there's the incongruity of hanging onto the bones and having such a limp arm. Your arm just has to be "sloppy relaxed." The simplest move you can make with the bones is the staccato tap. I've been torn between approaches from here on. I've tried teaching the tap with the other hand, then going through a lot of tap patterns. That seems to be very interesting to a person who is just beginning. However, there seems to be a lot of fun in getting the first rolls out of the bones too. Then you really feel like you're doing something. But if you learn the rolls and accented rolls with one hand, the question arises of whether or not you're going to teach the other hand to do the rolls too. There's a real sense of achievement in being able to hear that coming around with two hands.

In general this is the course I like to take. I think probably after a person learns the tap, it's best to do the roll with one hand right off the bat, then the roll with two hands. That's very encouraging. Then go back to the taps and do tap patterns, then taps and rolls and mix them up a bit.

BL: How do you try to teach somebody to play with music in an appropriate way?

PD: Essentially all of this teaching has been at folk festivals where I'll see the people for as long as it takes them to be able to rattle the bones with two hands. If they're at the festival the next day they come back for an updating. If several people show up, I work with them as a group. If just one person shows up, I have the person just "swing in" back in the background as I'm demonstrating the bones to the next group. That's kind of morale building just to be able to rattle the bones with the music. But I've never had an opportunity to work with people until I've been involved with you and Nancy [Udow]. I've tried several approaches with you two. We've played things together and both you and Nancy have been interested in having me play while you follow along, imitating what I play.

BL: Yes, that seemed a good way for me to learn what things you considered to be appropriate. It was also helpful to have you listen to me play alone and comment on how I did.

PD: This advanced kind of thing is relatively new. I've never really had a chance to work with people who were interested enough in it when I've been able to work with them.

BL: Have you ever considered using any kind of notation?

PD: Yes, very decidedly. I started making practice sheets about seven or eight years ago with half notes and eighth notes and so forth. But when I've been involved with somebody like Bill Cahn, that looks like music!¹

BL: He notates everything?

PD: Yes. But what I have done is just use symbols. For example, if you're going to do a roll for two beats, I've just made a wavy line in place of a half note. I've even considered that as a possibility for people I run across at folk festivals who don't have a musical background. When I talked about it with Bill Cahn, he said, "Well, in the front of the book you just include a page which explains musical notation." You can do that. I know we [BL and PD] haven't. I know it's like that in drum manuals.

BL: Yes. The exercises out of the book you're working on with him look similar to a snare drum book in that regard.

PD: Yes. He's a percussion man writing for snare drums. What's your reaction to his approach?

BL: For me, the notation tends to get in the way. As a classical musician, I was trained to use notation and for a long time was so immersed in playing the right notes at the right time that I wasn't listening to what was coming out. Playing the bones has helped me use my ears a little bit more. You first taught me the basic rudiments and elements, and then we began to play with music. I'd go home and practice by myself, try out different things, and come back and play

¹Bill Cahn, member of the professional percussion ensemble Nexus, is currently working with Danforth on a bones instruction book.

for you again. That seemed to work real well for me. I get the feeling that there's not a right way and a wrong way to play with music, but that perhaps some ways are better than others. It's like jazz improvisation in that regard. You just have to experiment and find out what you think works well for you.

PD: Nancy [Udow] and I have played around with a series of signs, a sign for a seven tap roll, for example, and you do it a particular length of time.

BL: Do you think notation would be helpful for someone who is just learning to play, as well as for someone who already plays quite well, but for some reason wants to play a particular piece the same way every time?

PD: What I had in mind was using notation so that a player could play something the same way every time. I also think a good use for notation would be in conjunction with the kind of thing I've been working on writing [i.e. an instruction book]. I'd like to have a tape to go with it. Many people wouldn't be able to read a stretch of Mozart's "Turkish Rondo." I'd like to try using a set of symbols which would work the same way as notation for guitar players and ukulele players; you just have a series of chord symbols. You play a "B^b" chord until you get up to here where it says to play a "C" chord. Instead of using chord designations I would use symbols which indicated particular bones rudiments.

BL: I think that's a good idea.

