



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 1, No. 1 1999

*When and where the bones were first made is difficult to say. In Western civilization the bones originated in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, made their way to ancient Greece and Rome, were brought to Western Europe during the Middle Ages, and eventually were brought to North America during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (from The Bones in the United States: History and Performance by Beth Alice Lenz, Master's Thesis, University of Michigan, 1989, page 227)*

## Executive Director's Column

I welcome you to this inaugural issue of the Rhythm Bones Player. September 25, 1999 was a historic day for bones players everywhere. After years of effort by numerous bones players the RHYTHM BONES SOCIETY came into being with 27 charter members. A literature search failed to find that any similar society has ever existed. Bones players now have some clout as we can speak with one voice. The purpose of the SOCIETY is to preserve and foster the development of this unique and age-old musical instrument. See details elsewhere in this news- letter about the SOCIETY and the newly elected Board of Directors.

BONES FEST III was a huge success

with bones players sharing their techniques, skills and instruments, creating new sounds and enjoying the camaraderie of everyone. It was the first time that many of the attendees had an opportunity to perform among their peers, a real challenge for some and enjoyed by all. For more pictures and details see Rhythm Bones Central (<http://mcowett.home.mindspring.com>) on the Internet. The event was also video taped by several and we have more than 10 hours of tape to edit into a one hour program which will be made available to members at cost.

Mark your calendars now for Bones Fest IV to be held during the 4th weekend of Sep-tember (22, 23 and 24) 2000 in Chattanooga, Tennessee.  
*Ev Cowett*

## Bones Fest III Highlights

Russ and Wilma Myers of Brightwood, Virginia were great hosts opening their almost one century old home to 25 bones players and their guests. The view of the Blue Ridge

Mountains from the deck, which served as the stage, was inspiring. Russ tolerated all deviations in procedure of bones playing, bells, rattles and dress. He opened the proceedings

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**Rhythm Bones Society Charter Members** (Photograph courtesy of Dave Boyles). From left to right sitting; Charlie Breeland, Al Cowett, Kevin Dunn and Deborah Brower. Kneeling; Ev Cowett, Steve Wixson, Tom Rice, Dan Cowett, Mel Mercier, Bonnie Chase (behind), John Cowett, Matteo and Dave Boyles. Standing; Ed Cox, Joe Birl, Vivian Cox, Spike Muhrer, Terry Carroll, John Cahill, Sally Carroll, Parker Waite, Russ Myers and Tommy Cowett (bending over). Not shown are Steve Brown, Martha Cowett, Jerry Mescher and Art Scholtz.

(Continued from page 1)

with a history of the bones and a demonstration of his own style which incorporates a sophisticated pitch changing technique.

The festival was structured into three parts. Part I gave each player a chance to introduce themselves and demonstrate their own style. Part II consisted of groups; specialty shows and free style group jamming. It was rumored that the racket was heard as far away as the mall in Washington DC. Part III of the Fest was a business meeting where the attendees, after much discussion, agreed upon forming an association of bones players. These formalities were followed by another hour of bones jamming, mostly to 1990's music where everyone contributed.

Although everyone present contributed much to the success of this event, several folks took the event even further:

Bones, Balls and Bells, Darryl "Spike Bones" Muhrer gave an abbreviated version of his show which represents American entertainment from the era of 1840 to 1940. He included singing, dancing, juggling, puppets and audience participation in addition to bones playing. Spike went from cow bones, in front of the pastured cows behind our host's house, to wood bones commonly used today. Later Spike was part of a spontaneous "Bones-off" with Black Bart the Wisconsin boner and rib bones maker.

Steve Wixson presented a review of Internet Bones sites accompanied by a CD with clips from many old time greats. In addition to playing the bones he also arranged a library of sorts, which displayed bone types, teaching tools, CD's, tapes, cassettes and historical items. Unexpected gifts from attendees who donated additional material created a (Bones Playing/Rhythm Bones) museum.

David "Black Bart" or "Bones Man" (depending upon the audience) Boyles, is a real bones maker from Wisconsin. He showed his secrets as to how to dress "the part", add humor, select a good animal, retrieve the right parts from the slaughter

house, boil them down, and make collectable bones with scrimshaw and silver tips. He shared a film of himself in a failed beer commercial. With the Bones-off with Spike he showed himself to be a great showman.

Martha Cowett our web page mistress, in addition to playing bones until she blistered her fingers, had her computer set up to demonstrate the Rhythm Bones Central web site to all who were interested. This web site is responsible for bringing many of us together.

John "Mr. Bones" Cahill, with a top hat and appropriate attire of the 1850's got everyone's attention. Playing with one long curved bone and one short flat thick bone in each hand, he created sounds of unusual quality.

Paul Duhon, an Acadian from Louisiana, was a real treat for everyone. His brother Willie retrieved him from a nursing home just for Bones Fest III. He played pieces of leg bone of a cow, which he had cut and polished to resemble narrow piano keys. Dan Cowett accompanied Duhon on guitar. Duhon wore a long red shirt which reached his knees where a wide white belt held up little patched britches under a huge stomach. His legs looked to be only 2 ft. long. When the music started he turned on like a light bulb with hands flying, bones clicking and body swinging as he danced and played to the sound of the music.

What a thrill to have four female bones players appearing. Sally Carroll was rookie of the year. Martha Cowett and Deborah Brown were experienced but Vivian Cox was one of the few professional players present. She plays at the Boggstown Inn and Cabaret in Boggstown, Indiana and in Branson, Missouri in Ragtime and Roaring Twenties Bands. She was a ball of fire at the Fest and never missed a click.

Bodhran, Bones and Bonesgrass music were on the scene with Mel Mercier from Cork, Ireland on Bodhran, Ev Cowett on bones and Dan Cowett on guitar. Mel brought an Irish flavor to the spirited music written by Dan and an excellent one-handed bone solo later in the day. Dan was also our sound man and cassette

## Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
mccowett.home.mindspring.com/

tape/CD coordinator.

Joe Birl holder of the Rhythm Bones® patent and Trademark gave us the story of making plastic Rhythm Bones, obtaining a patent and trademark and manufacturing and distributing them. It is a long story filled with many "almost made it's" which kept us on the edge of our seats. Joe never gave up. On top of that Joe is a great bones player with many tricks, historical bone trinkets and photos in his bag which he happily shared with us.

Matteo introduced classical castanets with a great performance by a world class percussionist. Bones players can all take a page out of his book to add to their repertoire.

Carl "Old Bones" Hedrick, Fincastle, Virginia who mixed bones and great humor; Tom Rice, Farmville, Virginia clicking to 1800's banjo music; Charlie Breeland, King William,

(Continued on page 4)



# Rhythm Bones Society Formed - Meet the Board of Directors

The Rhythm Bones Society was organized during a business meeting at Bone Fest III. Participants voted unanimously to form a non-profit society, and By-Laws were approved and signed by all present (see photograph on the page 1). The Society will sponsor an annual festival, newsletter, and website.

The purpose is to preserve, educate, communicate, and foster development of bones playing sounds and music. To distinguish musical bone players from archeological boners, osteopaths, trombone, domino and die players, and with the permission of Joe Birl the holder of the Rhythm Bones® trademark who attended the meeting, the association selected Rhythm Bones Society for its name and elected a Board of Directors and slate of officers. These include:

Everett Cowett - Executive Director. Ev grew up in Northern Maine and has been playing the bones since 1944. Ev is a retired Agronomist and has made his home in North Carolina for the past 26 years. He never met another bones player until 1995, except his five children who also play. In addition to sheer enjoyment from playing this ancient instrument the Cowetts' major efforts are directed to preservation of the bones through an Annual Bones Fest and their web page edited by daughter Martha. 1822 New Garden Road, Greensboro, NC 27410, 336/294-5332; e-mail: [evcow@aol.com](mailto:evcow@aol.com)

Russ Myers – Assistant Director. Russ was born in Baltimore, Maryland and graduated from Washington & Lee University with a BS in Foreign Service. He first saw the bones in 1942 when his father brought a set of wooden bones home from a Washington D.C. Board of Trade luncheon. He showed Russ how to hold them but said he couldn't teach him how to play. Russ bought his favorite set of ox bones from Kitt's Music Store,

Washington, D.C. in 1943. At his father's suggestion, he tried to copy the combined patterns of drummer and tuba players on Dixieland recordings. Russ played only for his own enjoyment, discovering his "pitch change" bit by accident in 1959. He made a recording for the Library of Congress in the late 1970's. A church social in the 1980's started his playing for civic organizations, etc. Russ is now considered the best bones player in South Brightwood beating out stiff and heavy competition a few moments ago. Box 43, Brightwood, VA 22715, 540/543-2368.

Steve Wixson – Secretary/Treasurer. Steve learned to play one-handed bones from his father during grade school, and until Bones Fest II never met another bones player. He is a retired Biomedical Engineer. Steve has carried out an extensive search for rhythm bones on the Internet. He will be a two-handed player by Bones Fest IV. 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mountain, TN 37377, 423-886-1744, e-mail: [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net)

Steve Brown – Board Member. Steve was raised in Massachusetts, and was inspired by his brother to play drums at an early age. He played rock and roll, and jazz through his teenage years, and later developed a strong interest in folk and traditional music. Also through his brother, he was introduced to Percy Danforth in 1978. Percy not only taught him to play, he gave him wooden bones to sell. He helped bring him to the New England Folk Festival in 1986. He has played bones all over the Northeast, and is a featured performer on a recent recording by Ryan Thomson, "Newmarket Duets". In 1983 he began making bones from polished cow bone. He has also worked with several wood workers to produce wooden bones, and has sold and taught bones at various folk festivals in the Northeast including: the New England Folk Festival, the Nomad Festival, and The Eisteddfod

Festival of Traditional Music. He works as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. He is married and has two children. He sees the key to the preservation of bones in two ways, education, and acknowledgement of our past and senior players. 36 Royston Road, Winchendon, MA 01475, email: [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com).

Sally Carroll – Board Member. Sally's introduction to bones playing was at the Mystic Seaport Museum. A woman was sitting near a featured sea chantey singer doing this marvelous thing! Sally approached the woman, Alison Reilly, and was shown the bones and given a demonstration. Since it was obvious to Sally that she had to learn to do this, it was fortunate that Alison's husband, Tim Reilly, makes real bone bones. Some weeks later her bones arrived and she began practicing, mostly with Irish, Scottish, other Celtic music, and early reggae. She plays at sea chantey singalongs. Sally is a voice on the Board for new bones players. 11661 Charter Oak Ct, #102, Reston, VA 20190, 703/471-4290, email: [heysailor@crwmail.com](mailto:heysailor@crwmail.com).

Mel Mercier – Board Member. Mel Mercier was born in Dublin where he lived with his parents, three brothers and six sisters until he moved to Cork in 1986 to study for a Degree in Music. He has been playing bones and bodhran for 30 years and got his first lessons from his father, Peadar Mercier, who played with the Chieftains until 1976. Mel received his MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles in 1991 and is a fulltime lecturer in Irish Traditional Music and Ethnomusicology at University College Cork. He performs, records and composes regularly and recently began research into the bones playing tradition in Ireland. He hopes to write his PhD dissertation on this topic. His greatest hope, however, is to be able to play two-handed style bones at Bones Fest IV in Tennessee! Music

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Cork, Cork, Ireland, 352-21-902271,  
email:

mmercier@mail.wesleyan.edu.

Jerry Mescher – Board  
Member. Jerry is a farmer on a  
beautiful farm in Western Iowa. He  
learned to play the bones from his  
father, and with his father won the  
Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour  
when he was 10 years old. Jerry is a  
National Bones Champion having  
won the Bones Contest which has  
been part of the National Traditional  
Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa for  
24 years. He conducts bones  
workshops and makes and sells  
bones (preferring ebony). Box 25,  
Halbur, IA, 51444, 712/658-2211,  
email: smescher@netins.net.

*(Continued from page 2)*

Virginia who promised to prepare  
for Bones Fest IV; Tommy Cowett,  
Richmond, Virginia playing bones  
like a rock drummer at a concert;  
Parker Waite, Sedgwick, Maine with  
bones hip hop; John Cowett,  
Wilmington, North Carolina first

solo; Kevin Dunn, Farmville, Virginia  
singing and playing bones to Irish  
music; Art Scholtz, Upton, New York  
with a bag full of tricks too numerous  
to mention; Bill Rough, Earlsville,  
Virginia who had to leave early; and  
the Swedish Rhapsody with Dan, Al,  
Tom, Martha, John and Ev Cowett  
playing with Percy Faith. It was a  
great day of sharing, caring and  
learning, not unlike a family reunion.  
A weekend to remember!

### Rhythm Bones Y2K Compliant

A survey of leading rhythm bones  
makers revealed rhythm bones for the  
most part should continue to work after  
January 1, 2000 though some potential  
problems exist. If food is scarce, protect  
real bones from hungry dogs. If fuel is  
scarce, protect wooden bones from  
fires. If electricity fails and television  
stops working, bones will still work  
however excessive play could get the  
bones player shot. And most important  
if communications fail there is a new  
millennium SOS distress call; a triplet,  
three taps and a triplet.

### Board Meeting Notes

The Board of Directors had its initial  
meeting following Bones Fest III. A  
newsletter including the use of color  
was approved, and Steve Wixson was  
appointed Editor. Dues of \$20 per year  
were approved to be due by September  
30 of each year. The fiscal year will be  
October through September of the  
following year. Officers will be elected  
at the annual meeting to be held in  
September, and will take office  
immediately. This was not discussed at  
the general business meeting of  
members and is an editorial change to  
the approved By-laws subject to  
approval by membership at the next  
annual meeting. The Board authorized  
the purchase of the name  
[www.RhythmBonesCentral.com](http://www.RhythmBonesCentral.com) for the  
web site created by Martha Cowett.  
Chattanooga, Tennessee was selected as  
the location for Bones Fest IV to be  
held during the 4<sup>th</sup> weekend of  
September 2000.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 2, No. 1 2000

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*Bones History Tidbits*

*Reviews of Bones Instructional Resources*

*Where to Buy and How to Make Bones*

## Executive Director's Column

Welcome to 2K and the second edition of the RHYTHM BONES PLAYER. Interest in bones and bones playing has increased phenomenally since Bones Fest III and the publication of our Newsletter. I have heard from folks all over the world, many of who will attend Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga in September. We can thank Steve Wixson, editor of a great Newsletter and Martha Cowett our Web mistress for this.

To continue with a quality newsletter and expand our web page we will need your support and guidance. Please join the Rhythm Bones Society and encourage your friends to do the same.

The production of videotape excerpts from Bones Fest III is now complete and copies are being made. They can be obtained at \$12 for members and \$20 for non-members. This includes shipping and handling. Send your check to the Rhythm Bones Society, 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mountain, TN 37377.

Planning for Bones Fest IV has just begun. I have asked Steve Wixson to serve as Program Chairman. Russ Myers and I will serve with him and we want your input. Send your suggestions to any of us as soon as you can. We want Bones Fest IV to be the best ever. *Ev Cowett*

## Tribute to Percy Danforth

When Steve asked me to write a tribute to Percy Danforth, I felt honored. Percy was the person who passed on the art of bones playing to me. I have great respect for his artistry and a deep appreciation of his friendship.

I met Percy when I was a graduate student in percussion at the University of Michigan in the early 1980's. He not only taught me how to play the bones and helped me become a better musician, but also turned over to me all information he had collected on the bones over the years. I chose the history and performance practice of the bones as the topic for my master's thesis. The information Percy passed on to me gave me a solid starting point for my research.

Percy grew up at a time when the bones were still a household item. His father taught him how to play—with one hand only. Percy didn't do much with the bones until many years later when his wife took a musicology class. The bones came up in class one day and no one knew what they were—with the exception of Percy's wife. She volunteered him to come demonstrate for the class. After deciding that playing with one hand wasn't impressive enough, he practiced until he could play with two hands. From then on, he was always a two-handed player.

Percy's classroom demonstration quickly led

to local performance opportunities as interest in the bones grew. Soon he was flying from coast to coast, attending folk festivals to give workshops on the bones and to perform with some of the top folk musicians of the day.

Percy's performances with great musicians were not limited to the folk arena; he played

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Photograph of Percy Danforth from his video 'How to Play the Bones,' by Lark in the Morning, www.larkinam.com, 1989.

## Editorial

As a new Society, we will struggle to find our way, and if there is a way for us the Society and this newsletter will be around for many years. I solicit your help by submitting articles for the newsletter, letters to the Editor and informal messages to me or Board members with suggestions and concerns (preferably in electronic form). This is your Society, so 'sound off' as to what it should be doing.

The membership application form includes an optional survey that will help the Board understand who and what are today's bones players. The information collected will not be distributed, and only statistical summaries will be printed in the newsletter. Please take time to fill out this survey.

I have been asked why is *age* on the survey. One of the goals of the SOCIETY is to preserve bones playing for future generations, and we will analyze age to see if bones players are mostly old or a healthy mix of young and old. If we discover that bones players are older then we should begin discussions on how to get young people interested in playing the bones (see *Getting Kids Started* by Bill Rexroad in this issue). Maybe we should do this anyway. Anyone have ideas or experience? *Steve Wixson*

## Letters to the Editor

### Dear Editor,

Rhythm Bones Society...RBS, pronounced "RiBS", eh? That's great! And so was the first newsletter. Enjoyed the report on Bones Fest III--sure wish I could have been there. Chattanooga's only a day's drive for me so here's to Bones Fest IV! My membership application & check are in the mail. Best regards and happy turn of the century! *Ellen Stern*

### Dear Editor,

Sign me up! I am 70 and have been playing bones since I was 8. Joe Birl sent me a copy of the Bones Fest III report. It was great - I really enjoyed it.

You may not know that since I could not make Bones Fest III, Ev Cowett suggested I contact Don DeCamp from Iowa who was playing at Six Flags Over Texas on 25 and 26 September. Well I did go over to meet him and ended up playing

bones with him for 2 days. It was all blue grass and about wore me out. We had a fest of our own, and I cannot remember when I have had more fun. DeCamp is one fine bones player.

I marked Bones Fest IV on my calendar and will be there for sure. *Walter Watkins, Arlington, Texas*

## Getting Kids Started

**A Prediction:** There will be an outbreak of bones playing in the central United States in about ten years, possibly sooner. Why? Because thousands of kids have been exposed to bones playing in recent years, kids who had never heard of them before, let alone see or hear them. Their excitement upon hearing the bones makes me believe that some of them will take up bones playing as they grow older. It happened to me. The memory of seeing someone play the bones when I was a kid was what got me started later on.

For the past ten years I've been doing a program for kids called Mr. Bill Show. It is a program of songs and stories that I perform at schools, libraries, and festivals. The highlight of the program, the part that people always exclaim about, is when I play the bones. Kids always come up afterward to ask questions about the bones, and to ask to hold them. Their parents do too. To make a more lasting impression of the bones, I make a whole little program of that part of the show. It goes like this:

I hold up the bones and ask if anyone knows what they are. Usually no one does. They guess that they are Popsicle sticks, or chopsticks, or tongue depressors. Then I rattle the bones a little and someone will say they are clackers, or some kind of musical instrument. That is when I tell them they are bones. We have a short discussion of where bones come from (from animals), and this serve as the lead-in to a poem I tell them about the bones and how I came to play them. The first part is true.

One time when I was just a boy,  
I saw a man who played  
A funny looking instrument.  
'Twas something that he'd made.

He called them "bones." They had no tone,  
But he made music with them.  
He shook them to a band nearby  
And brought out all the rhythm.

The story goes on to tell about how I

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## Rhythm Bones Player

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Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
<http://mccowett.home.mindspring.com/>

## Bones Calendar

August 28-September 3, 2000. National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests including 25th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest on September 2nd and a Bones Workshop the following day, Avoca, Iowa. Contact Jerry Mescher (smescher@netins.net) or the RBS at the address on Page 4.

September 22 & 23, 2000. Bones Fest IV. Chattanooga, TN. Contact Ev Cowett (evcow@aol.com) or the RBS.

## David Letterman's Video Collection

David Letterman, during a Late Night television show in December showed a small portion of Percy Danforth's *How to Play the*

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(Continued from page 2 - David Letterman)

*Bones* instructional video during his Video Collection segment. This is quite a coincidence since an article on Percy was planned for this issue last November. How in the world could he find such an obscure video?

## Bones Websites

The internet is not rich with bones playing information, but sites like those below will be listed each quarter. Check out these:

<http://www.geocities.com/Nashville/1856/walkaround.html>. Start here and follow the links to learn about Minstrel music of today and yesteryear. In addition, Norm Conrad is a one-man minstrel show and John Cahill played bones in Dr. Horsehair's Old Time Minstrel Band. <http://baymoo.sfsu.edu:4242/15120>. The Percy Owen Danforth Memorial Garden website is dedicated to the memory of bones player Percy Danforth.

## Recorded Bones Music

Reviews of recorded bones music will be printed in each issue. Submit reviews of favorite bones recordings.

Did you hear bones in the movie *Titanic*? Aaron Plunkett played them in the background music as Kate and Leonardo made their way to the car love scene. See [www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/palladium/7205](http://www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/palladium/7205) for information about Aaron.

Percy Danforth played the bones on *The Early Minstrel Show*, New World Records, 80338-2, [newworldrecords@erols.com](mailto:newworldrecords@erols.com). Hear bones virtuoso Danforth in authentic rendering of minstrel music. Extensive liner notes by producer Robert Winans.

## Bare Bones

Nick Driver, renowned English bones player from a bones playing family, donated a copy of his album *Bare Bones* and gave permission to distribute copies to RBS members. The bones playing is great as are the liner notes. Send a request to Steve Wixson ([wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net)) or the RBS to receive a copy.

## Bernie Worrell wins Avoca Bones Contest

Bernie Worrell won the 24th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at the National Traditional Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa on September 4, 1999. This is the longest running contest of its kind in modern times. In earlier years there were separate Bones and Spoons contests, but with a declining number of players of each type, the two contests were combined resulting in a secondary contest to see which is better—bones or spoons. The spoons won in 1998.

The Festival is a spectacular celebration earning commendation as being the number one festival most representative of traditional values, entertainment and education by the National Geographic Society. It is full of fun and excitement, and what our forebears gave to this generation is passed on through this festival.

The National Traditional Country Music Association which sponsors the festival is a non-profit group dedicated to the preservation of America's great musical heritage. In addition to the festival, they publish the *Traditions* magazine, and sponsor the *Pioneer Music Instrument Museum* and the *Old Time Fiddler's Hall of Fame*. Bob Everhart is the Director since its founding in 1976. For more information write to NTCMA, P.O. Box 492, Anita, IA 50020, 712-762-4363, email: [bobeverhart@yahoo.com](mailto:bobeverhart@yahoo.com)

The festival is a seven day event. There are ten stages, over 600 performers, over 100 stage shows, over 30 contests including guitar, singers, dulcimer, storytelling and harmonica to name a few. Previous Bones winners include Jerry Mescher, RBS Board member and brother of Bernie Worrell herself now a RBS member, Jerry Barnett and Donnie DeCamp. There are also over 60 workshops, and Jerry Mescher has conducted the bones workshop for the past few years. Steve Wixson attended last year and made a video for RBS.

Bernie carries on a family legacy of bones playing. Bernie's dad was 10 years old when he saw someone playing what he later learned were the

bones. Mr. Mescher had to figure out by himself how to play the bones. He used bones purchased out of the Sears catalog and the family's player piano for accompaniment. Bernie never learned to play the bones while her father was alive, but one day in 1970 she sensed her dad's presence, and picked up the bones getting something out of them for the first time. Bernie got serious about bone playing after she found an old player piano and while pumping it and playing the bones she felt like she was reliving another era. Bernie likes ragtime piano, Dixie Land, polkas and bluegrass music. *Jerry Mescher*

(Continued from page 2 - Getting Kids Started)

went to the zoo and asked some of the animals to give me a bone. They did, and I took them home, got their shape "just right" and practiced until I could play them. It ends this way:

So now I'm going to play the bones  
Especially for you,  
And maybe someday down the road  
You'll want to play them, too.

Then I turn on a tape of old-time music and play for them.

Another way I introduce the bones to kids is to present school programs just about bones. This is usually for a music class in elementary school. I explain where the bones came from, how ancient they are, and how they got to this country centuries ago. I show them bones made of different materials (wood, plastic, bone) and demonstrate how the sound differs from one material to another. Finally, I turn on the tape and play them.

Kids are fascinated by all of this. It is new to them, and it is exciting to them. And they remember it! Parents have come up to me at festivals to tell me that their kids still talk about seeing me play the bones years later. That is why I believe there will be an outbreak of bones players in the not-to-distant future. As I tell them in the poem:

Nowadays I take them everywhere  
And play them all the time.  
But I never have forgotten  
How it started, in my prime.

Every time I play these bones,  
I think about that man  
Who played them years ago for me,  
And made me think, "I can."

*Wm. D. Rexroad, Storyteller of the Plains*

This is your last complimentary Issue.

The Rhythm Bones Society sent the first two issues of the newsletter to everyone known to be a bones player (about 285 people). To continue receiving the newsletter please join with us by becoming a member. A Membership Application form is inside the newsletter.

*(Continued from page 1 - Percy Danforth)*

with well-known classical musicians as well. These included numerous performances with the professional percussion ensemble, Nexus, and with Joan Morris and William Bolcom, including performances at Lincoln Center.

Percy was constantly experimenting with new musical contexts in which to use the bones. He performed with symphony orchestras, classical chamber ensembles, a rock

band, and worked several times with dancers.

While the nation-wide resurgence of interest in the bones was due largely to Percy's travels and his willingness to share his craft, he also made technical contributions to the art. While it was common for players in the 19th-century minstrel shows to play with two hands, most players Percy met in his travels in the '70's and '80's played with only one hand and were what Percy referred to as bone 'rattlers' as opposed to bones players. He was instrumental in getting people to play the bones with two hands again, and also brought a higher standard of playing to the art.

Percy was a consummate musician. He played with other musicians in a way that supported and enhanced a performance. He listened carefully to what the other musicians were doing, choosing rhythmic patterns, accents, dynamics and timbres appropriate to the situation. He had a particular gift for placing rhythmic patterns and accents in just the right spot to bring a piece to life and let it sparkle.

Percy's playing reflected his greatest human qualities—his warmth, in-

Mark your  
calendar  
Bones Fest IV  
Chattanooga, Tennessee  
September 22 and  
23, 2000  
First Anniversary of  
Rhythm Bones Society

telligence, and generous nature. He radiated so much joy when he played that it was impossible not to smile when you watched him. We owe him a great deal for evolving his craft to such a high level and generously sharing his knowledge and love of the bones with so many people. *Beth Lenz* (Percy died on June 10, 1992, at the age of 92)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 2, No. 2 2000

## In this Issue:

Ted Goon, Mr. Goon Bones

Review of Fred Edmunds Bones Instruction Video

New name for Website

David Holt snapshot

Columns:

Executive Director

Editorial

Letter to the Editor

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Recorded Bones Music

Bones Calendar

Future Issues:

Paddy 'Sport' Murphy from Limerick, Ireland

Ronnie McShane, original bones player with Sean O Riada and Ceoltoiri Chualainn

Bones History Tidbits

Reviews of Bones Instructional Resources

Where to Buy and How to Make Bones

## Executive Director's Column

Interest in bones playing and the Rhythm Bones Society continues to grow. We now have over 70 paid members of the society with many more anticipated. The web page has been updated and given a new address (see article on page 4). Check it out. If you know of any bones player who has not joined the society please give them a call and encourage them to become a member.

Over the weekend of March 24-26 Virginia Public TV aired a special program on 5 TV stations which included a sketch filmed at Bones Fest III. Everyone who had the privilege to see the program was impressed. They did a great job. Copies can be obtained from Virginia Public TV for \$24.

Plans for Bones Fest IV to be held on September 22-24 in Chattanooga, TN are well underway. Steve Wixson, Program Chairman, has everything under control. There is much to do and see in Chattanooga. Some of us are going early and staying late. All registrants will receive a package of information about this

beautiful area.

Although plans are not finalized it appears that we will have a reception with light food and great music on Friday evening September 22 at Steve Wixson's home. This will give us a chance to get to know each other, make plans and form carpools for the weekend. Saturday the 23<sup>rd</sup> will be spent at the Mountain Opry house. Everyone will introduce himself or herself and demonstrate their bones playing technique, not to exceed 3 minutes. Two bones playing workshops are planned. One for beginners and a second for advanced players. Lunch and dinner will be provided.

After a BBQ dinner on Saturday night a special program will be presented by the more experienced bones players. Please contact Steve if you would like to present something special. On Sunday morning we are all invited back to Steve Wixson's home for coffee, donuts and more jamming music. At this time it appears that Bones Fest IV will be a truly international event. Don't miss it! Ev Cowett

## Ted Goon - Mr. Goon-Bones

Ted Goon, Mr. Goon Bones, was a recording artist during the late 1940's. He had many hits and rose to seventh on the Jukebox popular music charts. There were thirty or so Mr. Goon Bones clubs where people who owned authentic Goon-Bones gathered to exchange ideas and practice their bones playing.

I found Ted while surfing the internet. I telephoned him and after preliminary conversations recorded a two hour telephone interview. I was exhausted after the interview, and I wonder how Ted at age 88 felt. He sounded exhilarated, and played bones to illustrate his ideas.

Ted Goon was born in 1911 and at age twelve heard bones played at a tent minstrel show. He says "it was the most beautiful and sensational sound I'd ever heard.". He queried his father only to discover his father knew about bones. He carved Ted a set and showed him the basics. Ted made better bones and developed enough ability by his senior year to

(Continued on page 2)



# Editorial

This issue features my article on recording artist Ted Goon, known as Mr. Goon Bones. Ted says he achieved success as a bones player because he developed new techniques for the music of his time. If that is true, then his story is a lesson for us on how to preserve bones playing for our next generation. I mean have you tried to play the bones with all of the music that comes from the radio and television. Our youth like that music.

I am impressed with the 'tap' development seen slightly in Percy Danforth's and almost entirely in Dr. Fred Edmunds' instructional videos and the ambidexterity demonstrated by Aaron Plunkett (read a review of Edmunds' instructional video on Page 3). There is need and plenty of room for all of us to contribute. Let's try some of that more difficult music at Bones Fest IV. Any comments?

Martha Cowett writes about her web site and its new name. Part of your dues go to pay for this new name.

One purpose of the Rhythm Bones Society is to educate. What better way to do that than for the Society to produce a Bones CD. We can talk about it at Bones Best IV, and if there is enough interest we can set guideline for the music that should be included. Bring along a favorite bones recording, and maybe it will be included. We have to negotiate copyrights, but as a non-profit organization recording companies are likely to give us permission to use their works. Who knows, with bones popularity on a fifty year cycle, a bones album might catch on. *Steve*

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Boners,

Spring 2000 - time to be bone-again. I remember the weekend I spent with Percy Danforth at a university in La Crosse, Wisconsin. That weekend I went along as Percy's go-for, chauffeur and assistant. We discussed everything from music to his life as an architect. If anyone is interested, I will share some of our conversations.

I made my first appearance as a bones player in 1978 as Dr. Bones soon to be changed to Spike Bones when I discovered the theatrical character Mr. Bones of the 1800's. I have performed everyday since.

I request a spot on the Bones Fest IV program. *Spike Bones*

(Ted Goon—Continued from page 1)

play in the high school jazz band.

Ted went to college with the goal of getting into business. His hobby became golf, not bones playing. World War II comes along and Ted's right leg gets banged up forcing him into a long period of hospital rehabilitation. He knew his golf days were over, and needing a hobby he sent for his musical bones.

By this time bones had died out, and new music had come along. He needed a starting point to continue playing the bones, but for a time couldn't find one. But he lucked out at an old library where he found a definition of rhythm that was what he was looking for. Rhythm: a pattern of beats or accents repeated uniformly. He says it again: "Rhythm: a pattern of beats or accents repeated uniformly."

During his hospital stay to the enjoyment of his fellow patients, he practices becoming ambidextrous "to get the maximum ability to create patterns."

After the war he got readjusted into business, but this time could not forget the bones. He practiced to records, gave free performances at service clubs, churches, and the like which seemed to be appreciated. And there was a demand for bones at a reasonable price.

Ted started experimenting with different woods and plastics using professional sound equipment to evaluate the sound. He never revealed the wood he chose until now—maple from a section in northern Wisconsin. The shape and length came from his research on bones playing in England in the 1400's. He planned on making a fortune selling bones, and trademarked his bones as *Goon-Bones*.

Ted knew that to get into that market he would also have to get into the recording business. One night while on business, he stopped into a nightclub and heard an organist who was "unbelievably clever with his instrument." Ted proposed he would pay all expenses and split the royalties, and the two were in business. He selected *Sheik of Araby* and worked 80 hours on an arrangement.

While waiting for his Goon-Bones trademark, Ted was approached by a small recording company but told them it would be three months before his trademark would be issued and he would

(Continued on page 3 Ted Goon)

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 2, No. 2  
Second Quarter 2000

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
<http://www.rhythmbones.com/>

## Bones Calendar

June 24, 2000 Bones Workshop at California Traditional Music Society Festival, Molly Bennett and Michael Ballard teachers. ([www.ctms-folkmusic.org/](http://www.ctms-folkmusic.org/))

August 28-September 3, 2000. National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests including 25th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest on September 2nd and a Bones Workshop the following day, Avoca, Iowa. Contact Jerry Mescher ([smescher@netins.net](mailto:smescher@netins.net)) or the RBS at the address on Page 4.

September 22 & 23, 2000. Bones Fest IV. Chattanooga, TN. Contact Ev Cowett ([evcow@aol.com](mailto:evcow@aol.com)) or the RBS.



(Ted Goon—Continued from page 2)

be willing to record. One month later he heard *Sweet Georgia Brown* on the radio by Brother Bones. They had found another bones player and rushed a record to the market. Later Ted got to know Brother Bones, and learned that he did not receive a dime on that record. Brother Bones was first to have a hit bones recording.

The *Sheik of Araby* sold 400,000 copies when 200,000 was a hit. In those days the other side of the record, the B side, went along for the ride. Ted selected *Ain't She Sweet* and experimented with an exaggerated off beat and a new device called an echo chamber. Billboard magazine reviewed it, and said it was a virtual monstrosity. Later a disc jockey in St. Louis

## Recorded Bones Music

Blues 'n Bones, Master of Piedmont Blues by Archie Edwards with Richard "Mr. Bones" Thomas playing the bones. Mapleshade 56292. Archie's barber shop in Washington, DC was a collecting place for Blues musicians. Original and traditional songs with lots of

## Bones Websites

<http://www.nexuspercussion.com/>  
Nexus is an exciting percussion group from Canada. Russell Hartenberger is their bones player.

## David Holt

RBS member David Holt is a Grammy Award and four time Grammy nominee. He is known for his folk music and storytelling recordings, his numerous programs on TNN, Folkways on PBS, Riverwalk on public radio and for his popular concerts performed throughout the county. He has been collecting stories and traditional mountain music for over thirty years, many of which are included in his recordings and books. Ev Cowett has David's *Folk Rhythms* instructional video on spoons, washboard, bones, paper bag and hambone and says it is great. Visit David's web site at [www.davidholt.com](http://www.davidholt.com)

played it and it exploded selling one and a quarter million copies. A distributor in St. Louis ordered 200,000 *Goon-Bones*, but Ted was unable to produce them at a profit. Ted did sell about 20,000 sets of four bones with an instruction book during his career.

Ted signed with Mercury and made several other recordings. He was getting pressure to go on the road, and after two years gave up recording to stay with his family. Eight years later after his children were grown, Ted and his wife, who operated his professional sound equipment, went on the road for two years entertaining in high schools and small colleges and for a half year on a military tour to Alaska, South Pacific and the Orient.

Ted tells a story about the actor William Holden who was a goon bones player. Holden invited Ted and his wife over for lunch to discuss a joint partnership for recording and selling bones using a company Holden found in India that could make bones inexpensively. First Holden wanted to see Ted play bones, and Ted played to Tiger Rag. Holden looked sick as he assumed Ted dubbed all of those clicks and now realized that he could not be a recording partner. Ted never heard from Holden again.

Ted put his bones up except for an occasional demonstration for friends and family. When we recently contacted him, he said he was hesitant to get involved with bones again, but after thinking about it wanted to contribute something if he could. He says "It was a wild ride while it lasted. My hobby got way out of hand."

RBS sent Ted videos of Bone Fests I, II and III, and he was impressed with the talent displayed. Ted issues two challenges to us. First to develop new techniques for today's music which he says he can't understand. Second to play Tiger Rag better than he did. Tiger Rag will be played at Bones Fest IV as will his other recordings that still sound great.

Ted gave RBS a cassette of nine of his recordings, a copy of his instruction manual, two sets of *Goon-Bones*, copies of the covers of two of his hit recordings, and other materials. Those items plus a copy of his

recorded interview and a transcript of it will be turned over to the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress so future historians can view them. We will keep a copy for our informal library. *Steve Wixson*

## Dr. Fred Edmunds' Bones Instruction Video

The book and video start out with learning to hold the bones. Dr. Edmunds is quick to point out that this is the main difficulty people have playing the bones. From there he progress into very elementary rhythms, accents and pickup notes. He next moves on to triplets and quadruplets showing several methods of performing each. Following these rudimentary, mechanical, and developmental chapters, He starts mixing things up and showing some possibilities for creative expression on the bones which is where the value of his method lies. Finally he delves into the "off-beat," (syncopation) and ends the course with several showy licks.

The video is most helpful to see hand motions and how a particular passage should sound which could save countless hours of trying to figure something from just the book, particularly where accents and syncopation are involved.

Fred Edmunds was a percussionist. He was an excellent drummer along with being a bones player. Nothing irritated him more than to see bones playing as a never-ending series of triplets with the occasional quarter note thrown in-between them, he believed there is so much more to being an accomplished bones performer. I would highly recommend his course of study if you are curious to find what lies beyond the typical "click a de ick a de ick a de click" to quote the good doctor. Syncopation and accents mixed with the rolling of triplets and quadruplets is where it was for him.

This bones method is demanding and you need to bear with it in the order things are presented. Master one section before moving on to the next. If your perseverance and drive holds together, and a little creativeness kicks-in, you can become one of the great bones artists. *Tom Rice. Editor Note: After Dr. Edmunds' death, his widow sold his materials to Jim Meyer, 612-557-6866.*

## Web Site Gets New Name

'Dem Bones 'Dem Bones, 'Dem Rhythm Bones. Welcome to Rhythm Bones Central! Your host of this spot is Everett Cowett...

For a man who has just about everything he needs and the means to get what he wants what else can a daughter give her father for Christmas other than a web page of his most favorite hobby. That is how it happened, Rhythm Bones Central was created. I figured it would be fun for him; almost a novelty item and perhaps it would even entice him to get on that computer he just bought himself for no good reason and help him learn how to use it. Who knew it would actually do all that and really make a difference in so many peoples lives.

The purpose of the Bones page (other than the above mentioned stuff) is to educated folks on Bone Playing and to bring Bones Players out of the closet and off back porches together. So far it has worked better than I had

ever expected. Many old hobbies have been rekindled, new hobbies have been created and the best thing; many good and lasting friendships have been formed.

Those who have search around the site have seen that it is divided into eight sections: Introduction, History, Bones Players of Today, Rhythm Bones Festivals, Where to Buy, Clicks and Clacks and Rhythm Bones Society. My personal favorite section is Bones Players of Today. In this section I have posted small personal biographies and pictures of Bones Players who are proud enough to offer up the information. I love to get new names and post them. If you are not on there and would like to be please send me an email with your information and a picture. If you would prefer you could even send me your information and photo snail mail and I will scan your picture for you -no charge!

The page is being updated as often as I get to it, which I will tell is not often enough. However, don't let that discourage you from sending me more information that can be shared on the web. I will post it eventually, I

promise! I am so pleased with its progress. My personal goal for the page is to expand the Clicks and Clacks section, a miscellaneous catch all of the other stuff about bones playing section, so that it will be more topical, current and even perhaps have a chat section. But that is all to come in due time.

The page certainly would not be what it is today had there not been feedback and participation so; I want to thank all of those folks who have responded to the page regarding the content, Thank you! You have helped to make it a better site. I would like to encourage all of you who have not done so yet to submit a brief 3-5-sentence paragraph about yourself and picture to Bones Players of Today. And finally, I would like to encourage all of you who have not seen the site to go to a computer (most public libraries have at least one you can get on for free and they will help you...) and check it out! Thanx! Martha Cowett, Web Mistress @ <http://www.rhythmbones.com> Email: [mcowett@mindspring.com](mailto:mcowett@mindspring.com). Street address: 1822 New Garden Rd

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 2, No. 3 2000

## In this Issue:

Paddy 'Sport' Murphy

Review of Aaron Plunkett's Bones Instructional Video

Bones Fest IV Announcement

## Columns:

Executive Director's Column

Editorial

Websites of the Quarter

Recordings of the Quarter

Calendar of Bones Events

## Future Issues:

Highlights of Bones Fest IV

Remembering John 'Mr. Bones' Burrill

Summary of Membership Questionnaire Responses

## Executive Director's Column

It is time to get excited about BONES FEST IV to be held in Chattanooga, TN on Sept. 22-24, 2000. Membership continues to grow as well as enthusiasm. I ask each member for their help in three ways. 1) Send in your registration for the Fest by August 31 to help us ensure adequate food, facilities and transportation. 2) Volunteer to appear on the special evening program after dinner on Saturday Sept. 23. We need a few more volunteers to complete the evening event. It's going to be great. Be on the program. 3) Send in some items to Steve for the Newsletter. Don't be concerned about how significant you think they may be. Steve will select the most appropriate ones for the Newsletter.

Since our last meeting Board Director Sally Carroll appeared on CNN and other National TV stations (without her bones) as a sailor on the Tall Ships. I am sure she will be happy to talk about this at our September meeting.

During the summer I had the opportunity to play the bones with the lady Francis Fisher Dubai who introduced me to the bones in 1944 and have dinner with Elaine Conner, the lady who got me a TV spot playing bones in North Carolina which led me to Dr Fred Edmunds which led the way to our present Rhythm Bones Society. A great bones playing year for me.

For the September meeting I ask each of you to be thinking about the following items which will be determined at the business meeting:

- 1) Slate of officers and Board of Directors.
- 2) Location for Bones Fest V.
- 3) Date for Bones Fest V (we are not tied into a fall meeting).
- 4) How often the Newsletter should be published (this is a significant expense).
- 5) Any changes in the web page.

Please help us make bones activities the best ever. *Ev Cowett*

## PADDY 'SPORT' MURPHY

Paddy 'Sport' Murphy lives a mile or so outside of the town of Abbeyfeale on the Limerick/Kerry border. He is a well known musician in the area: known to many as a local 'character', and regarded as the senior bones player in the region. Paddy won the inaugural All-Ireland Bones-Playing Competition in 1997 which is held as part of the Abbeyfeale annual traditional music festival. He returned two years later to win the prize for the second time, and again in 2000. I met Paddy for the first time when I adjudicated the competition in 1997. It was difficult not to award him first prize: his performance was compelling and his musicianship obvious. That he was also the local favourite did not go unnoticed by me!

Paddy's commanding performance was not the only remarkable thing I witnessed that day. The competition was held outdoors on the back of a truck as the sun was setting on the town square. One by one the bones-players mounted the temporary stage to perform with a single tune-player, more often than not a local box player such as Donal



# Editorial

This issue features an article on Paddy 'Sport' Murphy by Board Member Mel Mercier. We are fortunate to have Mel as a member as he gives us a perspective on the important segment of Irish bones playing. Mel is currently working on his PhD with a thesis on bones playing.

This issue reviews Aaron Plunkett's bones instructional video as the second of a series that will attempt to review all of the currently available bones instructional videos. These videos will be available for viewing at the upcoming Bones Fest IV.

There were no Letters to the Editor

## Bones Calendar

### August 28-September 3, 2000.

National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests including 25th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest on September 2nd and a Bones Workshop the following day, Avoca, Iowa. Contact Jerry Mescher (smescher@netins.net) or the RBS at the address on Page 4.

### September 22, 23 & 24, 2000.

Bones Fest IV. Chattanooga, TN.

## Recorded Bones Music

Bob Flesher's Old-Time Minstrel Banjo. Download a sample of this tape (No. 403) and others at [www.drhorsehair.com](http://www.drhorsehair.com). Bob plays an old-time clawhammer banjo and RBS member John Cahill plays bones.

## Bones Website

[doublestop.com/barrybones.htm](http://doublestop.com/barrybones.htm). Barry 'Bones' Patten's website invites you to meet Barry and learn about his bones and his instructional video (that will be reviewed in a future issue). The website is part of his uncle Byron Berline's Double Stop Fiddle Shop website and you may want to visit it to learn about this great fiddle player and The Byron Berline Band. Barry and the band have played all over the country and he has appeared on TNN television. Barry is a RBS member.

(Paddy Murphy - Continued from page 1)

Murphy. The crowd grew steadily as the evening progressed. There were about ten competitors in all, and not one of them a 'chancer': each and everyone of them could play. I had never seen so many bones players (all male) in one place at one time: in fact I had never seen so many bones-players, period! As each one was introduced it became clear that even though the event was billed as the All-Ireland Bone-Playing Competition most of the players were from within a ten-mile radius of Abbeyfeale. Rumour had it that for the previous couple of days the rattle of the bones could be heard in fields in the townlands surrounding Abbeyfeale. And for hours before the competition began bones players could be found warming up in all of the several music sessions taking place in the bars of the town.

When the adjudication formalities were completed and the prizes presented, all of the competitors returned to the stage for one last set of tunes: one box player and ten or eleven bones players including myself. Paddy Murphy was obviously delighted, as were his large number of fans, and as we parted he put his hand into his inside pocket and produced a pair of bones which he gave to me.

I didn't see Paddy again until I went to visit him and interview him at his home in Ballaugh, Abbeyfeale in October 1999. I would have leave several hours later with another set of bones, this time made on the spot by Paddy from a single, long rib-bone that he found in a drawer in the kitchen. The following then is largely my representation of Paddy 'Sport' Murphy's story as he related it to me that day.