PD: That's what I want to work on. Some of this stuff is a bit nebulous because all of a sudden the interest in this bones thing has become much more sophisticated. There are people like you and like

the people in the School of Music¹ who are interested in the bones, who see the same potential that I have seen in them. What do you think about the use of symbols like that?

BL: It would depend on what my intentions were. If I were playing folk music with a fiddler, for example, I wouldn't want to use notation. Improvisation would be more appropriate. But if I were working in a situation in which it was crucial that I play the same rhythms every time the piece was performed, then I think notation would be quite helpful.

PD: The question would be whether or not it would be music notation or sign notation.

BL: If I had to do the actual writing, I would prefer sign notation. It would take much longer to write down bones rudiments using music notation. Also, sign notation would be easier to read; the page wouldn't be so crowded. But if the bones part was rhythmically complex, music notation would have to be used.

PD: The kind of notation I'd like to use would tell a player, "You do a roll from here to here, an accented roll from here to here, with accent marks. You do it from here until the sign changes." It seems to me it would be less cluttered than music notation.

BL: In the course of playing one song, you do play a lot of notes. If you wrote all those notes down it would take up quite a bit of space. I'm transcribing several of the pieces that you and Neely Bruce did. For a two-minute piece, I have several pages of notation.

¹At the U of M.

Have you ever considered playing with a contemporary ensemble, an ensemble that plays twentieth-century music?

PD: That gets kind of rough. I suppose a person could dance to those kinds of things all right, but I think it would be kind of rough.

BL: Some of them, yes. But I can see the possibility of someone writing a part in a contemporary piece for the bones. In a situation like that, you might have to use notation. I think the bones are a legitimate percussion instrument. I don't see why the bones couldn't contribute to a piece of music like another instrument could. They have a distinctive sound; I wouldn't want to rule the possibility out.

PD: Oh no. I should say not!

I don't think I've told you that the people in the Library of Congress are constantly watching for bones material. The only material they've turned up I've turned over to you. Pauline Norton¹ turned up a Sousa march. It has bones like that [music which includes a part written for the bones]. But nobody has ever gone in for the bones.

BL: It's interesting anyway. Maybe someday somebody will write for the bones. I don't think they have much exposure, so people don't know they're around. You certainly don't find bones mentioned in orchestration books or anything like that!

PD: Bill Albright, six or seven years ago, was going to write something for the bones. If somebody like that begins to wonder about it, it's a little hard to put a finger on it. Now the bones do an interesting job

¹A former librarian at Clements Library, U of M.

a cappella. It would be swell now to have a little music stretch come in and then back again as you were proposing a little bit ago.

BL: What sorts of possibilities do you see for the bones in the future?

PD: I've wondered about duets, or even a trio--two or three bones players. If something like that is not carefully designed, it's going to sound just like it sounds at a folk festival when a group of people are learning to play the bones--it's going to be chaotic clatter.

Bones and bull fiddle and guitar make a beautiful combination. John Foster¹ plays the bull fiddle and Julie Austin² plays the guitar. The bones are kept at just the right dynamics; they just keep the right color of sound. When we were talking about duets and trios with the bones, I was reminded about how nice a bull fiddle sounds with the bones.

BL: Just by itself?

PD: Yes. Really, really swell. I've been thinking about the possibility of different colors of sound. Now maybe one, a bass line, so to speak, could be low register bones and be relatively simple. And then alto and soprano parts with the bones.

BL: Now that's an interesting idea.

PD: Probably the low part would be kept very simple. And then the other two parts would be like what we were doing the other day together,³ but beautifully designed so that it isn't going to sound like that mess at the folk festival I was describing. I see some

¹A double bass player living in Ann Arbor.

²An Ann Arbor folk musician who plays guitar and fiddle.

³Several days before the interview took place, PD and BL had done some improvised duo playing.

possibilities. Also, it's been nice when I've played with Greg Ross¹ up at the Michigan Union at Christmas time. We played Italian music from the Renaissance. He played guitar and I used finger cymbals in this hand and the bones in the other. There are all kinds of possibilities. Of course I have a three-hole penny whistle and I'm going to send away for one of these South American pipe things, like pipes of Pan.

BL: To play with the bones?

PD: Yes. But the trouble is, the bones don't have an opportunity to do things when there's just a one-handed bones player playing.

BL: I also wanted to ask you why you consider the bones to be a worthwhile pursuit. Many people wonder why it's worth the bother.