Abbeyfeale lies on the northern extremities of the Sliabh Luachra region, an area famous for its musicians, box and fiddle players predominantly, and for its music, especially the polka and the slide. Many of the names of the towns in the region, such as Knocknagree, Ballydesmond, Gneevgullia, Castleisland, and Scartaglin, also refer to tunes synonymous with the local repertoire, and they evoke for many the image of a vibrant, rich culture of dance and music. Legendary musicians such as the late Pdraig O Keefe, Dennis

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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Third Quarter 2000

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Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
[www.rhythmbones.com/](http://www.rhythmbones.com/)

Murphy and Julia Clifford, and the still dynamic Johnny O Leary are amongst the icons of what many consider to be one of the few remaining, identifiable regional styles of music and the dance in Ireland.

Paddy Murphy comes from a well known, local, musical family. Michael Murphy, Paddy's father was given the nickname 'Sport' on account of his being a good ste-dancer. He also played fiddle and was a contemporary and friend of the reknowned fiddle master, Pdraig O Keefe at a Feis in Abbeyfeale. Pdraig won and was presented with a cup while Michael was placed and received five shillings. Paddy takes up the story:

"So my father got five shillings anyway and Pdraig got a cup, a small cup and they went into the pub anyway. Pdraig was a great man for the pint. He says "Sport is there any chance you'd give me the five bob and I'll give you

(Continued on page 3)



(Paddy Murphy - Continued from page 2)

the cup. That is true. That's the way the times were that time. Five shillings was a lot. You'd get drunk nearly a week on it. Tuppence a pint, tuppence halfpenny that time."

Paddy's uncle Ned was a well known dancer and the family home, in which Paddy still lives with his wife, was a regular venue for music and dance parties. Paddy danced also, as did his brother and sister. He was about eight when he got his first set of bones. His father had heard somebody play them, a man called *Wingle* from around Newcastle West. From him Michael Murphy learnt how to make a set for his son. Here's how Paddy tells the story:

"My father was playing in Athea. My brother was playing with him. There were a ceili band. That time it was polka and set and *Seige of Ennis* and waltz. You hadn't any of the modern stuff that's there. And this old man used to come in and he would sit down on the stage...and he used to take out these bones. He used to have an old overcoat on him. God help us he was old, over seventy years and according to my father he said he never heard anything like him. And he was asking him about the bones and he told him that he should boil them first. File them down to your own liking, and there'd have to be a bend in the bones."

Michael brought some raw bones home and following instructions he boiled them and made a set for Paddy who was able to get a sound out of them after a week. Paddy makes his own bones now and says the best in terms of size and sound come from a two-year-old heifer. He told me about making the pair he plays now:

"I put them down above in a saucepan. There was a lot of meat on them and, I don't know is it two mugs of broth was had out of them. I brought them in and put them up near the fire. I didn't let them heat too much now, just to dry them out 'cos if you heat them too much a thinny sound comes out. If you boil the marrow too much you get a hard sound off them."

He spoke later about sensitivity to instrumental timbre with the group setting:

"If you have a keyboard there and you're on the wrong side of the key-

board the keyboard is louder than you. Or if you've a concert flute there with a high pitch, that's a way louder than you. And [it] depends then if you have a good set of bones that's soft. You can tune them down the same as you tune the strings of a fiddle. You can tune them up or tune them down the way you want, and you will drown nobody.

He acknowledges that not all bones players display this sensitivity:

"Some people don't respect players at all. They're off like a jet. They're gone and they don't care about sound or noise. They're belting away and [that] upsets players. You have to be balanced, [to] know the instruments you are playing with."

His own children, Ted and Mikey are musicians and with Paddy's brother, Maurice they had their own ceili band which played for dances and weddings. Maurice and Ted now both make violins. Paddy also played drums for twelve years with Julia, John and Billy Clifford, Denis Murphy, Pats, Liam and Bidy Moroney, and Noreen O Connell in the Start of Munster Ceili band. The instrumentation included fiddles, accordion, flute and saxophone. Paddy didn't limit himself to the drums however:

"I used play in the band, with the kettle drum. I'd have the bones in one hand and the stick [in the other]. I'd play the first part of the music on the kettle drum and I'd play the second part on the bones."

While Paddy never learnt to play a melody instrument he did pick up a lot of tunes which he can 'jig' or 'lilt'. He cites this ability as an advantage in his bones playing. He spoke in this regard about the bones-players obligation to *follow* the tune carefully:

"I know every tune. I have the music. I'd it all learnt from years back. I had to do it when I was younger."

When I asked him what he would be looking for in a good player he answered:

"Time! I'd be looking for time and to be putting in every beat, every triplet and long note that the player would play for you. You want a good player that knows his job. A greenhorn is no good as you know yourself. It's great

(Continued on page 4)

## Review of Aaron Plunkett's Bones Instructional Video

The video begins and ends with a very professional music video of Aaron playing bones on a large sailboat. He demonstrates how to hold the bones (Aaron prefers real bones) with the stationary bone between the thumb and first finger and then how to play a tap. The video has beginning, intermediate and advanced lessons based on Irish music though his techniques he says work with many kinds of music.

The beginning lessons begin with tap exercises with individual, alternating and both hands with both down and up beats. He then introduces the triplet again with exercises for individual, alternating and both hands. The section ends with review exercises and listening to similar sounds made by woodpeckers in the wild.

Intermediate lessons begin independent hand training with each hand playing different patterns. He begins with tap exercises to demonstrate the patterns working up to one hand playing continuous triplets while the other hand plays accents. He demonstrates how to use these patterns with single, double and slip jigs both with and without music. The section ends with listening to similar patterns made by horses.

Advanced lessons begin by applying these patterns to basic reels and related rhythms. More complex rhythms are introduced with a fast triplet hooked to a slow triplet with variations. There are more variations with hornpipe and jig rhythms. He contrasts playing the same rhythms with one hand and both hands. He demonstrates the polka rhythm, and cross cultural rhythms including African, flamenco, Cuban, Balkan and Indian, and advanced poly-rhythms. He concludes with an Irish dance piece.

His demonstrations are clear and the exercises well thought out. He uses words and phrases to help convey basic and complex rhythm patterns. This is a good video for a beginner or advanced bones player. *Steve Wixson, reviewer.* For information contact *Plunkett Productions, 818/569-5465, email pplk@aol.com*

*(Paddy Murphy - Continued from page 3)*

to have a good solid player bringing out every note and you have to put in that note with him (*Paddy clicks his bones*). That note has to go in and when he puts in the triplets in the fiddle or the [ac]ordion or flute you have to put in them aswell...and a lot of them there's two notes going in from the bar and they didn't put them in at all." Paddy when on the illustrate this point by lirting a jig for me.

One of the first things to strike me about Paddy's playing was his flamboyance. He says this come from being totally involved in the performance of the music:

"You are so much interested in your job. It's like you'd be going out dancing. You're so much interested in the music and the time and the players with you are interested in you aswell, and when you play with a person so long they know everything about you. They're spot on with you aswell: you can't go wrong."

He likened this total involvement in the performance to a kind of madness, something that was long ago referred to as St Vituse's dance:

"When a fella would be half mad. It's the same thing with the music. When I heard good music every bit of me shakes. I could find it going down like I'd be drinking whiskey or something, the tension would be so much."

Even when playing with several other instruments the bones draw attention to themselves. The instrument, the sound, and the gestures of the bones-player attract the ears and eyes of the audience.

The second year I adjudicated the competition in Abbeyfeale several children demonstrated their skill on the instrument before the competition proper began. Many of them are nieces, nephews and grandchildren of Paddy's. While he has formally taught some adults, these children have learnt by simply watching him play, often in Brown's bar in Abbeyfeale where he plays with friends in a session every Saturday night. Unlike many North American performers on the instrument he plays in the one-handed style, preferably while seated. His style is fluid and inventive, his timing 'spot on'. When the tune playing is charged and Paddy is in its grip, his free hand often swoops up to dance with his playing hand in a gesture that embodies

the 'lift' of the moment. No wonder then that Paddy is the inspiration for bones players, both young and old, throughout the region. Of his young acolytes he says:

"They picked it up themselves. They come in when I'm playing in the pub and they're standing there with their mouths open looking...go on grandad, go on grandad!" *Mel Mercier*

Mark your  
calender  
Bones Fest IV  
Chattanooga, Tennessee  
September 22, 23  
and 24, 2000  
First Anniversary of  
Rhythm Bones Society

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 2, No. 4 2000

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## Executive Director's Column

To say that Bones Fest IV was an outstanding success would be a gross understatement. You had to be there to hear, see and feel the excitement. Steve and Janet Wixson were superb hosts. I thank everyone whom attended and made Bones Fest IV so memorable (see highlights below). Steve Wixson has plans to make a BFIV videotape of the event by editing the best parts of many videotapes. If you have not already done so please get copies to Steve ASAP. The original camcorder tape is preferred and will be returned. Consolidating many hours of tape into a single piece is a major task, and in this case well worth it. It will be available to all members at a nominal cost and will surely be a collector's item.

Our web mistress, Martha Cowett, is preparing a summary with pictures for the <rhymbones.com> web page. If any of you

have pictures taken at BFIV which you feel would look good on the page please send copies to her. You can either e-mail them or send hard copy and she will scan them.

As a result of the Fest the RBS has gained several new members and I welcome them. For those of you who missed the event please plan to join us in Massachusetts during the first weekend of August 2001. It is not too early to mark your calendars. Steve Brown our 2001 host is still looking for the final site and welcomes all the help and support he can get. Suggestions for location, program and activities are requested.

The Rhythm Bones Society had 92 members during the 1999-2000 year. Now is the time to renew your membership for 2000-2001. Make your check payable to the Rhythm Bones Society and send it to 1060 Lower Brow Rd, Signal Mountain, TN 37377. May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

## Bones Fest IV Highlights

A HAPPENING, FANTASTIC, OUTSTANDING, WOW! LIKE A FAMILY REUNION, were typical of the comments received after Bones Fest IV. I was truly impressed with the quantity and quality of the bones players and playing at this Fest. Playing before a group of non-bones players is one thing, but playing before your peers is quite another. All participants were outstanding and don't forget the food, drink and partying at the Wixson home, the motel and its Irish Pub.

The wonderful reception given us on Friday night by Steve and Janet Wixson in their lovely home overlooking Chattanooga was a real bones 'click-off'. The musical CD arranged by Steve that had something for everyone was great and don't forget his BoneDrums (bones with sensors and switches that plug into a drum module). The pure sound of the bones will never be the same. Young rockers are sure to take up the bones now.

Since all 44 participants did so well and space does not permit me to review everyone I will sin and highlight some of those that turned me on the most. I did not see all of the

performances because of other activities so don't be offended if your name is not mentioned.

*(Continued on page 3)*



From left to right, officers Steve Wixson, Ev Cowett and Russ Myers performing together. *Photograph by Sharon Mescher*

# Editorial

Happy anniversary Rhythm Bones Society and Rhythm Bones Player. As measured by the quality of bones playing at Bone Fest IV, it has been a good year.

I thank you for your kind response to the newsletter during its first year. Vol 1, No 1 highlighted Bone Fest III and the 24 year old bones contest at Avoca, Iowa. Vol 2, No 1 paid a tribute to Percy Danforth whose playing and instructional video lead many of you into bones playing. Vol 2, No 2 on Ted Goon told the story of how Ted's success as Mr. Goon-Bones resulted from developing a new style of bones playing for the popular music of his time. And Vol 2, No 3 told the story of Irish player Paddy Murphy and the importance of having 'spot-on' timing.

I hope these stories have influenced your bones playing. They have influence mine. Those of you who saw me play at Bone Fest III and then at Bone Fest IV have seen me progress from a one-handed to two-handed bones player with an experimental style. I have been fortunate to have access to all of the instructional videos on bone playing that are being reviewed for the newsletters. My goal for the coming year is to play 'spot-on' which means downloading a metronome program and practicing the fundamentals

## Letters to the Editor

I was delighted by your wonderful article on my father, Ted Goon-Mr. Goon-Bones, in your Newsletter, Volume 2, No.2. I am sure he, too, was thrilled.

The article brought back fond memories of some of my childhood experiences: my dad and his musical group rehearsing in our home; the bones performance my dad put on at a high school variety show with some of my high school classmates and me playing the bones with him; and my job as shipping clerk to fill orders for bones when I was in college and he and my mom were traveling and performing at schools throughout the

western U.S. in the late 50s and early 60s.

I would like you and your colleagues in the Rhythm Bones Society to know that Ted Goon, in addition to being, I think, the best bones player who ever lived, is a wonderful man and a terrific father. Thank you so much for featuring him in your recent newsletter and giving him some pleasant flashbacks, too.

I would love to get extra copies of the Newsletter to share with my children and my father's grandchildren. They, too, love him dearly and would delight in reading about his experiences as a bones player. *Bob Goon*

Ev, What a great time I had meeting your family and all my newfound "bone brothers"! Thanks for all your efforts getting us together. Last night I had two hours in the car to try all the new bones I picked up and was in hog heaven. I really feel like I met long lost relatives. I've got tons of ideas swimming around in my head after seeing Spike, Jerry, Bart, Barry and others. Looking

## Website of the Quarter

[www.tinfoil.com/cm-9707.htm#0867](http://www.tinfoil.com/cm-9707.htm#0867).

This website is dedicated to the preservation of early recorded sounds. They have a CD titled Vaudeville & Minstrelsy with several minstrel tracks. You can download a 1904 wax cylinder recording by the Georgia Minstrels.

## Davies Obituary

Len Davies, "The Bonesman" from England passed away in July. He was in his late 70's. Len played the bones since he was 5. A retired plastic engineer, he played across Europe, North Africa, and America. He made his own laminated plastic bones which had an excellent sound. He appeared on the English version of the TV show, 'Whats My Line'. He played on recordings by The Trunkles, Michael Roach, and Geraint Watkins. See his picture at [www.fyldefolk.freereserve.co.uk/fyldefolk/l.html](http://www.fyldefolk.freereserve.co.uk/fyldefolk/l.html). *Steve Brown*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 2, No. 4  
Fourth Quarter 2000

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
[rhythmbones.com/](http://rhythmbones.com/)

## Bones Calendar

**August 2001.** Bones Fest V, Boston area. Details in next newsletter. **September 1, 2001.** 26th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher (smescher@netins.net).

## Recorded Bones Music

Member Mel Mercier has made several recordings. His bodhran and bones playing with pianist Micheal O Suilleabhain is delightful (The Dolphin's Way, CDVE1, tracks 1, 4 & 8, and Casadh/Turning, CDVE904, tracks 1, 3, and 5. Venture Records, c/o Virgin Records, Hensal House, 553/579 Harrow Road, London, W10).



(Continued from page 1 - Bones Fest Highlights)

Many of you were involved in the bones jamming sessions, but were not overlooked.

Al Cowett (Greensboro, NC) our MC arranged the Saturday program on the spot and held it all together. Dan Cowett (Greensboro, NC) handled our CD's, tapes and sound system. We thank them.

Steve Wixson playing in public with both hands for the first time was a shocker. What a year of practice can do. And what about that number *Tiger Rag* by Mr. Goon-Bones. He challenged us to play it better than he did, but I am not sure any of us did. *Spike Bones* Muhrer (Columbia, MO) will be remembered for his Riverboat performance and Bones 2000 light show with vegetarian bones. Jerry *Dr Bones* Barnett (West Des Moines, IA) was great with cowboy songs, 'The Old Chasm Trail' in particular and I liked Bill Vits (Grand Rapids, MI) for what he did with Sweet Georgia Brown and a whistling audience participating. And don't forget Jim Runner's (Spring Mills, PA) bones sounds, Russ Myer's (Brightwood, VA) 'Hot Time in the Old Town' and Dave *Black Bart* Boyles (Cedarburg, WI) wild performance playing to 'Hilarity' rag time music.

Everyone was impressed by our octogenarians Joe Birl's (Philadelphia, PA) Sousa marches, Matteo (NY, NY) on castanets, Vivian Cox (Shelbyville, IN) playing Rag time, and Ida May Schmich (St Louis, MO) dancing and playing everything. If you want to stay young play the bones.

A highlight was the video of Jerry Mescher (Halbur, IA) and his dad on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour in 1961 followed by his sister Bernie Worrell (Miami, FL) and Jerry doing a duet which was historical, great fun. John Cahill (Jonesboro, GA) in his top hat doing several old-time numbers got everyone's attention, fast and strong. Mel Mercier (Cork, Ireland) playing to Irish pipes and flute with Bodhran and bones,

Walt Watkins (Arlington, TX) with Rag time, Tom Cowett (Richmond, VA) Latin beat, Mike Ballard (San Diego, CA) Celtic, Gil

Hibben (La Grange, KY) 'Night in Barcelona', Sally Carroll and Steve Brown's Celtic selections, John Cowett's (Wilmington, NC) Rag time-country, Ann Hoffman's (St Louis, MO) Cajun Spice, John Davis who started the day off and David and Alice Kimber's (Skiatook, OK) spiritual selections for bones were also memorable. The Cowett family, Ev, Al, Tom, Martha and John enjoyed playing to Dan's 'Bonesgrass' music arrangement.

Another highlight was the appearance of Barry Bones Patton (Winfield, KN) from the *flat pickin* capital of the world doing what he does best. A great young boner, very clean, with speed left over.

The most fun however was the spontaneous boning and jam sessions. Every one got into the act and with the help from several local musicians, namely Don Sarrell, Rufus Elliott and Randy Minor who played the spoons and bones.

Martha Cowett, our web page mistress, was able to obtain resumes and pictures from many bones players for the Bones Players of Today section of Rhythmbones.com. Keep sending her resumes, pictures and updates and she will add them to the page as time permits.

The Rhythm Bones Society met following the Saturday daytime program and reelected the entire slate of officers and board members to

(Continued on page 4)

## Decamp Wins Avoca Bones Contest

Donnie Decamp won the 25th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at the National Old-Time Music Festival and Contests in Avoca, IA. Four RBS members attended the contest held on September 2nd. Donnie has a flamboyant style with great arm movement, and gets paid for playing the bones. He is a occasional performer at Silver Dollar City in Branson, MO and Six Flags over Texas in Arlington, TX. There is a cash prize at the Avoca event. Next year will have at least one other RBS member competing (your editor).

# Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

The meeting of the Board of Directors was called to order at 4:20 pm on September 22, 2000 at the home of Steve Wixson with all members present.

The minutes of the initial membership and Board meetings were read and approved. The Treasurer's report was incomplete due to outstanding BFIV expenses, but showed that RBS broke even for the year. (Note: the Treasurer's Report is now complete and was mailed to all Board Members. Members may request a copy.)

The Board served as a nominating committee, and all members wished to continue serving to provide continuity for year 2. This slate will be presented to the membership with a request for nominations from the floor.

Steve Brown made a proposal to host Bones Fest V in the Boston area in early August. August will be an experiment, but best fits Steve's schedule and maybe the weather. Motion was made and approved.

The newsletter was discussed and will have four issues in 2000-1. There was a request for historical articles.

The Board recognized the outstanding job that Martha Cowett has done with the website.

Motion was made to study the feasibility of a RBS educational series of CDs covering the recorded history of bones playing. The motion was approved and a report will be prepared for Bones Fest V.

Motion was made to create the Frank Brower Meritorious Service Award to be awarded to individuals making significant contributions to the Rhythm Bones Society. Frank Brower was the first of the minstrel bones players. Motion was approved.

Motion was made to give the Board the authority to remove inappropriate content from the website. The specific complaint was a link to a blackface minstrel page. Motion was approved.

Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

(Continued from page 3 - Bones Fest Summary)

serve for another year. They are:

Everett Cowett, Executive Director, 336-294-5332,  
evcow@aol.com

Russ Myers, Assistant Director, 540-543-2368, fax 540-  
543-2339

Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, 423-886-1744,  
wixson@hattanooga.net



Sister and brother Bernie Worrell and Jerry Mescher  
recreate Jerry and their father's Ted Mack Amateur  
Hour winning performance. *Photo by Sharon Mescher*



Barry 'Bones' Patton performing on the stage of the Mountain Opry with Mountain  
Opry regulars guitarist Rufus Elliot and banjo player Don Sarrell. *Photograph by  
Michael Ballard*

Steve Brown, Board, 978-297-1104 bones@crystal-mtn.com

Sally Carroll, Board, 703-471-4290, heysailor@crwmail.com

Mel Mercier, Board, 352-21-902271, mmercier@mail.wesleyan.edu

Jerry Mescher, Board, 712-658-2211, smescher@netins.net

On Sunday morning many of us gathered at the Wixson home  
again for breakfast and to say our good-byes. Val and I stayed over  
to see more of the sights in and around Chattanooga. I hope that all  
of those attending Bones Fest IV got a chance to see at least some  
of the area. It was a great long wonderful weekend, one I will never  
forget. *Ev Cowett*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 3, No. 1 2001

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Nicholas Driver

## Executive Director's Column

I hope that all of you rhythm bones enthusiasts are spreading the word about this fine but almost forgotten musical instrument and thinking about Bones Fest V, August 3, 4, and 5, 2000 at the Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, Massachusetts, 50 miles west of Boston.

The Board of Directors approved the Frank Brower Meritorious Service Award last September. This award is the highest award given by the society and will be awarded to individuals making significant contributions to preservation, education and fostering the development of bones playing techniques and music and the Rhythm Bones Society. Everyone is encouraged to submit names of individuals who, you feel, deserve this recognition to our Secretary, Steve Wixson, and me. We will present the names to the Board of Directors for approval.

Since the September meeting, however, some board members have expressed concern about the name of the award and feel that we should revisit the subject name and present it to the RBS for their approval before any awards are made. In that light the following is a bio of Frank Brower summarized from RBS member Beth Lenz's M.A. Thesis, entitled

"The Bones in the U.S. History and Performance Practice," University of Michigan, 1989.

Brower was born in Baltimore, Maryland on November 20, 1823. His first appearance as a performer was at the Dick Myer Museum in Philadelphia where he did a song and dance routine. He was engaged by the Cincinnati Circus in 1840 and went on tour. During the summer of 1841 he introduced bones to the entertainment business performing at Lynchburg, Virginia during the week of the Fourth of July accompanying Dan Emmett in the new song "Old Tar River".

He later became the bones player for the Virginia Minstrels, one of the first minstrel troupes. Their first performance took place in New York at the Bowery Amphitheater on February 6, 1843. The Virginia Minstrels played in London, Dublin, Cork, Belfast, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Brower played in a variety of circuses both in the U.S. and abroad. On February 28, 1856, he opened with Sanford Minstrels in Philadelphia. His last stage appearance as a minstrel performer was with the Tunnison Minstrels in Philadelphia on November 2, 1867 at the Walnut St. Theatre in the sketch "The Lottery of Love." He was known for his acting ability as well as his musical skills.

## John 'Mr. Bones' Burrill

Mention the bones to anyone from Boston and one name always comes up, "Mr. Bones" aka John Alden Burrill. He will be forever remembered by the people of Boston as a Street musician and performer who was welcomed on any stage in Boston and many across the country. John played with many local and nationally known performers from The Band to Doc Watson. Known for his charm, wit and gentlemanly persona, he was also well liked beyond his musical ability.

He was born in the Boston area (and a descendant of passengers on the Mayflower). He first encountered the bones in a minstrel show he saw as a child, but it wasn't until high school that he attempted to play himself.

He always loved to dance and was



Photograph and other help from Jan Cornish

# Editorial

Steve Brown contributes an article on John 'Mr Bones' Burrill from the Boston area. We also welcome our 100th member, Tom Coyle.