PD: As far as I'm concerned, I get the same feel out of the bones as I get out of dance. If you like to dance, you like to play the bones. And the nice thing about the bones is that not only do you hear the patterns but there's the kinesthetics of the thing. I don't know of any other instrument, although I watched Rob Conway last night down at Kerrytown.² And my, he was really enjoying the kinesthetics of playing the piano! (chuckle) I guess if you really get into these things you can feel them all over.

Incidentally, I've been wondering about this. You know Nancy [Udow] has been working with deaf people. Have you seen people at-- folk festivals is where I keep seeing them--somebody who is doing sign language for deaf people?

BL: Yes.

¹A classical guitar player living in Ann Arbor.

²Robert Conway, Ph.D. in Piano Performance from the U of M, was a student at the time of the interview; Kerrytown is a market area in Ann Arbor, including a small concert hall.

PD: I've watched some of those people who do beautifully--it's just like a lovely dance to watch them. Nancy has talked about the fact that she has worked with these deaf people and it occurred to me the other day to remember that I lived three or four blocks from Gallaudet College in Washington. That's the national school for the deaf. I went to high school with Percival Hall, whose dad was the president of Gallaudet, so I used to be invited to their dances and basketball games. I had deaf friends I used to call on. When I'd call on one of my friends, I would announce myself by pulling a handle that came out of the wall. On the end of the handle was a rope that went over the sashway. I'd let go of the handle and a weight on the other end would drop and make the floor vibrate. If it did this he knew I was there. At their basketball games they had cheerleaders. But their cheers were all stomping rhythms and the cheerleader leading them. It occurred to me that deaf people might be very much interested in being able to feel what goes on in the bones. And so the other night I plugged my ears full of modeling clay. And you know, I couldn't hear the bones, but I could feel all these things that were going on. So who can tell? When Nancy¹ comes back she's going to experiment a little bit. So this is another avenue.

BL: So you basically play the bones because it's something you enjoy doing?

PD: Oh yes. I like doing it. I like the sound of it. I like the feel of it, I like the potential, this business of changing, controlling the dynamics,

¹Nancy Udow was out of town at the time of the interview.

the color of the sound, rhythm patterns, time signature--you just get involved with all these things. It isn't just like hearing a clock tick.

BL: Do you see the same value in studying the bones as in studying any other instrument?

PD: I think you ought to have the answer to that! (chuckle)

BL: I think it is. I tend to look at it as a real instrument that you can play musically. If that's all you play, you can consider yourself a musician.

PD: Well, that's all I play.

BL: I consider you a musician; you're not someone that just makes noise.

PD: Thank you, Beth. As far as I'm concerned, the bones are a musical instrument. They're being recognized more and more as a musical instrument by people who are in music. Now the thousands of people I come in contact with at folk festivals are not people, generally, with music backgrounds. The bones are just something you rattle and do things with. But occasionally a few musicians come along, and boy are they fascinated! But they still don't know the possibilities or the real potential of the bones. You can't get all that across in just a visit to a folk festival. You can do a lot of talking, and a lot of demonstrating, but not nearly enough to get somebody from "here" to "there." You can get them started. Then it seems difficult for people, even with musical backgrounds, to realize the potential, to know what to do.

BL: In my early classical training as a musician, I wasn't encouraged much to develop my own interpretation of what was on the printed page. Learning to play the bones was a different kind of music making. I wasn't looking at music at all; I was listening to it and deciding how

to put things together. Playing the bones was a new kind of musical experience for me.

PD: Yes. I've seen so many people get hopped up about some simple little thing, especially in the field of education. I was a school marm for ten years. And I saw people who would get a little idea. "If that's true, then this is true. If these things are true, then this must be true." So they get off into the boondocks somewhere philosophically, and get so wrapped up with all this crap that they would write books about it and all this kind of stuff.

I've had some slight misgivings relative to my enthusiasm for the bones. There are two things I'm really wary of: one is that here's a white-haired old bunny that comes out on the stage with a couple of pairs of sticks. Now I do these things and there's enthusiasm--standing ovations and all this kind of stuff. Back in the back of me somewhere there's always this question: Is this all because a white-haired old bunny is doing this thing, or is this because of the bones? What I'm interested in having them appreciate is the fact that here's an instrument that's doing swell things, no matter who does it--not because some old guy is doing it.

BL: I think your personality definitely lends something positive to your performances. It's always enjoyable to hear someone play, but I noticed at the hospital¹ that people really liked to watch you play and listen to you talk, maybe because they were more your age than they were mine and they could relate to you. Perhaps they thought you had

¹A reference to a performance by PD and BL at an Ann Arbor hospital for a group of senior patients.

some of the same problems they did, yet you were having a good time, doing all kinds of things.

PD: See, that's it. You were doing the same things I was doing.

BL: But I think the personality of the musician lends a lot to what comes out in a performance.

PD: Oh yes. Some actors are successful and some aren't.

BL: Yes. I think that's important. I guess that's why musicians are individualistic. If everybody played the same way, then music wouldn't be much fun to listen to.

PD: That's right. I started way back in high school being in front of audiences. I like people.

BL: I can tell you do.

PD: I like to feel the reaction of people and modify the approach to keep 'em coming!

BL: I think that's something you do real well.

PD: But the thing I'm interested in is to begin to get the audience to recognize that, "Gee whiz. Here's a simple thing, like castanets are simple." Of course you can do a lot of nice things with castanets too, but not as much as you can do with the bones. The fact that the bones could have existed for so many, many centuries without anybody ever having recognized the potential of them is interesting to me.

You get into basically two kinds of situations when you play the bones with other musicians. One is the kind Bill Albright used to be. Did I ever play Echoes of Spring¹ for you?

BL: Yes.

¹A piano piece by Clarence Williams, Tausha Hammed and Willie "The Lion" Smith, 1935.

PD: When Bill Albright brought that out as a number for us to do, I could have given him a big hug. It's always been Dizzy Fingers, Kitten on the Keys¹ --just loud and fast. Now in Kitten on the Keys we did work in a little deviation from just tearing through. There was a session where I did a quiet section with the balsa bones. I used to use balsa bones for quiet sections in whatever I was playing. But I can play quietly now by manipulating the bones. I don't have to use one pair to play loudly and another to play softly. That's what I like to be able to do, just use one set of bones and do all the things that I do with them, without having to change bones. But I have to be careful about the selection of the bones.

BL: Most of the time do you play with your white pine bones?

PD: 99.99% of the time. But it's not only the selection of the bones that's important; there's also the matter of tuning the pairs.

BL: You like them tuned so that they're . . .

PD: . . . the same pitch. And I feel that that's very important, especially when you get into rhythm patterns where part of the pattern is played with one hand and part of the pattern is played with the other hand, like two against three. Unless they're the same pitch, you don't get the two against three pattern. Now I've tried four against five. But that gets to be too complicated. Two against three you can feel as a pattern. But you get a little bit more than that and it gets to be hard. Maybe I haven't done it quite right.

¹Dizzy Fingers and Kitten on the Keys are piano works by Zez Confrey.

BL: Charlie Owen¹ gave a book to me that deals with polyrhythms; I should show it to you. It tells how to figure out how to play a certain number of beats against a different number of beats. You can figure it out mathematically, but when you get thirteen against fifteen or something like that, you just have to know what it sounds like; there's no way you can accurately count the beats of the rhythm if it goes very fast.

PD: But how does a listener react to thirteen against fifteen or something like that?

BL: There probably aren't very many people who would know it's thirteen against fifteen.

PD: Is it a nice pattern to listen to?

BL: I would say it's a bit cluttered for the kinds of things you're interested in. But there is three against four (demonstrates) and two against five (demonstrates).

PD: Some of those would be nice. I've never thought about two against five. The two against three, it seems, works real well. I don't know to what extent you can sense two against five. But it sounds quite different. You can do all of those, two against five . . . ; I've never worked on them.

BL: I'll show you some time; they're not very hard.

PD: O.K. It just does my heart good to see somebody feel the same way about the bones as I have felt. You can imagine starting out where I started out with this thing.

¹A former professor of percussion at the U of M.

BL: You've really done a lot by yourself, coming up with all the elements, and starting to play with two hands.

PD: There have been people who have played with two hands, rattled with two hands. But nobody has ever looked at bones playing musically before.