This issue presents statistical data from the survey on the Membership Application Form. As you can see our typical bones player is male, age 55, plays wood bones with two hands, the stationary bone is between the 1st and 2nd finger, is an advanced/professional player, performs, was taught by a relative—most likely his father—and plays to Irish music.

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Steve,

I was born in Philly, and lived most all my life here. I've always been an appreciator of music. My grandfather (John J. Maguire, Sr.) called music the number one art. His nickname was "Fiddler Maguire" even though he played every instrument but the fiddle. Back in 1969 I was in The United States Marine Corps where I was exposed to lots of different types of music. I lived in Florida for a couple years back in the early 80's and developed an appreciation for country music. As a child, I took clarinet lessons for a short while, but I gave it up because I realized I was a musically challenged student (of course this broke my grandfathers heart). I've always liked folk music. In my adolescent years I taught myself to make some noise with harmonicas (Bob Dylan fan). I played badly enough to drive away my friends and loved ones and I was proud. More recently, I rather miraculously, got a job with the Philadelphia Fire Dept. where there's a band, the Philadelphia Police and Fire Pipes and Drums. They allow me to march around with them and beat upon the bass drum. I've learned a lot since becoming a member of this much esteemed organization (boom! boom! boom!). As a result, my interest in music has unmercifully risen again like "Ye Damned Whale" of Moby Dick fame. So much to the dismay of those closest to me, I have developed a

middle aged interest in Celtic music, and if lack of talent dictates and I never become the musician my grandfather would have been proud of, well I'll just click them spoons, I'll just clack them bones, I'll beat that bodhran, I'll boom boom on that base drum, and nobody has to listen. YEAH! RIGHT! God bless all you music lovers. *Tom Coyle*

## Ted Goon is first Honorary Member

With its first email vote, the RBS Board adopted the membership category of Honorary Member. There are no requirements, but three-fourths of the Board must vote for a candidate. It is envisioned this category is for senior persons who have made significant contributions to bones playing and/or the Rhythm Bones Society. Honorary Members pay no dues.

The Board awarded the first Honorary Membership to Ted Goon (Mr. Goon Bones). There was an article on Ted in the Rhythm Bones Player, Vol 2, No 3. Thanks, Ted, for your

## Website of the Quarter

**Www.itma.ie.** The Irish Traditional Music Archive is a multi-media reference archive and resource center for the traditional song, music and dance of Ireland. It is a public not-for-profit facility which promotes public education in Irish traditional music through its own activities and its support for the activities of others.

## Bones Calendar

**April 21, 2001,** New England Folk Festival, Bones Workshop at 11 am by Steve Brown, bones@crystal-mtn.com. He will have a booth.

**August 3,4, and 5, 2001.** Bones Fest V, at the Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, MA. See Page 4 for more

## Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 3, No. 1  
First Quarter 2001

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Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
rhythmbones.com/

details.

**September 1, 2001.** 26th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry

## Recorded Bones Music

Newmarket Duets Ryan Thomson and Friends. CD with RBS member Steve Brown on bones. 4 Elm Court, New Market NH 03857 or [www.captainfiddle.com](http://www.captainfiddle.com) (has Arkansas Traveler/Soldier's Joy tract).

Alfred Montmarquette. Masters of French Canadian Music. Vol 2. Smithsonian/Folkways Series 00111. CD or Cassette. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 750 9th St. NW, Suite 4100, Wash. D.C. 20560-0953, U.S.A. Telephone 800-853-9511 or [www.si.edu/folkways](http://www.si.edu/folkways) (a must if you like old French Canadian music).

*(Continued from page 1 - John Mr Bones Burrill)*  
considered the "best jitterbugger in my high school class" and felt rhythm strongly. He remembers seeing the bones played during an impromptu jam session while in high school and felt it was a way he could play music and be included. A friend gave him some bones as a present and he learned to play, that was 1939.

After high school he put the bones away and joined the service. While in the service he contracted a severe form of spinal arthritis which would cause him to be stooped over the rest of his life. After the service he moved back to Boston, and played the bones on rare occasions. He married, had two daughters, and settled down to provide for his family.

It wasn't until 1975 when the bones began to enter his life again. While traveling to work through Harvard Square in Cambridge one July evening, he spotted two street musicians playing Dixieland music in the square. He was so impressed, when he got home he dug out the bones and the next day joined in. He began playing regularly around the square.

In 1976 at the Nameless Coffee House he was spotted in the audience by local folk singer and organizer Stephen Baird and invited up on stage. This was his first performance on stage and it bit him pretty hard. Soon he was a regular in bars and coffee houses around Boston.

I first met John in 1978 as a fledgling bones player. He welcomed me into his home, and played numerous tapes he had made on the street and in bars. "Do you like cabaret music?" he asked, and played a tape of a woman singing, "Those were the days" while his bones clicked away in the back ground. It wasn't long after that I joined him on the street for an evening of music and merriment. When I found him, he was playing with several musicians and surrounded by a large crowd. One of them turned to me and said, "This is the most money we've ever made." Due in no small part, to John; the crowd loved him.

I was amazed that John seemed to play everywhere, and with

everybody. At the time there was a new kind of rock and roll popping up everywhere, Punk Rock. John loved going to the punk rock clubs. He played regularly at The Rathskellar, nicknamed "the rat", and also The Space. He was a frequent player with a Boston Punk Rock band, The Infliktors, and once called me to tell me they were opening for Aerosmith at Boston Garden. I remember Mr. Goon Bones challenge to the members of the Bones Preservation Society to make the bones relevant to modern music and John accomplished this to an extent.

Although he played with everyone, Spider John Koerner was his main gig. Koerner was a Rochester, New York born folk/blues singer, song writer, and guitarist who was part of the folk revival of the late fifties, early sixties. His second home became Cambridge in the early sixties. John developed a relationship with him in the mid-seventies, and began doing local gigs. Gradually he became a regular. They toured England in the early eighties, and he made two records with him, Nobody knows the trouble I've been (1986), and Raised by Humans (1992), both on Red House Records.

Although he began playing with wooden bones, he loved the set of polished cow bones he got from Nick Driver in the late 70's. Later he got a set of laminated plastic bones from Len Davies, The Bonesman of England, and loved them, too. John's bones playing style was intricate and subtle. He valued the music over all, and was the consummate accompanist. I think this is the reason he played with so many musicians and was dearly loved. I remember his lamenting that he wasn't as ambidextrous a player as Percy Danforth. He felt he couldn't lead with his left hand as he could with his right, but it was this subtleness that added to his appeal.

Both John and Percy had heard of each other, but had never connected. In 1985 I was part of a group of people who helped to bring Percy to the New England Folk Festival for several workshops. I invited several bones players to be part of one of the workshops, and naturally called John.

Percy and I were setting up his bones booth when he spotted John coming down the hall. They didn't say a thing, but walked up and gave each other a big hug. It was amazing! They didn't stay in touch much, but became good friends.

John gained much respect and acknowledgment both locally and around the country in the late eighties and early nineties. He was a perennial winner of the Boston Music Awards' Outstanding Street Performer category. He was also a guest on several national television programs, including: Evening Magazine, The Today Show, and The Good Day Show. Each spring he traveled to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival where he was treated like a visiting dignitary, provided with his own golf cart for transportation to play at any stage he wished. He was sought out one late evening to teach Ringo Stars Band all about the bones and had them all jamming in no time. Mickey Hart sought him out for his knowledge on the bones, and later invited him to play with the Grateful Dead, though it never worked out due to Jerry Garcias' health.

John was plagued by poor health throughout his life, although he never let it get in the way of work or music. He contracted brain cancer and finally died in March of 1993. His obituary was published in the Boston Globe, Sing Out Magazine and many other

## Tom Coyle is 100th Member

Tom Coyle is the 100th member of the Rhythm Bones Society. This growth was accomplished in just over one year, and one-third of the bones players on our mailing list have joined.

Tom was exposed to the bones by his musical family, but only recently got a Percy Danforth tape which has rekindled his interest. He plays two-handed, and likes traditional Celtic and American music and rock and roll. He says he is a beginner, but has already done some performing. He found out about the Society while "rooting through bodhran sites on the internet." Welcome Tom, and we hope to meet you at Bones Fest V.



## What is a Bones Player?

Here is a summary of the responses to the survey attached to the membership application form. Of our 100 members 86 completed the survey, but not everyone gave complete responses.

Sex: Male 73, Female 13.

Age: Youngest 20, Oldest 85, Average 55.4, Median 54.

How taught: Father or grandfather 22, Other relative 4, Self-taught 15, Percy Danforth 15.

Level of Play: Beginner 9, Intermediate 19, Advanced 24. Professional 29.

Bones style: One-handed 19, Two-handed 60, Both ways 5.

Stationary bone: 1st and 2nd 52, Thumb and 1st 7, Both ways 19, Other 2.

Perform: Yes 71

Teach: Yes 42

Sell: Yes 20

Kind of bones: Real 43, Wood 54, Ivory 3, Plastic 7, Other 5.

Obtain bones: Make 21, Store 9, Mail order 12, Ireland 5, From an individual 17, Other 8.

Styles of music: Irish 25, Bluegrass 17, Dance music 16, Anything 16, Rock&Roll 13, Old time 13, Ragtime 11, Dixieland 10, Country 8, Celtic 7, Folk 7, Other 49.

## Bones Fest V

August 3, 4 and 5, 2000

in the barn at the  
Red Apple Farm

Phillipston, Massachusetts  
(about 50 miles west of Boston on Highway 2)

Host: Steve Brown

**bones@crystal-mtn.com**  
**978-297-1104**

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*

## Playlist for John 'Mr Bones' Burrill

...and Mr. Bones played on... Below are listed performers he played with at least once.

David Amram-Nationally known Jazz/Latin French horn player the Back Beat Boys-Boston Dixieland  
Stephen Baird-Boston Folk Singer, organizer and street singer  
Marcia Ball- Nationally known New Orleans style piano player  
The Band-Nationally known rock band  
Beausoliel-Nationally known Louisiana based Cajun band  
Byron Berline-Nationally known bluegrass musician  
Spencer Bohren-Louisiana based singer, guitarist, songwriter  
Boogaloo Swami's-Boston based Cajun/zydeco band  
Boozoo Chavis-Louisiana based Zydeco band  
The Brattle Street Players-Boston based Irish band  
Buddy Guy and Junior Wells- Nationally known Chicago blues musicians  
Bunker Mountain Fiddlers-Boston based bluegrass band  
The Cambridge harmonica Orchestra-30 member Boston based band  
Cj Chenier-Louisiana based Zydeco performer  
Clifton Chenier and his red hot Louisiana band-King of Zydeco music  
Dan Crary-Nationally known bluegrass musician  
Dirty Dozen Brass Band-Louisiana based New Orleans style brass band  
Snooks Eaglin-Louisiana based singer and guitarist  
The Fabulous Billygoons-Boston based Punk rock band  
Paul Geremia- Boston based blues/folk musician  
The Hackberry Ramblers- nationally known bluegrass musician  
John Hammond- Nationally known blues singer/guitarist  
Harmony River-Boston based Irish band  
John Hartford-Nationally known song writer and musician  
John Hickman- Nationally known blue grass musician  
Heidi and the Secret Admirers- Boston based rock band  
The Infliktors-Boston based Punk Rock band  
Queen Ida-Nationally known Louisiana based Zydeco performer  
Peter Kairo-Boston based performer  
Spider John Koerner-Nationally known singer and guitar player  
Patty Larkin-Boston based singer song writer  
Rod McDonald-New York based singer song writer  
James Montgomery-Boston based blues singer  
John Mooney-New Orleans based slide guitarist  
Nathan and the Zydeco Cha Cha's- Nationally known Zydeco band  
Kenny Neal-Louisiana based blues guitar player  
Charmaine Neville-Nationally known Louisiana based performer  
New Birth Jazz Band- New Orleans style brass band  
Bonnie Rait-Nationally known singer and song writer  
Zachery Richard-Louisiana Cajun performer  
Paul Rishell-Boston based blues singer  
Roomful of Blues-Boston based blues band  
Peter Rowan-nationally known singer and song writer  
Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee-Nationally known blues singers and musicians  
Tiny Tim-National known ukulele player and singer  
Marc and Ann Savoy-Nationally known Louisiana based Cajun musicians  
Michael Sullivan and Neti Vaandrager-Boston based street musicians  
Michelle Shocked-Nationally known Singer songwriter  
Ringos All Stars-Internationally known rock band  
Leon Redbone-Nationally known singer/guitarist  
Riders in the Sky-Nationally known Texas swing musicians  
Doc Watson-Nationally known guitarist/singer  
Robert Ward- electric blues



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 3, No. 2 2001

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Nicholas Driver

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## Executive Director's Column

In the barn on RED APPLE FARM - that's where it's going to happen - BONES FEST V that is, on Aug. 3, 4 and 5. Located in the middle of a typical New England apple orchard, our noise will not be a problem. Atypical, however, is a 30-year-old apple tree with 108 varieties of apples on it and much more. A pick your own apple, small fruit and vegetable operation which Bill and Susan Rose, proprietors, call home will have peaches, blueberries and apples ready to pick.

The farm also has a .75 mile-hiking trail leading to a beaver pond with working beaver and a fruit stand. Located in rural Phillipston, MA (pop. 1485) that the town Fathers plan to maintain as it has been for the last 250 years. It's antique New England and you will love it.

If you are flying in consider Worcester

airport as well as Boston as landing sites.

Steve Brown, our host, plans a reception in the barn on Friday evening, an all-day program on Sat. followed by a Bar-B-Q and an evening program open to the public. On Sunday morning a light goodbye breakfast is planned. All included in your registration fee.

If your schedule permits, spend a day or more in nearby Boston. See the Old North Church and "every Middlesex village and farm". Take a walk on Freedom Trail and enjoy a Duck tour of the city. Fun and educational. Dinner at Durgan Park is always different and seafood at the Legal, either eat in or take out, is great. And don't pass up the coast. Although the water is cold, the lighthouses have great scenic views. I hope to see most of you at the Fest. May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

## Nicholas Driver

Nicholas Driver comes from three generations of rhythm bones players. He was born in London in 1946. He was taught by his father, Aubrey Driver, from the age of about eight years old, and Aubrey passed on many of his decorations and techniques. Aubrey Driver, born in 1907, represents a direct link with the period when bones playing was at its peak in Britain. It could be seen among the Irish community, in the hands of the East End of London Buskers, and on the stages of Music Halls in Britain brought by minstrel bands from the States. Even children played them in the streets in England using 'roofing slate' bones, and in this atmosphere the art was developed by many performers.

As to if his great-grandfather played the bones there is some doubt but according to his father it is likely. What is certain is that his grandfather was a serious player and indeed married into an Irish family. Nick's grandmother came from County Mayo. His grandfather died young before Nick was born.

Certainly his grandfather and father made both bodhrans and bones. Recently an old lady sent Nick a set that his father had made for her long ago. However there was no serious

production of either instrument until Nick, in his early thirties, decided to promote both to a wider audience.

Nick knows very little about his grandfather's playing, except that he was very good and

*(Continued on page 3)*



From *Bare Bones* album cover, left to right, Liam Molan, Nicholas Driver and Charlie Harris

# Editorial

An interesting thing happened on St. Paddy's Day—I became a professional musician. RBS member Ann Coulter told the local event organizer about me and I was asked to perform. I played, presented a brief history and demonstrated how to play the bones. I recommend it to you amateur players (just trying to be humorous).

The feature article is on RBS member Nicholas 'Nick' Driver from the UK. It was prepared in part from email correspondence from Nick and I changed first person references to third person. The article mentions his album titled '*Bare Bones*' which he donated to the RBS informal library and gave permission to make copies for RBS members. CD copies will be available at Bones Fest V.

I recently met Walter Maioli who is an Italian researching ancient Roman musical instruments. Most written histories of bones playing note that bones were a Roman instrument, and Walter confirms this in a book he has written. He gave me a copy of his CD of music from these ancient instruments (primarily wind instruments), two tracks of which were in the movie *Gladiator*. He also gave me a recording of an Indian playing the kartal (a type of bones)

## Letters to the Editor

I have received the Vol 3, No 1 newsletter and ....wow!. (*Editor's note: The newsletter announced Ted as our first Honorary Member.*)

At age 89 3/4, I no longer have the concentration to write the depth of my feelings, but I can say that I can't remember when I've experienced such satisfaction and pleasure. I feel certain that you all are on your way to making musical history, and I am flattered to be considered part of it. I feel certain that you will be able to come up with a musical application of the bones that will be far broader than I was able to do in the relatively short time that I researched and worked with them.

My best personal regards to all who are carrying the load. *Ted Goon*

Reference: Obituary for Len Davies, the Bones Man, in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol 2, No. 4.

Len was a member of my band, TRUNKLES, from early in 1983, for about 1 year. I first saw Len playing at a Festival in the West Country and was impressed by his visual/physical impact and energy and realised the potential of him performing on stage, adding an extra dimension to the percussion side of the band.

His 'Electric Bones' idea was that he had small pick-up style microphones on his wrists which linked back through the sound system to a strobe light machine, giving him a slo-mo action on stage, while the rest of the band were hit by static lights with colour changes, giving an incredible overall visual impact. Len was a bit of a drifter who traveled around in a small live-in van. He was a great handy-man and a help to me between gigs, and we worked on restoring a wooden yacht I owned at that time. Regards, *John Goodluck*

## Websites of the Quarter

Here are two of many metronome programs available on the Internet for those who want to develop 'spot on' timing. Please send a Letter to the Editor if you find one you like better. [www.familyeducation.com/download/0,1747,47-17939.00.html](http://www.familyeducation.com/download/0,1747,47-17939.00.html) This one is free. [www.vko.com/mundosoft.htm](http://www.vko.com/mundosoft.htm) This one has more complex rhythms and you can try it free for 14 days.

## Bones Calendar

**August 3, 4, and 5, 2001.** Bones Fest V. Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, Massachusetts. Host is Steve Brown, email address, bones @crystal-mtn.com. See newsletter insert for more details.

**September 1, 2001.** 26th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry

## Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 3, No. 2  
Second Quarter 2001

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
[rhythmbones.com/](http://rhythmbones.com/)

## Recorded Bones Music

Whenever I need a little pick-me-up, which seems like allot lately, I go down in my cellar and put on the Spider John Koerner record "*Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Been.*" Not only is it just great all around good time music, it features bones player John "Mr.Bones" Burrill who was written up in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol. 3, No. 1. You really can't find many records that feature bones at all, never mind 13 out of the 15 tracks. The artists include Willie Murphy on bass, Tony Glover on harmonica, Peter Ostrousko on mandolin, Butch Thompson on piano, both of "Lake Wobegon" fame, and Chip Taylor Smith on the fiddle. RHR CD 12, Red House Records, P.O.Box 4044, St.Paul, MN 55104. *Steve Brown.*

(Continued from page 1 - Nicholas Driver)

played with both hands. A whale bone set his father played were from him and then passed to Nick when his hands were strong enough to hold them at about eight years old.

Nick's father was a great player, in his time a really entertaining player. He loved the musical humour of bones playing that came from 'Mr. Bones' of the minstrel bands. There were stacks of little groups in England usually on the end of piers, lots of banjo, etc., much like the kind of playing you get in 'mountain music' in the States, plenty of slow waltzes. In fact in his youth there was very little fast playing, they played to the old tunes of the day, Dixie, traditional jazz, etc. A lot of jazz was a slow rhythm, tunes like 'Home in Pasadena.' Nick says "a tune like that gives a lot of opportunity for very stylish playing, it stops and starts and has breaks of tempo."

His father played with the fixed bone between finger and thumb and the other in the middle fingers, he would role the thumb bone around to change the sound all the time even playing with it on its edge. Percy Danforth played a lot like Nick's father, so it must have been the old style of class players both were around the same age, though Percy was a little younger.

This style of holding made it possible for him to throw bones in the air while playing and catch them again at the correct beat and go on playing. They would go up to the ceiling and he would put a spin on the bone so it spun in the air very impressively.

At first Nick learnt everything from him and played in his style, up to four bones in a hand, done by adding bones with the other hand as you play, then taking them out again or eight bones with lots of tricks. He played from quite young, about 14, in traditional jazz bands, and for a while with a 'jug' band, the 'Hubbly Bubbly Jug Band.' He also played with the new skiffle groups. He practiced at home to the old 78 records like 'In a Persian Garden' and of course to tunes on the radio.

Slow playing, with both hands and

often eight bones is still the great art, to the very slow but rhythmic songs and tunes that were around then and still are alive in places such as North Carolina, especially autoharp with vocals. Nick used to know an old blues bones player in the states, but can't remember his name. He also loved to play with original Cajun music.

His early days were all traditional, often very slow playing, lots of decoration and art. When he settled in Suffolk, a very backward place at that time, there were a lot of Irish musicians around and Suffolk, as an old county of England, had a long tradition of button accordion playing and hammered dulcimers, so there was a lot of local old folk music and musicians. He played with a lot of very gifted Irish musicians and they formed bands doing everything from TV to pubs. The two musicians he played with the most were Charlie Harris from Limerick and Liam Molan, both brilliant and very taxing. Charlie went off to the States in the end and Liam died before he was 50. Since they have gone he has never felt like playing with anyone else, so he just picks up a set and put on a record from time to time.

Playing with them was very demanding, and they played often four nights per week such that his fingers used to swell up from the bones and his wrist needed a bandage to strap it up for the bodhran. It was during this time and the demands of the fast Irish music that he switched to playing with two bones between the middle fingers of each hand. With this kind of music there is no scope for being decorative; what matters is just perfect unison with the instrumental. Nick played a lot in Ireland with many musicians and did some recording of some rare names. Nick's other main instrument was Anglo concertina.

Nick is fascinated and delighted that the bones have become an interest again for young people. Forty years ago it was nearly dead. It is a reward for the work that Percy and Nick did. They were both evangelical. Percy toured the campuses of the States giving demonstrations and even gave a talk and demo at Cambridge University in the UK. What mattered was that both of them made and sold the

instrument so that people could get their hands on and learn that way. They both made a bit of money, but they loved to see the interest grow again and be taken seriously. Nick even did BBC World Services short-wave radio once!

Nick says there was a time when he was very good, but he just doesn't practice much now. What you loose are the muscles, their training, their lightening speed of reaction to perfection. What you don't loose is the instinct that is vital to playing, the sensitivity. Percussion requires great sensitivity, you must feed off the instrumental, back and forth, like *tabla* playing in India. A bones player is only as good as the person or group they play with. When you play with one or two musicians all the time you become instinctive as to their little ways and the result is wonderful.

Nick says there is today far too much discussion on style and technique, far too much fussing about technical matters. A good player changes to suit the music and the style of the instrumental, the decorations used and the tempo set. You don't think about it or analyse; it must be instinctive, from the heart, from the love of the music, it all flows. The bones are so much part of or an extension of your body, your arms, your hands that unlike any other instrument the connection is one pure flow. Trying to break this all down into technical analysis is impossible and a waste of time. He found this when trying to write a tutor!

Nick says the ultimate material for bones must be whalebone, though not now politically correct, as it combines the hardness of bone with the easily worked qualities of wood, its special hollow membrane giving an unique sound. For serious playing today, hardwood or shaped bones from cow's shin are idea, animal ribs (probably the oldest type of instrument) proving too uncomfortable between the fingers for sustained playing. Nick makes and sells about 500 cow shin bone sets a year, and several RBS members own them.

Nick has made other contributions to rhythm bones playing. His recording "Bare Bones: The Traditional Art of Bones Playing" is special as every track has bones playing. One reviewer said "This album illustrates the amazing variety of uses of bones as an

(Continued on page 4)



(Continued from page 3 - Nicholas Driver)

accompanying instrument. They can travel from waltzes to *The Rollicking Boys around Tandarages* and sound quite at home.” He is joined on this album by his friends Charlie Harris and Liam Molan, and a photograph of the three of them taken from the cover of their album is on Page 1. Nick has also contributed articles on bones playing for magazines and has a *Bodhrán & Bones Tutor* that is published by Hobgoblin Music. This 26-page book covers the basics of bodhrán and bones playing with brief histories and maintenance instruction for each instrument.

Nick says “This is without a doubt the foundation musical instrument of mankind and was first seen in the cradle of mankind in North Africa. How far back it goes we cannot tell, but certainly beyond the skin drum. People still fail to appreciate the scope and versatility of the bones, surely the most effective pocket percussion instrument conceived by man.”

Bones lived in the wilderness after the second world war. Nick can remember when you could count on the fingers of one hand the number of players who could play with both hands. He wishes that his father were alive to see the rebirth of interest.

The saddest thing to Nick is that his own son shows no interest and can't play the bones. Nick is a grandfather and has a grandson. He says “I have to live long enough to teach him so I can pass on the

# Bones Fest V

August 3, 4 and 5, 2001

in the barn at the  
Red Apple Farm

Phillipston, Massachusetts  
(about 50 miles west of Boston on Highway 2)

Host: Steve Brown

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 3, No. 3 2001

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## Executive Director's Column

BONES FEST V! Live music by three bands, a professionally printed program, BFV t-shirts, the barn on Red Apple Farm, many new boners who thought that they were the only bones players left on earth, and a real minstrel show by Norm Conrad. And don't forget the rainstorm on the tin roof and all the food and drink we tried to consume. All of the old boners were at their best and learned a lot from the new faces. We missed Carl, Matteo, Vivian, Mel, Mike, the Cowett kids, David, Barry, Tom, Bill and many others who could not be there for many reasons. A weekend to remember and it is not over yet. Watch for a complete summary of the event in the next issue of the RHYTHM BONES PLAYER and a video, which is in production as I write.

I want to thank all of you who participated which made this a wonderful experience. A very special thanks to Steve Brown (and wife

Jennifer) who put it all together. What a great effort. Thanks to Jerry Mescher our substitute MC and wife Sharon for program coordination, Lori Grady for the design of the t-shirts and program, Norm Conrad for t-shirt production and sound system for CDs and tapes and all the musicians who encouraged a great deal of spontaneity to our play. Dave Reiner and sons Eric and Andy contributed the sound system and played jigs, reels, marches, polkas, rags, Irish, bluegrass and much more all day long. They were sensational. And last but not least to the folks at the Red Apple Farm who were great hosts behind the scenes. Can BFVI top this?

The fiscal year for the Rhythm Bones Society is October to September of the following year. Now is the time to renew your membership for 2001-2002. See the insert in this newsletter for details.

May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

## Matteo and Castanets (Woods That Dance)

Matteo has honored the Rhythm Bones Society by attending and performing at Bones Fests III and IV. Matteo is a world class dancer and castanet player and founder of the Foundation for Ethnic Dance whose purpose is to document, preserve, teach and perform authentic forms of indigenous dance representing many countries of the world.

Matteo has written a small, marvelous book on the castanets titled *Woods That Dance* (published as *Dance Perspectives* 33, Spring 1968). In it he tells the story of castanets beginning with a history of dance and the idiophone (defined as an instrument of naturally sonorous material that produces the desired sound when two or more pieces of it are struck together). Scholars have postulated that dance is the oldest of the arts with dance being inseparable from rhythmic accompaniment.

Bones players share the history of the idiophone, and Matteo includes a brief section on rhythm bones as a type of castanet. Bones must certainly predate castanets, but no one can dispute that castanets are the more refined,

precisioned and sophisticated.

Castanets range in size from a few centimeters

*(Continued on page 3)*



Matteo with castanets in dance position  
(Matteo photograph used with permission)

# Editorial

Bones Fest V is over and it was a great success. As in previous years, the highlights will be presented in the next issue of the newsletter.

The feature article is about Matteo and castanets. I have been practicing castanet rhythmic patterns on the bones and they sound good. They are also excellent exercises for practice in becoming a better bones player. I discovered I could produce the castanet quadruplet with a little extra arm swing. The article describes Matteo's notation system for castanets that could be adapted to bones playing. In a humorous mood, I asked Matteo "Are bones a type of castanet or are castanets a type of bones?" He, of course, said bones are a type of castanet. What do you think? Matteo is a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Matteo, thanks for your support.

On the back page is a rap song I

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Steve,

I was standing in front of my bones booth at the New England Folk Festival having just given a workshop for 50 or so people, ably assisted by Norm Conrad, Tim Rielly, and Rob Rudin, trying to sift through the folks with questions, when I was approached by a young looking guy with a beard and pony tail. I was mid conversation with Jan Cornish discussing John Burrill's meeting with Percy Danforth at that festival in 1985. He pointed to his name tag which read, "Jonathan Danforth" and I laughed, "Not related to Percy I'm sure" I remarked. "He was my Grandfather" he said. "Wow!" After regaining my composure, we settled into long reminiscences of Percy. It was a real treat! He is living in Fall River, Ma. and does play the bones a bit, but it is not his main instrument. He intends to attend Bones Fest V! We never know what (or who) is just around the corner! *Steve Brown.*  
*(Editor note: Jonathan is our newest member joining while at Bones Fest*

V.)

Dear Ev,

My father in law, aged 101, learned to play the bones when he was a boy. He has led an adventurous life in India and South Africa among other places. He was blinded by a gas attack in the First World War. He now lives in a special home for elderly people with sight impairment, and he still entertains the residents with performances on his ebony bones, which he claims he inherited from his grandfather.

I was thinking it would be nice to give him a recording of music played on the bones. His taste for music stops around 1930. Can you recommend any recordings of old and traditional music played on the bones, and where might acquire them? Thanks a lot, *Louis van den Berg (Editor note: Read more about Cliff Wood on Page 3 of this issue. Send me recording recommendations and I will forward them to Cliff.)*

Dear Steve,

I enjoyed the Vol 3, No 1 issue of the newsletter. Don't know if I can be at Bones Fest V as I'll be in seminary beginning in July for a 3 year Master of Divinity program. I'm looking forward to being a (perhaps unique) banjo picking, harmonica blowing, bones playing, yodeling (and all at the same time, no less!) pastor. It'll have to be a somewhat different kind of church, 'eh?

I'm a 52 year experienced bones player, having learned from Ted Goon in Gadsden, AL when I was his paperboy in '49-'50. I too have not heard about Frank Brower. His exploits in the front page column are impressive, but I vote for the award to be called Ted Goon Meritorious Service Award; as Ted Goon is by far the most known and noteworthy of modern bones players as well as perhaps the most well known in all history. He had top ten USA chart songs playing the bones in his inimitable style! 'Nuff said.

I played the bones in Holland and Belgium in April on John Denver's Memorial Concerts with John Adams' Show. They loved the bones. Maybe someday you can see me play the banjo, bones, harmonica and sing at the same time. (sic) Cheers, *Jim Connor*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 3, No. 3  
Third Quarter 2001

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
rhythmbones.com/

## Bones Calendar

**September 20, 21 and 22, 2002.**

Bones Fest VI, Location not yet determined. Details in next newsletter.

**September 1, 2001.** 26th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher (smescher@netins.net).

## Recorded Bones Music

Sonny Terry's Washboard Band. Legendary blues artist Sonny Terry with Brownie McGhee and J. C. Burris playing RBS member Joe Birl's patented bones. Custom Disc FA 2006, Smithsonian Folkways Records, Dept. 0607, Washington, DC, 20072-0607, USA telephone 800-410-9815, website address is [www.si.edu/folkways](http://www.si.edu/folkways).

(Continued from page 1 - Matteo) and Castanets to the size of a man's large hand, and generally are made from granadillo wood. Castanets are made to fit the individual with the best castanets being the ones that are best for you. As with bones, castanet tones mellow and grow with age.

The two pieces of the castanets are held together by a cord and suspended from the thumb. The sound is produced by striking the tips of the fingers against one piece causing it to strike the other piece. Castanets are normally smaller than bones, and can produce faster sounds

Matteo has two instructional videos titled, Castanets in America, Part I-Basic Technique and Part II-Intermediate and Advanced Techniques. Part I presents the history of the castanets, describes the parts of castanets, shows how to hold and perform the basic elements of castanet playing. Part II presents more complex rhythm patterns including the *master combination*. Both videos show Matteo and Carola Goya, a brilliant performer, dancing and playing their castanets to illustrate the techniques. The videos also present Matteo's students in performance.

Castanet basics are similar to bones basics. The right hand tap has the Spanish name of *Ti* and the left hand tap is called *Ta*. The castanet roll is like a bones triplet followed by a tap but executed with two hands. One hand does a triplet or more frequently a quadruplet with all four fingers rapidly striking the castanet. The other hand finishes with a tap. The right hand roll is called *Ria* and the left hand roll is called *Rai*. Performing a tap with both hands at the same time is called *Tok*, and striking one pair of castanets against the other is called *Choque*. Bones player and teacher Dr. Fred Edmunds frequently used a *Choque*-like sound when he performed.

Matteo developed a notation system called *Castanotation* to help the student learn the complex castanet rhythm patterns. Each of the basic elements described above has a symbol, for example a large dot for *Ti*. These symbols are grouped

within standard musical measures to describe the desired rhythmic pattern. It is very compact and easy to learn.

Matteo makes and sells castanets as well as the videos mentioned. They can be purchased from Matteo

## More on Cliff Wood from Letter to Editor

Cliff has one and a half sets of bones. The half set, which he inherited from his Grandfather, has quite a history. In 1919 Cliff was still serving in the army, although his sight was even then severely affected by the gas attack at Arras the year before. He had refused to apply for a discharge on medical grounds, because he knew that would mean he would never get a job back in civilian life. In June 1919 he was stationed in Oberkastel on the Rhine. The Peace Treaty was finally signed that month, and his battalion was ordered to Bonn, about a day and a half's march up the Rhine. It was a boiling hot day, and as the battalion made its way, the soldiers began to flag from the heat and lose the step. Cliff stuck his hand into his pocket and came up with his ebony bones. Click clickety click he went, and the battalion duly picked up the step. The Colonel was up in front of the column on his horse, and he rode back down the column to find out what this clickety click was which had suddenly got his tired troops marching like good 'uns. Looking down from his horse he saw Cliff marching along with his rifle slung over his shoulder and his bones clicking away in his hands. It would be nice to record that the Colonel rewarded Cliff with a smile or a word of encouragement, but this was the British Army, First World War. The Colonel wheeled his horse round and cantered back to the head of the column without as much as a backward glance. That night as the company bivouacked in a deserted and ruinous old hotel, the order was given to 'Break out the rum.' Ironically, Cliff didn't get any. Because his sight wasn't too good he had been given the post of Permanent Orderly Corporal. That meant he didn't count as a fighting man, and so there was no rum for him,

no matter how much of an inspiration he had been on the march. To make things worse, as he slept that night a thieving Tommy rascal crept up and pinched a pair of his precious ivory bones from the pocket of his greatcoat. And that's why he only has half a set of ebony bones. The bones he plays now are made of wood. He found them a few years later in a music shop in England, and has kept them with him ever since.

Cliff now lives in Pocklington House, a home for elderly people with impaired sight. He celebrated his 101st birthday in March. Although he is 100% blind now, he refuses to carry a white stick (or a stick of any kind, for that matter.) From time to time he entertains the residents and staff with musical performances on the bones. He likes to accompany military marching music. Charlie Kunz, the pianist, is another favorite, and he can still get them going with his rhythm. *Louis van den Berg*

## Need Buffalo Ribs to Make Bones

Several years ago a friend of mine in the state wildlife department came across the parched bones of a buffalo out on the Kansas prairie. He gathered up several of the bones and gave them to me to use in making rhythm bones, which I did. I made two pair with them, but still have enough bone left to make more.

If anybody out there has the sincere desire, the wherewithal, and the tools to turn these buffalo bones into rhythm bones, then I will give them to the first one who asks. No charge. Well, maybe you could throw in \$5 for postage. Contact Bill Rexroad, 300 Crescent Blvd., Hutchinson, KS 67502 or e-mail to [rexroad1@webtv.net](mailto:rexroad1@webtv.net) (be sure to put in the 1.)

## Website of the Quarter

<http://histoire.org/antiquite/egypte/bastet/musique/musique4.html>. Egyptian music and percussion with a picture of Egyptian bones. Text in

## **The Legend of 'Mr. Bones'**

(Done in rap style accompanied by the bones)

This is the legend of Mr. Bones,  
Who rattled when history was carved in stones,  
Down through the ages in ritual and play,  
Elder teaches youth - I learned that way!

China and Egypt and later Rome,  
Great Britain, America all were called home,  
The Irish with one hand, the rest using two,  
Playing reels and polkas, and bluegrass too.

The Minstrels added Mr. Tambourine,  
In blackface they played with faces unseen,  
And hundreds of thousands learned how to play,  
Yet only a handful is left today.

Ole Mr. Bones is how he's known,  
But he does have a real name of his own,  
He's a minstrel, soldier, cowboy, physician,  
Butcher, farmer, and working musician.

I hope you're enjoying my rhythm and rhyme,  
The story's not over, but I'm near out of time,  
Bones are for gals and I'll name just a few,  
Ms Bones, Mrs Bones and Missy Bones too.

We've all joined together in a so-ci-e-ty,  
To save rhythm bones for eternity,  
So the first to the last of humanity on earth,  
Hear the sound of the bones' ongoing rebirth.

*Copyright 2001 by Steve Wixson. All rights reserved.*

**Rhythm Bones Society memberships runs from  
October through September of the following year.  
It is time to renew your membership.  
Please see the insert in the newsletter for details.**

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 3, No. 4 2001

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Bones Instructional  
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Tips and Techniques  
Column

## Executive Director's Column

Bones Fest VI is just around the corner, August 2, 3 & 4, 2002. Mark your calendars and start practicing. It is going to be the biggest and best yet. BFVI will be held on campus at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. On-campus housing will accommodate singles, doubles and families. Meals, reception and banquet will be provided in Founders Hall in the center of campus and the Joseph Bryan Jr. Auditorium will be available for our bones demonstrations, business meeting and Saturday night concert. This is a brand new facility with the latest in acoustical design. All buildings are in close proximity of each other; therefore you can walk to all activities. Hotels, motels and restaurants are also nearby for those who wish to stay off campus.

Guilford is a four-year liberal arts college

with about 1500 students and the campus is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is beautiful and has great energy (See [www.guilford.edu/](http://www.guilford.edu/) for a campus tour.)

Preliminaries cost figures look exceptionally good. The college is located less than 5 miles from the Piedmont Triad International Airport, which serves Greensboro, Winston-Salem and High Point, North Carolina.

Greensboro and the entire state of NC are great places to visit. North Carolina beaches are some of the finest in the world and the Great Smoky and Blue Ridge mountains have breathtaking views and cool summer nights. For more information about accommodations and vacationing ideas contact the Greensboro Visitors Bureau at 1-800-344-2282 or the NC Visitors Bureau at 1-800-847-4862. We hope to see you in North Carolina in 2002. May your

## Bones Fest V Morning/Evening Highlights

Bones Fest V, hosted by Steve and Jennifer Brown, was a weekend filled with forty-four Bones stories, each one shared through word and demonstration.

Saturday, August 4, was the first full day of the fest, and I had the honor and opportunity to MC the morning and afternoon events which highlighted 33 bones players from all over the US and England. My first impression was WOW! What a group. I personally got to greet, shake hands and introduce each individual who then performed in front of a responsive audience of peers.

Each performer had his or her unique style and played to their choice of recorded or live music. From my viewpoint, you could almost sense the satisfaction it gave each performer, for he was now playing in a Fest of all bones players, and they weren't alone.

Also, it was remarkable to see so many good bones players, and they all need to be praised and congratulated for their efforts. I can't name them all, but the performers who caught my eye, just to name a few are highlighted below.

Fiddler Dave Reiner and his two sons,

Fiddler Andy Reiner and Eric Reiner on piano provided most of the music for the bones players making the important connection to live music.

*(Continued on page 3)*



Bone Fest V host Steve Brown with bones moving so fast they blur in the photograph. *Photo by Jennifer Brown*

## Editorial

During this time of national/world tragedy, people are comforted and strengthened by prayer and music. We can take pride that music, such as we help make, is an important part of this healing. The only RBS member I heard directly effected was Nick Driver (see his Letter to Editor)

This issue highlights Bones Fest V. This was another high point in the young life of the Rhythm Bones Society. Jerry Mescher was the MC for the daytime activities, and Steve Brown was MC for the evening performances. Each of them has summarized the highlights of their session.

Having hosted Bones Fest IV, my wife and I know the work it takes to put on the event. I take my hat off to Steve and Jennifer for the outstanding job they did with Bones Fest V.

After the Fest, my wife and I visited New England, and I had the opportunity to have breakfast with Parker Waite. He told this story. "Nick Driver and I did a duet together off to the side with music. It was a purely jazz type response with the both of us playing off each other. We burst out laughing when it was over cause it seemed to go so well but of course we couldn't really hear how it sounded." My first thought was how about a quartet with Jim Runner's big boomers on bottom, whale bones on top with cow bones and wood bones in the middle. Actually I got lots of new ideas from the Fest including an idea for my performance at Bones Fest VI. I hope the same happened to those of you who attended the Fest.

I attended the National Storytelling Festival in early October. My first such festival, but because member Bill Rexroad tells stories and plays bones, I knew I would find some bones players there. And I did, 19 in fact. They each received a newsletter and application form. Help us get the word out by letting us know of other

## Letters to the Editor

Just a note to say how sad I am about the tragedy that has struck your

country, all the more strong to me as my wife was at the World Trade Centre when it happened and just escaped with her life. She is physically ok but saw and experienced many dreadful things. We are behind the US here in the UK.

I would like to thank all the folks I met at Bones Fest V for the deeply friendly welcome I received and the valued new friendships I made. It was so good to see and hear such talent in an ancient art. I look forward very much to the time I can make it to another gathering. Take care and best wishes. *Nick Driver*

Dear Editor,

Russ, Walt and Steve on Avoca competition. CONGRATULATIONS to the 3 of you for your effort. I wish I could have been there to come in 4th or ..... Also to Jerry Mescher for induction into the Hall of Fame. Great job for RBS. *Ev Cowett*

Dear Editor,

Dave Reiner was the fiddler who played Saturday at Bones Fest V. On October 13th. I got a message he had been taken into the hospital with chest pains and later that week underwent bypass surgery. He's since come home and is doing well. If anyone would like to write him and wish him well, his address is 7 Russell Road, Lexington, MA, 02420, dsreiner@rcn.com, 781-863-0140. *Steve Brown*

## Bones Calendar

**August 2-4, 2002.** Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details in this and future newsletters. Note date change!

**August 31, 2002.** 27th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher (smescher@netins.net).

**December 31st.** Twin Cities First Night, Steve Brown performing as part of the "Retelling History Through Song" with Paul Luria, Leominster Historical Society 2pm-4pm for additional information please contact Steve Brown,

bones@crystal-mtn.com, 978-297-1104

**April 19-21, 2002.** New England Folk Festival, Natick High School, Natick, Ma. Tentative plans include a

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 3, No. 4  
Fourth Quarter 2001

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

bones workshop and performance by bones society members. For more information on bones activities contact Steve Brown. For more information on New England Folk Festival visit their

## Website of the Quarter

Do your own web search with such search terms as "rhythm bones", "bones playing" and cliquette. Write a Letter to the Editor if you find other good search terms.

## Recorded Bones Music

**J.C. Burris, Blues Professor.** This legendary blues artist plays the bones on only two tracks, but these both include bones solos that make the album worthwhile. Also included are hand jive and his dancing doll percussion. CD497, Arhoolie Productions, 10341 San Pablo Ave, El Cerrito, CA 94530,

## Myers wins at Avoca Mescher in Hall of Fame

The 26th National Old Time Country and Bluegrass Music Festival hosted by the National Traditional Country Music Association was held, as always, 27 August until Labor Day in Avoca, Iowa. There were eleven stages, each with something going on from 9 am until after 10:30 pm, as well as many impromptu groups forming wherever two or more musicians gathered. The attending members of the RBS had no difficulty in assimilating with a variety of groups each and every day, and in joining some of these groups in stage performances. Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell have been mainstays at this festival for years, and on Saturday alone they participated in six different stage shows. RBS fared well in the Bones and Spoons contest, taking the top three honors winning prize money and a plaque. (*Editors note: Russ Myers won first, Walt Watkins second and Steve Wixson third.*) RBS members who have won this contest in the past include Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, Jerry Barnett and Donny Decamp.

Perhaps the most moving event of the week was Sunday's Old Time Country Music Hall of Fame induction for Jerry Mescher who paid special tribute to his father. Jerry learned to play the bones from his father and together they won first place on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour. Jerry and sister Bernie Worrell now play bones duets

## Dustin Griffin is Youngest Member

Maybe there is a future for bones playing. Dustin Griffin is a twelve year old drummer, and met Jerry Mescher at the above mentioned Festival. Jerry showed him the bones, and within five days he was playing. Walt Watkins gave him a set of Nick Driver bones. Dennis applied for membership and is our youngest member.

(Morning Highlights continued from page 1)

Don DeCamp from Redfield, IA with his rhythmic style is always a crowd pleaser, and the stylish Walt Watkins from Arlington, TX played like he was warming up for the Avoca Bones Contest.

I think this performer surprised us all, Steve Wixson with his creative performance of the cave man bones player with a bone sticking from the sides of his head gave his presentation "The Legend of Mr Bones" in a rap style—very good, Steve

Nick Driver made his presence felt playing to his music and playing various types of rhythms. Following him came Russ Myers playing very good rhythm and changing pitch with his bones, an outstanding performance Russ.

Also I was impressed by Joe Birl's presentation on the pattern of the bones and the history of Joe's playing. He is truly a legend.

In summary, let me say that Bones Fest V was a great success and I'm looking forward to Bones Fest VI to

## Bones Fest V Evening Highlights

Saturday night at Bones Fest V was an attempt to open our fest to the general public and give each bones player a chance to showcase their playing. And a showcase it was with contrasting styles, music and stage presence to an audience of approximately 100-150, many of whom had never seen the bones before! Both the old masters and relatively new bones players took their turns, and giving it their all, each and everyone a delight to me, as I saw the night unfold before my eyes almost exactly as I had envisioned it some months before. Fiddler Dave Reiner and his two sons again provided live music.

The evening was divided into two halves with Spike Bones Muher opening the first half and Norm Conrad's Mini Minstrels opening the second half. Both Spike and Norm were given 15 minutes to do a more in depth presentation, Spike to give the

general public an introduction to the bones and Norm to present his version of the minstrel show. Each of the other participants were asked to perform one number and keep their total time within 5 minutes. One performer, Nick Driver, played twice, the least we could do after he came all the way from England!

Clearly every bones player did an outstanding job, but some remain as highlights to me. I want to retell the evening as I remember it with apologies to anyone I leave out or misrepresent.

Don Decamp displays one of the most unique styles I have ever seen. He played "The Beaumont Rag" and "Sweet Georgia Brown," the former of which was just great. Later in the evening he and his son Larry played to a prerecorded version of "Alabama Jubilee" in a duet style and looked like they were standing in front of a mirror. The energy was just incredible and they just brought the house down.

Jerry Mescher once again showed an amazing staccato, syncopated style, reminiscent of rudimental drumming. Clean, yet full of emotion and powerful, Jerry's playing continues to amaze and inspire me. He played to a Joanne Castle recording of the Scott Joplin rag time piano classic "Maple Leaf Rag" weaving his magic and accompanying the music perfectly. An additional treat was Jerry's duets with his sister Bernie Worrell. Showing the style which certainly makes her an expert bones player in her own right and certainly the best woman bones player I have seen, Jerry and Bernie demonstrate a style of playing the bones as a duet which as far as I know Jerry and his father began, truly amazing. They played to a recording of the "Dark Town Stutters Ball" in identical western wear shirts and pants and were great!

For many years I have carried and played a set of bones made by Nicholas Driver. During Bones Fest V I not only got to meet Nick and see him play, but got to know him as a person and what a great experience it was. Easily winning the award as the bones player who traveled the longest distance, Nick thrilled us with his stories of his Grandfather, and his playing. During his individual performance he did a rousing version of Rag time Annie, and

(Continued on page 4)

*(Continued from page 3)*

later thrilled us with a duet with Bonnie Dixon of acappella voice and bones, well done Nick and Bonnie!

Saturday night included another great duet. Last fall I had the great pleasure of meeting Elwin "Shorty" Boulet of Whitefield, NH. Shorty just captivated me with his enthusiasm and energy and his great love of music. Seeing Shorty playing away with his eyes closed and emerged in the music is a great sight. He and Ernie Duffy of Campton, NH, a great player in his own right, gave us a taste of bones duet "New Hampshire" style on "Bow on the fiddle." At one point

Shorty plays the bones of various points of his body including his head! Don't try this at home.

Russ Myers continues to amaze me in his subtle but intricate style changing tone in his inimitable way. Russ seems to play effortlessly and shows great command of the instrument as well as a real connection to the music. His rendition of "Golden Slippers" with Dave and his sons showed a great chemistry between the two and convinced me that emphasizing live music is the way to go at bones fest.

One of the amazing things about Bones Fest is you never really know who will show up. Largely due to the

local publicity by Bill Rose, we had the great pleasure of meeting Dave Gagne. Dave who lives in Princeton, MA, some 20 miles from my house, has been playing the bones for 60 years! Not only had we never met, I never even heard of him! Dressed in a western style shirt and hat, he displayed a great style playing "Down Yonder" and was well received by the audience and fellow bones players alike!

What truly may be the only bones playing opera singer and conga drum duet in history, Adam Kline delighted everyone with his strong vocals and unique bones playing. He and his

*(Continued on the Insert)*



## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*

(Continued from page 4)

friend Constance Cook played a rousing version of "Pick a bale of cotton" and had the whole audience singing and dancing in their seats.

Space simply does not permit me to elaborate on the other great performances but they included: John "Mr. Bones" Cahill showing great style in dress as well as bones playing accompanying a tape of Polka's, Dr. Jerry Barnett's amazing stories and fine accompaniment on "Andy's Waltz" an original tune by Andy Reiner, Tim Riley an incredible young bones player and sailor from Mystic, CT displayed an intricate style on a set of Irish reels, Newsletter Editor Steve Wixson making an incredible transition to a two hand bones player and doing a superb accompaniment to a pre-recorded Doyle Dykes finger picking guitar piece, Joe Birl's entertaining stories and energetic version of Red Wing all done at the age of 85 years, Gerard Arsenaault all the way from Quebec charming both in personality and bones playing, played to Dave Reiner and band playing an interesting French Canadian tune and wearing a wooden tie, Executive Director Ev Cowette's energetic "Black Mountain Rag," Donald Lee Clair showed his stuff on "Turkey in the Straw," Sally Carroll doing a fine version of the tune "Chinese Breakdown," Rob Rudin did a great job to Dave's version "Orange Blossom Special," Carleton Johnson demonstrating a unique one handed style with metal bones, 100th Bones Society member Tom Coyle playing energetically to the Swallow Tail Jig, Jim Nelson from Wilton, NH told a great story about local bones player "Happy Day" and doing a nice version of "Sweet Georgia Brown," Walt Watkins all the way from Texas did a great job on "Cripple Creek" and relative new comer Lisa Wilkins joining in on "Old Joe Clark."

Once everyone had been given a chance to play all bones players came up and all played together for several tunes (see photo on Page 4). The inevitable conga line formed and

bones were played around the whole hall! At one point I stepped out of the line and watched as each player took their turn moving in front of me. I played with each one and what a great experience to enjoy each persons company! Although 32 bones players played on Saturday night performance several others were in the audience and joined in making the total 44 bones players. I can't thank everyone enough for coming and helping me see

## Minutes of Board of Director's Meeting

Ev Cowett, Executive Director, called the meeting to order at 4:30 pm on August 3, 2001 at the Red Apple Barn in Phillipston, MA. Steve Wixson read the minutes of last year's Board and Membership meetings. The minutes were approved. He also read the email motion approving the Honorary Member category and selecting Ted Goon as the first Honorary member. This action was reaffirmed. An interim Treasurer's Report was presented but not approved. The Treasurer's Report will be submitted in October after the fiscal year ends.

Steve Brown reviewed his plans for the upcoming Fest. A discussion followed. The Fest is getting big enough that a Program Committee is needed to support the local host. Motion was made and approved that the Board of Directors be the Program Committee for Bones Fest VI augmented with the local host and volunteers. The date for the Fests was discussed and should be consistent from year to year so that people can plan. Motion was made and approved to allow the Program Committee to select this date. (*Editor note: Bone Fest V financially broke even.*)

A motion was made and approved that the Board adopt a logo and it be based around the hands in the Mount painting titled 'The Bones Player.' Ev Cowett volunteered to handle this.

The Board again served as Nominating Committee for election of

Officers and Board Members at the Membership meeting. The motion was made and approved to resubmit the previous Board for election.

A motion was made and approved to bring up the Frank Brower Meritorious Serve Award for reconsideration at the Membership Meeting.

## Minutes of Membership

Ev Cowett called the meeting to order at 4:40 pm on August 4, 2001 in the Red Apple Barn in Phillipston, MA. Motion was made and approved to dispense with reading of the minutes.

There was an election of Officers and Board members. The Board presented the previous Officers and Board members for election and Ev opened the floor for additional nominations. The motion was made and approved to close nominations and elect the nominees by acclamation.

A motion was made and seconded to rename the Frank Brower Meritorious Service Award in honor of Percy Danforth. A discussion of blackface minstrelsy followed. The original motion was withdrawn and a straw vote was held as guidance to the Board in support of naming the award the RBS Meritorious Service Award. The straw vote heavily favored the generic name.

Steve Wixson asked for ideas for new directions for the newsletter. He publicly thanked Sally Carroll for her editorial review of the newsletter.

Walt Watkins announced National Park Service ceremonies to commemorate the Civil War. There are funds for bones players for those who would like a paid gig.

Ev Cowett passed on a apology from Martha Cowett, web mistress. The website was down due to a lighting strike, but is in operation again.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:15





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 4, No. 1 2002

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## Executive Director's Column

Planning for BONES FEST VI, set for the Guilford College campus in Greensboro, NC on Aug. 2-4, 2002, is well under way. If you would like for us to add something special there is still time to do it. Please contact me or any board member ASAP. This will be a highlight event for the Rhythm Bones Society.

As I write this column a 2 hour video of the evening program at BFV is being copied. It is a great tape and already a collector's item for bones players everywhere. The old timers that many of you have seen before such as Spike Bones, John Cahill, Jerry Barnett, Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, Russ Myers, Steve Wixson, Joe Birl, Steve Brown, Walt Watkins, Sally Carroll and others are at their best. There were many new performers at the Fest that many of us had never met before that we all learned a lot from. Gerard Arsenault, Shorty

Boulet, Nick Driver, Adam Klein, Ernie Duffy, Donny DeCamp and son Larry, Jim Nelson, Lisa Wilkins, Norm Conrad, Donald Lee Clair, Rod Rudin, Bonnie Dixon, Jam'in James Bones and Carlton Johnson were great. We are hopeful that these new faces and many of the absentees will be present in Greensboro for the time of our lives at Bones Fest VI.

The Reiner Family Fiddle Band provided the music. They did an outstanding job and it shows on the tape. Each bones performer has their name superimposed over their picture so you can meet them up-front and close. Whether you were present or not this video is a must for your collection of bones memorabilia. We ordered 60 copies for this printing and they are available on a first-ordered basis; therefore, get your order in now (see insert to order). May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

## Vivian Cox—Performing Is In Her Bones

Vivian Cox has played the bones for more than 70 years. Real bones. Rib bones. Bones from a cow. Music.

By her own account, she is a "bones virtuoso," and entertains several times a week at the Boggstown Inn and Cabaret.

Cox, who lives in rural Shelbyville, claims she's the only [professional] female bones player in the world. She's never heard of another—and she should know. Over the years, she has attended "bones" conventions in California, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia and other locations. No one has ever refuted that claim.

Most weekends, Cox plays at the luncheon at the Boggstown Inn.

Russell Moss, co-owner of the cabaret, is very proud of his senior performer.

"Vivian is classy, unique and very professional," said Moss. "She's definitely a novelty, she loves people and she's an inspiration to our senior patrons."

Over the years, Cox has taken her "bones show" on the road and met many celebrity music artists and entertainers. In 1996 she performed at the Thunderbird Theater in

Branson, Mo.

"I met Arthur Duncan, the famous tap dancer from the Lawrence Welk Show, and he told me that he could learn some pointers from me," she laughs.

Edward Cox is supportive of his wife but somewhat bemused by her notoriety.

*(Continued on page 3)*



Vivian Cox playing her bones with the Boggstown Inn band.

## Editorial

This issue marks the beginning of a new column titled 'Tips and Techniques.' It was suggested by Jennifer Cutting of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress (she receives a complimentary copy of the newsletter for their Bones file). I write the first one on Tuning Bones, but hopefully in the years ahead many of you will contribute your expertise.

The feature article is on Vivian Cox, and is reprinted from the Indianapolis Star newspaper. The article says that Vivian is the only female bones player, but our membership survey shows there are 15% female. However, to the best of our knowledge, she is one of a handful of regularly performing professional female bones players in the world. Vivian is a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Congratulations, Vivian!

This issue reviews Percy Danforth's Bones Instructional Video. This video should have been the first video reviewed as it has taught more people to play the bones than any known video. In our membership survey, 20% of our members credit Percy in some

## Letters to the Editor

Thanks to Bill Rexroad for the raw buffalo os he sent me gratis from Kansas. (In case you don't know the word 'os,' it means bones or bones material.) After contacting Bill, here came a box the size of 3 or 4 shoeboxes. I pulled out hunks of American Bison (the correct name) bone the size of Barry Bond's baseball bats! Some even with dry hunks of hide clinging. I haven't yet carved 'em down to playing bones, but my bone-saw is ready and my scrapers are sharp. So when I finish a pair o' authentic Kansas Prairie American Bison shin-bone (os) rhythm bones, then I'll let all y'all know how they sound. Love the newsletter. Long live the bones!

**'Bones Forever** by Jim Connor  
Long live 'bones and may your tribe increase

May the rhythm of the 'bones bring you peace!  
May your spouse or friend put up with you  
As the music of the 'bones sees you thru.  
Friends of the 'bones are everywhere  
Some ride the road, some fly the air  
And we all know when on earth we're thru  
There'll be a set of heavenly bones waiting for  
you

*Jim Connor*

Dear Editor,

This letter is to update you on a "speech" problem that I have. I work out at the gym 3 times a week, chop wood, work in my workshop and still see all the Falcon games. I have played over 40 gigs this year -- playing bones with Mr. Bones & Co.-- & a few gigs with other bands. I am writing you to make it VERY CLEAR that my BRAIN is still working fine - except that I have a difficult time speaking and I stutter and stammer. It is a condition called "progressive aphasia." It is totally frustrating for me but there is no medical cure for the problem. It is a "WORD FINDING" problem and I know what I want to say but can't find the words. If I am looking for a word like *watch*, for example, I can tell you "it is something that you wear that tells time" -- but that word (watch) totally escapes me at that moment.

Those of you who have seen me recently or talked by phone, I am sure you know of the problem but maybe not the details.

Keep up the great e-mail. If you call (or see me in person) - PLEASE have LOTS OF PATIENCE - and SPEAK SLOWLY. I will get the words out

## Bones Calendar

**March 21, 2002.** Barry "Bones" Patton and the Byron Berline Band will be on stage for opening night of the Broadway revival of the musical Oklahoma.

**April 19-21, 2002.** New England Folk Festival, Natick High School, Natick, MA. Plans include a bones workshop and performance by Rhythm Bones Society members. For more information on bones activities contact Steve Brown (bones@crystal-mtn.com). For more information on New England Folk Festival visit their web site: [www.neffa.org/~neffa](http://www.neffa.org/~neffa). Ev Cowett says he's making every effort to come. Dave Reiner and the boys will be the musical

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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First Quarter 2002

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

back up.

**August 2-4, 2002.** Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details in this and future newsletters. Note date change!

**August 31, 2002.** 27th Annual Bones

## Website of the Quarter

[Http://c.sinclair.tripod.com/bones02.htm](http://c.sinclair.tripod.com/bones02.htm). Chet Sinclair, the videographer for Bones Fest VI, presents highlights from his video of the event that is now available for purchase. See Executive Director's Column and newsletter insert for

## Recorded Bones Music

**Bones Fest V video.** See Executive Director's column on page 1 for a description. See Website of the Quarter above for a preview. Order using newsletter insert.

## Review of Percy Danforth Instructional

The video begins with a long solo demonstration of Percy Danforth playing the bones while the credits for the video are overlaid. Percy presents a history of the bones beginning with the possibility that pre-historic people played them around the cooking fire. He traces them through the Mediterranean, Middle Ages and to Ireland and England.

He then demonstrates the basics. How to hold the bones. How to make the tap. How to do the triplet. His descriptions are full of detail and demonstration. He then shows the roll. These are all done with one hand.

He then begins his two-handed bones instruction. First with both hands doing the same thing. Then with each hand doing something different including 2 beats against 3, rolls with accents, syncopation, roll in one hand against a tap in the other, roll against a triplet and tap, single triplets alternating between hands, 7 beat roll, 13 beat roll, rolls with syncopation beats and finally flam taps.

He describes how to keep bones from slipping out of your hands by rubbing the bones with a mix of beeswax and rosin.

He demonstrates how to tune the bones, how to quiet the bones, how to play with anvil bone between thumb and first finger and how to change pitch from that position.

Percy then gives a bit of his own personal history of learning how to play the bones. He learned from his dad after seeing school kids play with them. He remembers Afro-American men playing bones and sand dancing when he lived in Washington, DC.

He talks about the people he has taught and that he has sold and given away 17,000 pairs of bones. He shows a variety of different materials used to make bones.

The rest of the video is full of Percy playing the bones with different musical instruments and different styles of music including jigs, polka, country and many more.

*(Vivian Cox continued from page 1)*

"I knew she could play the bones when I married her, but I never gave it a second thought till I found out how much people liked it," he said. "She's very outgoing and loves to entertain. I suppose she'll be rattling those bones till either she can't drive over there anymore or her arms wear out."

Cox, 80, was born just across the border in Rush County but grew up near Waldron and graduated from high school there. She recently attended her 60th class reunion.

"It was great! There were only 50 of us in the entire class and 16 were able to attend," she said.

About a year after graduating she married Edward, who was a Marine. He is a retired well-driller and she is a retired retail clerk. The couple, who raised three boys and three girls, will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary next year.

When she was 8, Cox was introduced to playing the bones by her father.

"I saw my uncle play the bone and Dad knew I was fascinated," she said. "He made bones for me from the ribs of a butchered beef cow. Playing the bones may look easy, but it took me years of practice to get any good at it."

"I came in first place at an amateur talent contest when I was 14," she said proudly. "I won \$5, and I still have that five-dollar bill."

Cox explains that bones playing is percussion only. There are no musical notes involved, but a player must get the right "clacking" sound.

Not just any old bones will do. They must be the right length, width, thickness and shape. Some players use wood, but rib bones are the best because they're curved.

"That makes for easier holding," she said. "The sound resembles tap shoes on a wood floor."

According to Cox, bones playing was popular in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was common on Southern Plantations, street corners, dance halls, and in school yards.

It was primarily associated with

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Tips and Techniques Tuning Wood Bones

Most wood bones need to be tuned to make their best sound. What is the best sound is very subjective and no two people may agree on what is best. Tuning is not to be confused with changing the pitch while playing as demonstrated by Russ Myers and others. A better name might be harmonic tuning.

In general, if two people hold the same bones in the same identical position, the sound will not be the same. Tuning depends on many factors; size of fingers, type of bone material, shape of the bones, position of the stationary bone and probably other factors. I hold wood bones with the stationary bone between first and second fingers. I do not like the sound of my real bones in that position and hold that stationary bone between thumb and first finger.

The size (diameter) of the fingers and shape of the bones determines where on the bone contact is made. Place a pair of bones in your hand and notice where they touch. Separate the bones next to the fingers and note that the touch point moves down. That changes the sound.

Percy Danforth, in his video, talks about tuning Danforth bones. He starts with both bones a half inch or so above his fingers and moves the stationary bone up until he gets the sound he likes.

I tried this using my computer to record the sounds. I used the Cool Edit audio editing program and its frequency analysis plug-in. With the bones even with each other, a dull sound was heard and there was a weak dominant frequency on the computer curve. When the stationary bone was raised to produce the sound I liked, the frequency curve showed a dominant frequency or pitch suggesting a purer sound.

Ev Cowett would like to understand how the sound from bones is produced. While I cannot explain that, it would appear that tuning wood bones is similar to locating harmonics on a guitar. It would make sense that the underlying physics of sound production would apply to bones, but since their structure is complex, figuring out exactly how the sound is made will be

*(Vivian Cox continued from page 3)*

slave culture and black-face minstrel shows and played along with instruments such as piano and banjo.

“Bones playing requires technical skill and practice,” she said. “It takes a lot of energy. You ought to feel the muscles in my arms.”

“Bones playing also existed in Europe during the Middle Ages. “It was used by lepers who were obliged to sound them to warn frightened people of their approach,” Cox said.

“Percussion bones go back even further than that and were on Greek urns, Egyptian bas-reliefs and on markers of pre-historic grave sites,” said Cox.

“So you see, I have joined an ancient and proud fraternity that stretches all the way back to mankind's prehistoric beginnings.”

Cox's career at the Boggstown Inn started as a dare more than 14 years ago when she and her husband were the dinner guests of former owner Carlos Gray.

He put her on the spot by

challenging her to get up on stage and entertain.

“Carlos had no idea that I was going to play the bones,” laughs Cox. “The crowd loved it and everybody had fun. I've been there ever since.”

The Boggstown Inn and Cabaret, a dinner theater, features music mainly from the '20s, '30s and '40s.

Performers don authentic period costumes and stage full production shows that include lots of comedy, sing-alongs and vaudevillian skills.

For three years it has been owned and operated by Moss and Brad Zumwalt and is open year-round, except in January. It hosts more than 250 bus tour engagements annually. Reservations are required.

Cox is also a hostess at the Cabaret. She enjoys greeting and seating people but especially loves to entertain the crowds with music, jokes and storytelling.

“I get to wear dazzling, colorful outfits with beads, feathered boas and gaudy hats,” she said.

“I perform for luncheons, bus tours and dinner shows. This job never gets old because there's always somebody new to entertain.” *Ron*

Mark your calender

Bones Fest VI

Guilford College

Greensboro, North Carolina

August 2, 3 & 4, 2002

Everett Cowett, Host

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 4, No. 2 2002

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## Executive Director's Column

BONES FEST VI plans are receiving the final touch. The Fest will take place August 2-4 on the Guilford College campus in Greensboro, NC. See <[www.guilford.edu/](http://www.guilford.edu/)> for a virtual campus tour. The college is located on the corner of Friendly and New Garden Roads. Overnight accommodations will be available to us at approximately \$50 per night for singles, \$40 for doubles and \$30 for seniors. This cost includes 3 meals per day in the cafeteria in Founders Hall. You can reserve your accommodations on the Guilford website or regular mail. Details on the enclosed form.

Call the Greensboro Visitors Bureau at 800-344-2282 and visit <[www.greensboro.org](http://www.greensboro.org/)> for excellent information about our city.

Your Board of Directors will meet on the afternoon of August 2 at 1:00 pm. You are all invited to this very important meeting.

On Friday night, August 2, we will have

member registration and a reception in the Boren Lounge in Foundation Hall from 6:30 pm to 11:00 pm. Heavy hors d'oeuvres, wine and beer will be served throughout the evening. An opportunity to get to know other bones players.

Bones demonstrations and semi-formal introductions will commence on Saturday, August 3, at 10:00 am in the Jos. Bryan Jr. Auditorium (located in the new Frank Family Science Center). A brief business meeting will follow this full day of demonstrations.

A banquet, without speeches, will be held Saturday evening, August 3, from 6:00-8:00 pm in Founders Hall. Immediately following the banquet we will have a public performance in the Jos. Bryan Jr. Auditorium. The make-up of this event will be determined during the Saturday sessions. You may be part of it if you so desire.

On Sunday, August 4, we plan to meet at 8:00 am in the cafeteria in Founders Hall for a long good-by breakfast. May your bones be with you.

## Mel Mercier

Mel Mercier is a special friend to the RBS, and, as one of the best bones players in the world, it is an honor to have him as a member of the Society and on our Board of Directors. He is a performer, teacher, composer, arranger, producer and student.

Mel's legacy is through his father, Peadar, who was part of the seminal Irish group, Ceoltoiri Cualann, organized by Sean O Riada who some credit as starting the modern era of bodhrán and bones playing. Some of the Ceoltoiri Cualann musicians, including Peadar, went on to form the now famous Chieftains.

Here is what Mel says about his early bones playing days. "Something in me always hesitates for a moment (in disbelief) when it hears me saying that I have been playing the bones for about thirty years now! I don't know exactly when I began to play but it was certainly in my early 'teens if not before. My earliest bones-playing recollection sees me sitting in the bathroom of our house in

*(Continued on page 5)*



Mel Mercier from Rhythm Bones Society's Founding Members Group Photograph at Bones Fest III



## Editorial

The newsletter is expanding to six pages, and if members continue to contribute, such as Steve Brown in this issue, eight pages may be needed.

The feature article is on member Mel Mercier. Mel is also a member of your Board of Directors, and helps guide the Society in the right direction. Being from Ireland and performing around the world, he gives us an all important international perspective.

Steve Brown has two reports. The first is his bones workshop at the recent NEFFA event. The other is an announcement of his Rhythm Bones Chat Group hosted by Yahoo on the Internet. I had hoped that Letters to the Editor would be a way for members to exchange ideas, but this is only somewhat successful. The Rhythm Bones Chat Group is the modern way to do it. Sign up and give it a try. I did.

I recently sent email to members and non-members asking for items for an expanded Bones Calendar, and this issue sees a modest increase in the Calendar. You are encouraged to submit events where you play the bones.

I played at a couple of events that I now would put in the Calendar, a Coffeehouse for a local church and a

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Rhythm Bones Society,

Our committee is delighted to have made contact with you and hope maybe we could compete in each other's festivals in the future. This is our last year calling ours The All-Ireland Bone-Playing competition as we would hope to make it an International event. We would like to see our Bone-Playing Competition have a broad set of rules and regulations which would cover both of our countries and perhaps Canada which I believe has pockets of bone-players also. We would greatly appreciate any thoughts or ideas you might have regarding your bone players coming to Ireland to compete or vice versa. Perhaps you could send us a regular copy of your Rhythm

Bones" Newsletter and we will keep you informed of the happenings in Abbeyfeale. The town has a very strong traditional music, song and dance background and our festival each Bank Holiday Weekend in May attracted the cream of talent in the country. This is our eleventh traditional festival in the town and each one seems to get bigger and better. Pat Sport Murphy's son Jack told me he is recording this year's festival for you and he also has the last three or four Bone-Playing competitions recorded so we will try and send them to you and your members. *Dan Murphy*, Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, Ireland

Subject: Vivian Cox Story  
Hiya Steve,

Yes indeed you have found another female bones player and I have played for eleven years or so now. My teacher was another female bones player, the mighty Monica Sullivan. In fact here in Sligo (Ireland) I know another three female bone players which is very healthy for the tradition.

I play bones at every concert and try to have them on every album. They are featured a few times on the *Live in Palma* album. Now I'm going to rest my weary bones. All the best. *Cathy Jordan* (Cathy sings vocals and plays

## Bones Calendar

**May 11, 2002.** Aaron Plunkett plays bones and drums for a benefit concert of Anlo Ewe music from Ghana Africa. 818-569-5465

**June 6-9, 2002.** Sea Music Festival. The featured musicians are Martin Carthy, Finest Kind, The Ancient Mariner Chanteymen, The Barrouallie Whalers, and Deb Cowan. Many other musicians will also perform including myself and Tim Reilly. There will be lots of bones playing. The festival includes concerts each of the four evenings and a full schedule of activities all day on Saturday and Sunday. The phone number for information and tickets is 860-572-5315. *Bonnie Dixon*

**June 16-22, 2002.** Gaelic Roots, Boston College. Mel Mercier and Tommy Hayes lead workshops on June 17th. See [www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/irish/gr.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/irish/gr.html) for details.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

**June 21, 22, 23, 2002.** The California Traditional Music Society will be presenting their 20th Annual Summer Solstice Music, Dance and Storytelling Festival at SOKA University in Calabasas, CA. Among many other things going on that weekend, I will be co-teaching (with Molly Bennett) a bones workshop on Saturday and I will be teaching (solo) another bones workshop on Sunday. For much more information about CTMS and the festival, visit: [www.ctms-folkmusic.org/festival/index.html](http://www.ctms-folkmusic.org/festival/index.html).  
*Michael Ballard*

**August 2-4, 2002.** Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details and Registration Form in this newsletter.

**August 31, 2002.** 27th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher (712-658-2211)

**Gemini Concerts.** Here is the Gemini concert schedule. I play the bones in all

(Continued on page 3)



(Calendar—Continued from page 2)

of these shows. Refer to our website [www.geminichildrensmusic.com](http://www.geminichildrensmusic.com) for details. *Sandor Slomovits*

**May 18**, Lansing, MI, 517-319-6804 or [www.elartfest.com](http://www.elartfest.com)

**June 1**, Flint, MI, 810-232-0145

**June 9**, Southfield Philharmonic Southfield, MI, 248-569-9420 [www.cityofsouthfield.org](http://www.cityofsouthfield.org)

**June 20**, Applewood/Ruth Mott Foundation, Flint, MI, 810-233-3031

**June 28**, Holland, MI, 616-396-3278

**June 28**, Fremont, MI, 231-928-3455

**July 9**, Huntington Woods, MI, 248-541-3030

**July 11**, St. Ignace, MI, 800-338-6660

**July 12**, Harbor Springs, MI, 231-526-2815

## Rhythm Bones Yahoo Chat Group

One of the best things for me at Bones Fest is the opportunity to talk to other bones players. Hearing how people got started, what material their bones are made from, stories of where they've played and just about anything about bones they want to talk about. When I came back from bones Fest IV I got an idea, what about starting a bones discussion group on the Yahoo Groups site? They have many percussion groups and 3 or 4 on the Bodhran alone, but none for the bones. *Rhythm Bones: The most Ancient of Instruments* was born.

Yahoo Groups is a place where people can go to discuss any topic they like as long as they stay within the parameters of good taste and civility. At the Rhythm Bones group topic's have ranged from the Minstrel Show, to playing styles, telling your own personal bones story, to discussing bones players on recordings. It's quite simple to join, simply follow the instructions at [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) located in the groups section. Initially few people joined, and the site saw little traffic. Now with many new members, we stand at 20 members and counting. So if the urge hits you to have a little contact with your fellow bones players in the context of a discussion, drop in and start posting those messages. We'd love to hear from you! *Steve*

## All-Ireland Bones Playing Competition

The All-Ireland Bones Playing Competition is one of the highlights of the "Fleadh by the Feale" festival in Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick. The fest is held every year on the first week-end of May and this will be its 8th year. The bones playing competition is held on Monday evening.

The competition is open air and a crowd of around a thousand people attend. Generally there would be anything up to twenty entrants and it's growing every year. One can hear a pin drop when each competitor takes the stage. Sizeable cash prizes are up for grabs for those who win 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. Also there is an under-age competition for those young enthusiastic bone players.

Abbeyfeale has always had a bone playing tradition mainly due to one local man, Pat 'Sport' Murphy, a man of up to seventy years, but boy can he play those bones (see RBP, Vol 2, No 3 for a story on Sport). Donal Murphy, son of Dan Murphy, one of the organizers, says "I've been involved in traditional music all my life as an accordion player and have recorded with lots of people in Ireland, but I have to say I've never met anyone with the same understanding and ornamentation as Sport Murphy. I am very fortunate to have played for Sport on each occasion that he has played in the competition." Sport, by the way, has never been beaten, and he is back to defend the title this year. Winners of the event are not allowed to compete in the following year's competition.

Norma Prendiville wrote an Internet story about last year's event ([www.limerick-leader.ie/issues/20010512/news09.html](http://www.limerick-leader.ie/issues/20010512/news09.html)). In it she wrote that the tradition of bones playing has been given a new lease on life in Abbeyfeale where it has flourished and become an integral part of the annual event. The event organizers, inspired by Sport Murphy, decided to re-introduce what had become a dying tradition and

inaugurated a national bones playing competition.

"We were struggling with it for a while," said Dan Murphy, "but now we are almost turning them away."

The adjudicator for last year's event was Seamus O'Kane, and he had his work cut out to choose the winners. What does he think makes a good bones player? "A good player can roll the bones. They can get different sounds from the bones. Precise timing is important as well."

But he admitted that the standard among the top four players was "very tight. No one in the top four could have been left out."

He awarded the top honor to Paddy Donovan, with Richie Breen a close second. Brian Hickey and David Murphy took joint third.

Previous winners have included only Sport Murphy and Paddy Donovan. Adjudicators in previous years have included Mel Mercier.

Donal says they allow two-handed bones playing in the event. Maybe someone from the States should compete in the event to give them someone different to compete against. Visiting Ireland, of course, would make it a glorious vacation.

The only other known bones competition is the Spoons and Bones Contest at the National Traditional Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa held for the past 27 years in late September. This is a smaller event, but has produced some very good winners.

Maybe a third bones playing contest is needed open to only those who have come in 1st, 2nd or 3rd in either the Abbeyfeale or Avoca events. That winner would be crowned the World Bones Playing Champion. (See Dan's Letter to the Editor for his

## Bones Recordings

**Live in Palma.** An album from the Irish band Dervish with Cathy Jordan playing bones on a few tracks (see her Letter to the Editor.) Dervish CD's are available from their online shop [dervish.ie/acatalog/](http://dervish.ie/acatalog/)

## Old Bones at NEFFA

The New England Folk Festival held 20 miles outside of Boston in Natick, MA brings together an eclectic group of musicians and dancers each year. This year was no exception with the program listing Yiddish and Klezmer music, African string band, and Turkish Village music and workshops in Irish tin whistle, hurdy gurdy, ukulele and accordion.

In addition, though, this year brought together Rhythm Bones players from around New England to perform and teach the bones to all who would partake. With such notables as Elwin 'Shorty' Boulet, 81 years young, Johnny Muisse originally from Nova Scotia and others from Maine to Vermont clicking their way into the hearts of all present.

An audience of more than 100 arrived for the performance section entitled "A Feast of New England Bones" and watched as bones players of various age and experience level displayed their expertise. Accompanied by Dave Reiner on Fiddle and Piano duty split between Ryan Thomson and Cal Howard, the music was excellent and provided just the right mix of styles. Of course Shorty and Johnny are my favorites, but George Barrett shined on *Alabama Jubilee*, Parker Waite displayed his virtuosity on the metal bones, Ken Sweeny on bones and harmonica performed a special duet with Tim Reilly, and Ernie Duffy with his 14 year old protégé' Sky wowed them with Shorty like movements. One of the highlights was Jonathan Danforth and Rob Rudin marching in playing bones in unison and Jon switching to fiddle and using his bones like a bow, much to the delight of the crowd.

All took the stage at the end, played together and individually, and set the scene for the "How to Play the Bones Workshop" which followed. Most of the crowd stayed, and attempted to try their hand at playing the bones. With many converts, the bones proceeded to move into the hallway and the sounds of bones

## Tips and Techniques The Basics

What are the basics of playing any kind of rhythm bones. They are the number of hands used, the number of bones played, the grips, the position of the hands and the sound elements.

The RBS membership survey revealed that 70% of members play two-handed, 23% play one-handed and the rest play both ways. Traditionally the Irish have played one-handed.

The number of bones played in a hand is predominately two. Nick Driver and his father and others can or could play with four bones in each hand and I am fairly certain Brother Bones used four bones in each hand on his famous "Sweet Georgia Brown" recording. It is not too difficult to keep three bones lined up while playing, but keeping four bones lined up takes some practice.

The survey revealed that 65% of members grip the stationary bone between their first and second finger, 10% between their thumb and first finger, and 25% both ways. These numbers pertain to two bones in a hand, and the moving bone is gripped between the middle and ring finger. If four bones are used, the stationary bone is gripped between the thumb and first finger. If three bones are play, either way of gripping the stationary bone will work.

Most players hold the bones so they are almost vertical. The actual position of the hands relative to the body varies from being in front of the chest to hands stretched wide away from the body. The major exception are students of Dr. Fred Edmund's technique and who holds their hands such that the bones approach horizontal with the ground. This technique is based on the *tap* or single sound element, and the horizontal position allows gravity to pull the bones apart more quickly in preparation for the next beat.

The natural sound elements produced by the bones are the *tap*, *triplet* and *roll*. The sound is produced by a combination of wrist and arm motion with the wrist motion

similar to throwing a curve with a baseball. The *tap* is a single sound with outward arm and wrist movement only. The *triplet* is a series of three sounds with outward movement followed by an inward return to the starting position. The *roll* is a continuous series of triplets with continuous outward and inward arm and wrist movements. Loudness is controlled by the strength of the arm and wrist movement. Loudness can be reduced by intentionally misaligning the bones so they strike together on their edges.

Music is played using various combination of these basic elements plus silence. If playing with two hands, the same combinations can be played by both hands or difference combinations can be played in each hand. The latter requires more practice and skill.

A *tap* can be produced with the ring finger and no motion of the arm and wrist. Jerry Mescher plays what he calls a *two-beat* which is a *triplet* without the middle sound played with no arm movement and extra control with the ring finger. A *quadruplet* can be played with exaggerated arm movement while playing a *triplet*. Most bones players create a *quadruplet* by following a *triplet* with a *tap*.

Any multiple sound element can be created with fast *taps* either in one hand or two as with the Edmund technique. However, a *triplet* or *roll* created with taps can not be played as fast as a natural *triplet* or *roll*.

As a bones player's skill increases, forces created by exaggerated arm and wrist motions in space add nuances to the sounds produced. For these players, the use of the ring finger to control the moving bone increases.

Pitch change as demonstrated by Russ Myers and Aaron Plunkett could be considered a basic element, but let's leave that to another day.

Do you have other elements that you consider basic—that more complicated rhythm patterns can be build upon them. If so, send me a description and I will include in the next newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

# Review of Mel Mercier's Bodhrán and Bones Video

This instructional video contains instruction for both bodhrán and bones. A bones player might think this is a waste of video tape; however, for those interested in Irish music, the percussion insights provided in the bodhrán instruction applied directly to bones playing.

The bones instruction is at the end of the video and lasts 14 minutes. It consists of instruction followed by a very good demonstration with music.

Following a brief bones solo, the instruction begins with a description of bones and the different materials they are made from. Mel's favorite is an unusual combination of a cow rib and a black plastic bone (made by RBS member Joe Birl). He next shows how to grip the bones using both the thumb and first finger and first and second fingers styles. Mel uses the traditional Irish one-handed style of bones playing.

The actual instruction begins with the roll and he uses slow motion so the student can see what is happening. He notes the triplet nature of the beat lends itself to jig rhythms. After the roll motion is mastered, he moves on to how to control it with an exercise to start and stop cleanly. He shows variations using single beats before and after the triplet rolls. He concludes by playing a Jig-Reel with Seamus Eagan on the flute.

During a recent visit to Boulder, Colorado, I wondered into a jam session at a local Irish Pub. They welcomed me and my bones into the session as they were learning how to play the bones. They had Mel's video and were enthusiastically trying to master 'backbeats' on the bones as adapted from the bodhrán section of the video. I do not play bones in any traditional style, and they convinced me to get his video and learn some traditional Irish bones playing techniques.

To those of us who know Mel, he is a delightful person, and this comes across on the video. The video was produced by Interworld Music, is distributed

*(Mel Mercier—Continued from page 1)*

Blackrock in Dublin in the early 1970's playing along to the Chieftains as they rehearsed in our front room. With the bathroom door slightly ajar I could take advantage of the bright tile-acoustic while not disturbing the musicians as they played.

"In another early memory, again in the early 1970's, I am standing behind the curtain on the stage of a local convent waiting to be introduced by my father who was playing in a charity event with his Chieftain's colleague, flute player Michael Tubridy. I was about to make my stage debut playing both bodhrán and bones and I can still just remember the introduction of a 'special guest' and my pushing through the curtain to enter the stage to the warm applause of the audience.

"I learnt to play the bones and bodhrán from my father but I have little or no memory of the process. I do recall my own eagerness to play and I seem to remember my father responding to this with on-going, but informal, gentle coaching and encouragement. At that time I considered the bodhrán to be the essential traditional Irish rhythm instrument, with the bones sometimes in a secondary role."

Over the years bones have become more important to Mel and bodhrán and bones player Tommy Hayes calls him the greatest bones player alive.

Mel is one of Ireland's most important percussionists and teachers of Irish and world music. His interests stem from his own performance on bodhrán and bones but extend to Ghanaian drumming and the gamelan traditions of Java. In 1990 he went to study with the percussionist John Bergamo at the California Institute of the Arts where he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in World Music.

His other academic achievements include a Bachelor's Degree from University College Cork, a Fulbright scholarship and an American Foundation for Contemporary Arts research grant, and he was a visiting scholar and assistant professor of music at Connecticut's Wesleyan University in 1998-1999. At Wesleyan he taught Irish music, and studied gamelan, Karnatak voice and

percussion, and ethnomusicological theory.

Some of his most impressive bones playing is with pianist Mícheál O'Súilleabháin. Mícheál and Mel have been collaborating off and on for over 25 years. Mícheál's 1987 CD 'The Dolphin's Way' charted a new relationship for the two which has resulted in Mel guesting on almost all of Mícheál's CDs to date. Their shared composition 'Music Be More Crispy' is already a classic in Irish tradition through its use of Indian, Western Classical, Jazz and Irish Traditional music.

Mícheál and Mel recently completed a tour that marked their first duo partnership since their landmark recording and allowed audiences a rare opportunity to eavesdrop on the ongoing musical conversation between these highly individual performers and composers. Their tour included new compositions by both musicians for piano and percussion as well as some of the many classic tracks.

Mel performed on stage in Riverdance and John Cage's Roaratorio, with singers Mary Black and Áine Uí Cheallaigh, and keyboardist/composer Bill Whelan.

It was while Mel was in Connecticut that he met Ev Cowett, Russ Myers and several other American bones players. Mel attended Bones Fests III and IV, became a Founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society and was elected to its Board of Directors. The Society has had some influence on Mel as he, during the previously mentioned tour, performed in public for the first time playing bones with both hands.

An interesting story came out of Bones Fest III. As Mel introduced himself to the other bones players, he

## Bones Websites

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rhythmbones/>. Steve Brown's Rhythm Bones Chat Group.  
[scripts.ireland.com/dublin/find/continuereview.cfm?eventid=5400&category=music](http://scripts.ireland.com/dublin/find/continuereview.cfm?eventid=5400&category=music). A review of pianist Michael O'Suilleabhain and RBS member Mel Mercier 12 day performance tour. This was Mel's first public performance playing two-handed bones.

*(Mel Mercier—Continued from page 5)*

mentioned that his favorite bones were a combination of a real bone and a black plastic bone made in the States. Unfortunately, he had broken all his plastic bones, and

*(continued on Page 6)*

could not find a replacement.

Unbeknown to Mel the maker of those bones was sitting not five feet away, and before the day was over, Mel had several pairs of Joe Birl's patented bones to take home.

Mel is a lecturer in Music at University College Cork where he teaches courses in Irish, Indian, West African and Javanese music, and directs the UCC Javanese Gamelan. He regularly composes for contemporary dance and theatre. He has just completed the music for a new production (*The Powerbook*) at the National Theatre in London and a previous Abbey Theatre production of *Medea*, will travel to six US cities in the Fall.

Bodhrán and bones have taken him around the world. One recent trip was a week to Ankara and Istanbul with a Turkish singer and percussionists from Turkey,

Bulgaria, Italy, Portugal and Germany.

As a student, Mel is working toward a PhD and his thesis is on the Bones. We look forward to reading his thesis and learning more about our instrument. He has interviewed many of the best bones players in the world as part of his bones research.

When asked where bones fit into today, "All I can say now is that bones playing is a celebration of life!"

Buy one of these two CD's with Micheál O'Súilleabháin on piano and



Photograph of Mel Mercier playing bones at Bones Fest III

Mark your calendar

**Bones Fest VI**

Guilford College

Greensboro, North Carolina

August 2, 3 & 4, 2002

Everett Cowett, Host  
evcow@aol.com

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 4, No. 3 2002

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## Executive Director's Column

BONES FEST VI at Guilford College can make a difference in the changing world around us. The College campus already has great energy and the sounds of bones rattling away can only improve upon it. Energy is everything! Bones and bones players have it. There is something about the sounds made by this ancient instrument that brings smiles to faces, tapping of toes and the desire to dance or just clap your hands. Bones players have been doing this for well over 5,000 years and 2002 is no exception.

A great weekend is in store for all attendees. Many old and new faces plan to attend and I hope to visit with each of you sometime during the weekend.

Many of you will receive this newsletter at Bones Fest VI as part of our surprise 100th

anniversary celebration of the birthday of Brother Bones, an important figure in the history of modern bones playing. One of his recordings, Sweet Georgia Brown, theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters, one of the most played recordings in history though many people do not realize he is playing bones. Brother Bones, that is Freeman Davis, was a contemporary of our Honorary member, Ted Goon, and both of these bones players made bones popular again during the late 1940's and early 1950's.

Our surprise birthday celebration at Bones Fest VI will include a short biography, listening to some of his recordings, watching a short segment from one of his movies, *Yes Sir, Mr. Bones*, and sharing a 100th anniversary birthday cake.

May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

## BROTHER BONES' 100TH ANNIVERSARY

October 4, 2002 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Freeman Davis known to the world as Brother Bones. This little know fact was discovered by the Rhythm Bones Society, a group organized to preserve and promote bones playing, and they plan to honor his birthday at their upcoming Bones Fest.

Freeman was a recording artist during the late '40s and '50s and is most well known for his bones playing and whistling on *Sweet Georgia Brown*, a recording that became the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters.

Freeman was born on October 4, 1902 in Montgomery, Alabama, but came to Long Beach, California in 1918. He died June 14, 1974 at the age of 71 and was survived by his wife, Daisy, a daughter and two grandsons. His funeral was attended by movie stars, many of those African-American, and women sang the old songs, ones they had learned in church.

He recorded for Tempo Records and on the back of one of his Tempo releases it states that he was a carpenter. But a former neighbor, Ernie McBride, remembers him early on shining shoes. Both Freeman and Ernie had shoeshine stands in the vestibules of local



Brother Bones in high hat with four bones in each hand.  
Photograph courtesy of the Harlem Globetrotters

(Continued on page 5)

## Editorial

I come from an university background and like research. I was sitting at my desk one day looking at the material I had collected about Brother Bones and it hit me. I had looked at his obituary many times, but there it was—a hundredth birthday. I emailed Ev Cowett immediately. Here was a possible way to tell many people about rhythm bones and maybe find some more bones players. So the article was written in hopes it would get picked up by major newspapers or the Associated Press. Only time will tell. Let's celebrate his birthday at Bones Fest VI in Greensboro this August.

Bracha Ben-Avraham is a bones player in Israel and writes a long letter to the Editor about bones playing in her country.

Adam Klein submitted an article on getting kids interested in playing the bones. We should all try to emulate what he has done. Contact him for more details.

Walt Watkins submitted an article based on a trip he took to a military fort where he saw Civil War rhythm bones that some at the National Park Service thought were shoehorns. Bill Rexroad submitted an article based on a trip he took to Egypt where he saw ancient rhythm bones. Later Bill saw what he thought were rhythm bones for sale that turned out to be

## Letters to the Editor

**Subject: Tips and Techniques—TheBasics** Dr. Edmunds always made a point that the bones were the only percussion instrument played by striking the instrument in the "up" position rather than down as in drums, piano, xylophone, etc. Fred did exaggerate this when playing, but you will find that most players, while starting in the vertical position, play most of their first beats on the way up. In other words when they actually make their first strike the bones are horizontal. For what its worth. *Ev Cowett*

Dear Steve,

Boneologist--from the Treatise On Boneology by "Professor" William B. Everett, Salem, Mass. 1863. This pamphlet was of great interest to John Burrell when he came to visit. He wrote me a month before he died. Requested I make a copy for him. Had moved & couldn't find it to copy before I heard of his passing. Still can't find it. If anyone in the organization has any info on this item, I'd like to have a copy. Many thanx, *Hank Tenenbaum*, hankbones@earthlink.net

### Subject: Bones Playing in Israel

Greetings fellow bones players!

It might seem rather strange that there is a bones player living in Israel (Western Galilee to be more specific) who plays Irish music, but that's the bare bones of it. A history of bones in a book that I purchased in Ireland several years ago says that bones were played in ancient Egypt and shows an Egyptian drawing of musicians holding a set of decorated rhythm bones. If this is true, then bones were around in this part of the world long before they were brought over to the United States.

I first encountered bones in Ireland while I was participating in a bodhran class in the South Sligo School of Irish Music and Dance in County Sligo. During the midmorning coffee break I met Cathy Jordan – the singer and bodhran and bones player of "Dervish." Cathy showed me how to hold bones and demonstrated her two handed techniques – including a flashy demonstration of four bones in each

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Bones Calendar

**August 2-4, 2002.** Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details in the last newsletter (Vol 4, No 2). Note date change!

**August 31, 2002.** 27th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher.

## Websites of the Quarter

**www.irish-cream.net/braha.html.** Bracha wrote the Letter to the Editor in the column above. She is a member of the Rhythm Bones Society.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 4, No. 3  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

**www2.nlc-bnc.ca/gramophone/src/m2-1041-e.htm.** Old bones recordings.

Near the bottom of the page (below the group picture) it says .....consult the Virtual Gramophone database. Click on that. It then lists several pieces--several of which you can listen to. Great fun!  
*Sally Carroll*

## Recorded Bones Music

**Yes Sir, Mr. Bones.** Freeman Davis is one of many performers in this 1951 movie of a minstrel show. The movie is available on video.

**Sweet Georgia Brown.** This and several of Freeman Davis' bones recordings can be found by searching for Brother Bones on used record websites on the internet. One Tempo record (number unknown) is a collection of 12 of Freeman's hits including *Sweet Georgia Brown*. Do it now as the prices may go up when dealers learn that it's the 100th



## Tips and Techniques Making Bones

This will be a short article, but one I suspect will generate comments from other cow rib bones makers.

Storyteller Bud Bartram is one of the few cowboy bones players in our database. At age 98, he still occasionally entertains at his assisted care facility. His son, Gary, recently told me how he made bones to accompany himself on his 'harp.'

He played cow ribs and did not like the sound of wood bones. Being a working cowboy, he would occasionally come upon a sun dried carcass. The only useable bones came from the upper back part of the rib cage next to the shoulder where the bones were thin. He would select only about two bones from a carcass. He would cut 14 inches of bone with a saw in the field and later trim them to the proper length (about 7 inches). He would then break the bottom of a coke bottle and use that to scarp the bones until he got the sound or pitch he wanted. This could take hours and hours. He still plays a set that he made 60 years ago. *Steve Wixson*

## Interesting Find Among Civil War Memorabilia

Early in June 2001, I visited Fort Donelson, Tennessee near the Land Between the Lakes. In 1862 this was the CSA fort defending the Cumberland river against a Union invasion into Middle Tennessee. While there I noted a display of individual soldier's equipment the National Park Service representative said was typical for soldiers of both sides. Along with playing cards, jews harps, hard tack, stationery and the like was a beautiful pair of bones. I asked the representative what she thought they were for and she replied "they are shoe horns."

I picked them up and played a few rolls and noted that they were a great sounding pair of bones. I asked her to turn up the period music they were playing, and I played along. This drew a crowd and all were amazed,

including me. I had a ball. Needless to say those were no shoe horns. They resemble the bones you see in the painting "The Bone Player" done by William Sidney Mount in 1856 and on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (postcard copies were passed out at Bones Fests III & V). I wanted to know where they got those bones and they were willing to tell me, but their research has not turned up a single lead. The Park Service took the bones off the display as being too vulnerable to theft. I'll Say!!

I have since learned that they celebrated the 140th anniversary of Fort Donelson in February 2002, and had a big bash including reenactment. When I left Fort Donelson we visited several venues in the Land Between the Lakes area. We found mountain

## Bill Rexroad Finds Bones in Egypt

When I give talks at schools about the bones, one of the things I tell the children is that it is one of man's oldest musical instruments. Bones were known to exist in ancient Egypt more than three thousand years ago, I tell them. Pictures of people playing the bones were depicted in hieroglyphs found in tombs there. I had read this and believed it, but had no proof of it. I had always told myself that if I ever had the opportunity to go to Egypt I would find out if this were true. In 1998 my wife and I went there.

We saw many temples and tombs, all of which were adorned with hieroglyphs. At first I looked closely at as many as I could, but quickly came to realize there was no way I would be able to scrutinize the thousands and thousands of hieroglyphs that exist there. I narrowed my search to those depicting scenes of celebration. There were plenty of those to look at too, but I never saw any that showed a person playing the bones. Not until we visited the temple of Amon at Karnak.

On the southwest wall of the magnificent hall of columns in the

Sanctuary of Amon is a large hieroglyphic mural picturing a parade being held to honor Ramses II. Among the musicians in the parade is seen a person holding a pair of objects in one hand that could be nothing other than bones. Eureka!

Later we visited the famous Cairo Museum. About fifty feet inside the main door of the museum is a glass display case containing a collection of fine, unusually rare items, so said the sign on the case. One such item was a pair of ivory bones or at least something like bones. They were rather short and somewhat oval in shape instead of being long and slender. There was a small hole at the end of each one, presumable for attaching a string to go over the finger. One might think of them as being like castanets, but they were not really that either. Perhaps they fell somewhere in between bones and castanets. They dated back five thousand years.

On another day we went to the old Cairo bazaar and walked its narrow streets, enjoying all the sights, sound, and smells. The walks are lined with shops, one of which sold items carved from bone. In the window of that shop I saw what appeared to be a set of bones. It turned out that they were really shoehorns, but I bought a pair anyway. They were close enough to the correct size, shape and weight that a little filing has resulted in a pair of hand-carved, Egyptian, camel-bone bones.

## Bones Playing in Israel (Continued)

*(Continued from page 2)*

hand. I was immediately fascinated and decided then and there that I had to learn how to do this. I purchased my first set of bones (real bone ones) in Galway, and then took a ferry out to Inis Mor, a small island in Galway Bay, where I walked up and down the beach for a day and a half and eventually got out my first triplet. The rest, I imagine, is similar to all the rest of you. I spent several years only playing jigs (6/8), and then suddenly the reels (4/4) fell into place.

A bit about the bones scene here in

*(Continued on page 4)*

(*Bones in Israel continued from page 3*)

Israel – as far as I know, I am the only member of the Rhythm Bones Society in Israel, but I am not the only player. Uri Myles, an extremely versatile musician, who among other things plays flutes, accordion, Uilleann and Scottish bagpipes, tin whistles and bodhran with his band, *The Celtic Camel Project*, was the first bones player I have ever encountered here and I knew of no others at the time. I believe I became the second player, and Doron Raz who plays with an Irish band called the *Five Shamrocks*, took up the bones after receiving some instruction from me and became the third. The fourth player here – if that is indeed the total tally of all of us – is Abe Doron, the former percussion player of *Riverdance*, who settled in Jerusalem two years ago, and who is I am sure, by far the finest player of all of us. Abe plays percussion with a band called *Evergreen*.

I play, compose and perform Irish music with my band which is called *Irish Cream*. My main instrument in the band is the Irish bouzouki, but I haul out a pair of bones for a tune or two. We perform all over the country and, when things were more peaceful here, appeared in East Jerusalem where I brought bones across the border into the Palestinian Authority, which was, I'm willing to bet, their first appearance there.

Israelis are fascinated by bones, usually come up after the show, ask to pick them up and want to give them a try. I love the bones much more than metal or wooden spoons. I own several pairs – a couple of real bone ones that I bought from vendors in Ireland, a pair of hewn white bones and a pair of black ebony ones. I usually play jigs with bones in both hands, but reels I only tackle with one hand – I still find them much more complex.

I deeply regret not being able to attend the Bones Fest since I am sure I would learn a great deal. Unfortunately distance and expense prevent me from doing so. If the Fest, or one like it, is ever held in Ireland or anywhere closer, I would definitely make the effort to be there.

And if any of you are ever in this part of the world – well, please drop in, and bring your bones with you! All the best, (Ms) Bracha Ben-

### **Bones Movement at Mass. Elementary School Principal is Bones-Friendly**

BROCKTON, MA- This reporter has witnessed something astounding at Louis F. Angelo Elementary School. Students from Grades 1 through 6 at this public school are learning to play bones, and buying them, and one can hear clacking and rattling on the bus lines and in the hallways.

This reporter must confess to a bit of responsibility for this phenomenon, it being the third consecutive year that he has given concerts and spent class time at Angelo, where his long-time acquaintance Ms Cook is the Music Specialist (the archaic term is Music Teacher). The concerts involve demonstrations of various traditional instruments: autoharp, banjo, bones, dulcimer, jaw harp, hammered dulcimer, mandolin, pennywhistle, and the like. Invariably the curiosity prize goes to the bones or the jaw harp, depending on the spectator's age-- but even among jaw harp enthusiasts, bones interest is stratospheric. So it was decided to make a set of Kidbones for use in the classroom. These are smaller than conventional bones to better fit children's hands. With a bag of these bones Ms Cook was able, after learning the rudiments herself, to teach bones technique in her friend's absence. Soon orders were being placed for personal pairs of these percussive pieces of pine and what not (some do have knots, actually). This reporter's stock was soon exhausted. Fortunately he can always make more.

Then this year interest in bones, like interest in curling, mushroomed, but for reasons other than media exposure. Ms Cook has come up with a more efficient teaching method and the success rate, even among children previously deemed developmentally too young, skyrocketed. Even among first-graders there were several triplet-rollers and down-snappers at the end of a mere 10 minute session. Another

factor in the decreased learning time is the enlistment of student helpers (older kids who are already masters) which increases the one-on-one time for each student.

Due to this increased achievement ratio, more sales occurred and by the time this reporter arrived for the yearly week of shows and classes, backorders had piled up. By mid-March these were filled and there are now over thirty bones players scuffing the linoleum at Angelo. Especially impressive is Kyle Vossos playing two-handed and enjoying a sense of power from playing very loud indeed. He is the ringleader of a group of sixth-graders who form spontaneous circles and hammer out the Bo Diddley beat (now known as the I Love Candy beat), and so well along that this composer as-well-as-reporter/bones maker/player included a bones part in an arrangement of the sea chanty *Rye-O Grand* to be performed this spring by the Angelo choir, accompanied by violin, tenor sax and two euphoniums acting as foghorns. Kyle will play the bones part, to the envy of Robert Gorman, who is stuck playing foghorn. This movement would not be possible without the support, or at least tolerance, of Principal McLaughlin who was presented with an Honorary Bones Pair as a gesture of thanks for her not banning bones playing on school grounds.

Bones turn out to have impressive qualities in the school environment: with proper teaching they are a fast way to get children personally involved in music; they teach muscle coordination; they enhance rhythmic ability; they foster self-confidence; they encourage children to play music together. These qualities and others will be included in an upcoming Masters dissertation in the field of Music Education. Who knows, someday bones may be an integral part of the music curriculum in your local school. If it still exists by then.

For information on the Cook-Klein bones teaching method, contact Adam Klein at [aldaron@compuserve.com](mailto:aldaron@compuserve.com). (Ms Cook, being a school teacher, simply doesn't have time right now.)

*Adam Klein*

(*Brother Bones* continued from page 1)

barber shops. Freeman's stand was at Tenth Street and Atlantic Avenue.

As Ernie says, "When he shined shoes he would whistle and pop the shoeshine rag to some tune. He could whistle real loud and people driving by would stop and listen and the police would come along and get them moving again. He would whistle the old songs, like *Amazing Grace*." Ernie, whose stand was a block away said, "You could feel the music like it was an instrument playing." People called him *Whistling Sam*.

As Freeman told the Press Telegram newspaper in an October 1972 story, "I had the stand about four years. All the Poly and Wilson High kids would come there. Some customers came in as late as midnight to get their shoes shined on their way to Sebastian's Cotton Club in Culver City to hear Louis Armstrong.

"Coming to that stand was just like going to a vaudeville show. We had a victrola playing records and the shoe shine guys would snap their rags or pop their brushes or tap dance to the tunes.

"If one of the customers asked for a record and we didn't have it, one of the guys would drive downtown and get it and bring it back. One of my customers was the Police Chief."

Ernie tells this story. He and several others were driving to Los Angeles one night and it was almost always rough fog on the way. They were going real slow trying to find the white line down the middle of the road when this car passed them. Somebody said "who was that" and then someone else said "didn't you hear the whistle - it's *Whistling Sam*."

He would play his bones too, though many times it was kitchen knives. Freeman could click them together and whistle along at the same time. He perfected a style using four bones in each hand whereas most bones players used two bones in each hand.

This is how Freeman describes his bones in the Press Telegram article, "They are made of different material—I have some of ivory, rosewood and ebony. They are

curved pieces of wood, about eight inches long, an inch wide and three-sixteenths of an inch thick. Two to four are held between the fingers of each hand and they are clacked together—where they curve against each other—to make rhythm."

Again as the Press Tribune article tells it, it all started for Freeman when he was a youngster in Montgomery, Alabama. "My mother used to whistle all the time...she was just a happy person. I'd hear her and I'd also be listening to the mocking birds. Then I began to want to see if I could be as versatile as the mocking birds, and as entertaining. I didn't have anything in mind for the future. I just wanted to satisfy my curiosity.

"Then, just to see how many different ways I could whistle, I began to learn to whistle double and triple, and exhale and inhale the same note. It certainly wasn't done overnight.

"I'd been using bones all along, just two little straight pieces of wood. About that time, when I was 13 or 16, the stores used to sell them. I once even went to a slaughterhouse in Alabama, picked out some cow ribs, cut them to the length I wanted and played with them.

"But it wasn't until about 1918, back in Dallas, Texas, in Ella Moore's Theater, that I saw a professional bones player. I was so enthused I talked to the performer, told him how interested I was, and he gave me a set. I've been using bones all along since then."

His first professional job whistling or playing the bones was on *The Schoolkids* Program. That was back in 1929 on KFOX and he was known as Whistling Sam. In 1932 he played on the KGER *Mammy Ginny* show. In 1940 he was the doorman at the famous old Virginia Hotel and made music for free after hours.

According to Tempo Records, Freeman was discovered by their president while he was playing in a Chinese restaurant in downtown Los Angeles. Tempo Records first approached another bones player, Ted Goon known as Mr. Goon-Bones, but Ted had a conflict at the time. Before Ted got his conflict

resolved, Tempo discovered Freeman and his first record hit the airwaves. Ted, an Honorary member of the Rhythm Bones Society, lives in California a few miles from where Freeman lived and he can still play the bones. Unfortunately, Tempo Records treated Freeman badly and he and his family did not profit much from his recordings.

Freeman's musical career is noteworthy. He recorded a dozen or more songs and was in at least three movies; *Riding High* with Bing Crosby (see photograph), *Pot of Gold* with James Stewart and *Yes Sir, Mr. Bones*, a 1951 minstrel movie. He performed in New York's Carnegie Hall, with Ed Sullivan on television, and on stage with such musicians as Woody Herman, Teddy Buckner, Jimmy Lunsford and Russ Morgan. In Long Beach, he performed several times with the famous Municipal Band and donated time to hospitals, churches and the armed services.

The song, *Sweet Georgia Brown*, has been recorded by many people including Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong, The Beatles, Ella Fitzgerald, Mel Torme and others, but none have been as successful as the one by Brother Bones. This is due primarily to it being adopted in 1952 as the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. The song is played during their pre-game warm-ups and several times during the game. A hundred million or more in America and around the world have heard it during their games and who knows how many people have heard it in their radio and television advertisements. It is probably in the top ten most listened to recordings in history. So important to the Harlem Globetrotters is *Sweet Georgia Brown* that it is their aural trademark like MGM's lion's roar. Later in his career, Freeman toured with the Globetrotters and performed during their games.

Joe Birl, who patented and manufactured black plastic bones, tells this story. Freeman was coming east to appear on the Ed Sullivan show for the third time and hit major cities to plug his records. Joe happened by the Paramount Record Shop in Philadelphia

(Continued on page 6)

(*Brother Bones* continued from page 5)  
and saw a crowd. He went in only to discover Brother Bones was there. Joe got Freeman to try his bones and a photographer captured the event (see photograph). Freeman gave Joe an autograph, "To a real guy, Brother Bones, 4/5/49 (Freeman Davis)." Joe saved this and other Brother Bones memorabilia as well as most of Freeman's records.

The Rhythm Bones Society is a

new group formed to educate people about this unique musical instrument and help preserve rhythm bones for the next generation. Rhythm bones are one of the oldest of all musical instruments and were popular in such diverse places as China, Egypt, Rome and England. In America rhythm bones were used in minstrel shows and became extremely popular.

The Rhythm Bones Society hosts an annual Bones Fest and publishes a quarterly newsletter. This year's Fest

will be in Greensboro, NC, August 2, 3 & 4, 2002, hosted by Everett Cowett, Executive Director, who held the first Bones Fest which eventually led to forming the society. To learn more about the society and bones playing today, look up *rhythmbones.com* on the internet or call Ev at (336) 294-5332.

Material for this article was provided by the Long Beach Public Library, the Archivist for the Long Beach Independent/Press Telegram newspaper, The Harlem Globetrotters and Rhythm



Freeman Davis giving Bing Crosby some pointers during filming of the movie *Riding High*. Note three kitchen knives in his right hand and two in his left hand. Photograph courtesy of Joe Birl.



Freeman Davis and Rhythm Bones Society Member Joe Birl in a Philadelphia record store on April 5, 1949. Freeman has four of Joe's patented plastic bones in each hand. Photograph courtesy of Joe Birl.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 4, No. 4 2002

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## Executive Director's Column

Bones Fest VI is behind us and what a grand time we had. More than 50 players were on hand. Check our web site <rhythmbones.com> for more information.

Our new web master is Jonathan Danforth. Please send him suggestions at <jonofiddle@yahoo.com>.

Plans for Bones Fest VII are on the drawing board. Gil and Linda Hibben will host it in Louisville, KY on July 25-27, 2003. They will appreciate any thoughts you have on the event.

Several RBS members competed this year

in the Bones playing contest at the National Traditional Country Music Festival in Avoca, IA in August. Yirdy Machar won the contest while John Perona, Steve Wixson and Steve Brown placed in the top five. Congratulations to all.

It is time to renew your membership in RBS for the 2002-2003 year which began October 1 and ends September 30, 2003. We ended the year with 104 members and hope that each of you will renew. Dues will continue at \$20 payable to the Rhythm Bones Society. May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

## Highlights of Bones Fest VI

**FINGERS TO THE BONE.** The sounds of the bones and their accompanied music are still ringing in my ears. The three-day event at Guilford College with more than 50 bones players and many guests will long be remembered. Starting Friday night with a simple logo nametag, logo T-shirt, Fingers to the Bone Program, good food and drink at a bones jam session got everyone off to a great start.

Guilford College, our site host, catered to our every need. The beautiful grounds and excellent facilities for lodging, meals and meetings were wonderful and the Joe Bryan Jr. Auditorium with its excellent acoustics and seating arrangement were "out of this world" (a real planetarium). The friendship exemplified by Rebecca and James of the staff of this Quaker College will not be forgotten. (See photographic montage by Nick Worth on Page 6).

Last but not least were the Banjo Bandits, a Greensboro real-live traditional old-time band, were great. The principals, Ivy Lindley and Greg Speas became part of the Rhythm Bones Society throughout the week. (Their CD "Ain't Got No Use" is available through Little Rebel Records).

The only difference between Bones Fest VI and earlier Fests was the quality of bones play. As we get older we get better, or we may have actually practiced before coming to the Fest. I for one was impressed. Many of the Charter

Members were present including the original six Cowetts plus two additions, Rioux and Ramsey ages 6 and 8.

Mr. Bones Cahill wore a new costume depicting Uncle Sam and was impressive. Joe Birl is improving with age (86) and introduced his new bones collection (wood this time). His play and story telling are better than ever. Vivian Cox was like a schoolgirl again playing those old Ragtime tunes. Next year we will insist upon her "black light" performance which she

*(Continued on page 7)*



Al Cowett was Master of Ceremonies for the second time

## Editorial

The stories and news following Bones Fest VI would not fit onto six pages, so this issue is eight pages.

It is now a tradition that newsletter No. 4 of each year presents the highlights of the annual Bones Fest. This year is no exception and Ev Cowett has done it up in grand style. Of course, the Fest itself was the best ever if measured by attendance, facilities with great acoustics and quality of bones playing that improves at each Fest. Thanks, Ev, for hosting it.

Member Yirdy Machar contributed an article on his experience at Avoca. In addition to winning the Bones and Spoons Contest, he filled in for several performers who failed to make it for their own 30 minute shows. Yirdy with bones, spoons, concertina and harmonica put on several one-man performances. He is an entertainer.

The Board of Directors approved a logo for the Society and it has been included in the upper left corner on Page 1. The hands in the logo appear to be from the William Sydney Mount painting 'The Bone Player,' but in fact are the hands of Ev Cowett. This is a legacy from the man who organized the first two Bones Fests that led to forming our Society.

I arrived for the Fest on Thursday and Ev and some of his kids and I went to the coffee shop where the Banjo Bandits were playing. While we thought we behaved appropriately, Ev thought we needed to read Black Bart's *Responsibilities of a Bones Player*. Thanks to member Dave Boyles for permission to reprint it.

Ev Cowett, Martha Cowett and I were presented with RBS Meritorious Service Awards at the BFVI banquet. It is a great honor to be recognized by one's peers (and my beautifully framed award hangs on the wall by my desk), but it is also rewarding to see the enthusiasm and efforts of our

## Letters to the Editor

*Editors note: Paul Duhon performed at Bones Fest III in a*

*costume with pants that belted at knee level to make his legs look very short.)*

Paul Duhon will be 85 in September and is finally getting old. He is still able to get around, but cannot play the bones because of arthritis in his hands. Attached is a check for his dues. I am attaching material for your review and consideration for the newsletter. He will be very happy if you include it.

I wish we could have attended the Bones Fest, but he is too feeble to attempt it. Best wishes. *Willie Duhon.* (See the article on Page 7.)

Interesting news. I've finally located one of Len Davies' relatives, his daughter. I'm hoping to get information on him for an article, some information on the plastic bones he used to make (I don't know if I told you he was a plastics engineer who designed and produced "laminated" plastic bones that sounded as good as ebony or bone). *Steve Brown* (See article on Page 5).

Last night there was a program of Spanish & Latin American music on WERU, our local community radio station. It made for great jammin' with my rosewood bones. I tend to use my aluminum bones on Reggae & Blues. On Thursday nights, following a Jazz show I do with a friend on WERU there is a great Bluegrass show called "Bronzewound." And sometimes there is live entertainment. Anyway it always is a great time to jam which I do at the station and on the way home.

The General Manager of the station, Matt Murphy of Irish descent, became interested in the bones so I made him a set of aluminum ones which he has been practicing on. One co-host of "Bronzewound" is also into the bones. So at times the radio station is ablaze with all of us rattling away in the studio as the "real music" goes out over the airwaves. *Parker Waite*

## Recorded Bones Music

**Bones and Jazz.** Spike Bones demoed this CD at Bones Fest VI. To order, send a check or money order for \$15 to Spike Bones, 3301 S. Emerald, Chicago, Ill. 60616. Ev Cowett says he is addicted to the CD.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 4, No. 4  
Fourth Quarter 2002

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Websites of the Quarter

[www.world-beats.com/cd\\_vid/VID\\_bones.htm](http://www.world-beats.com/cd_vid/VID_bones.htm). This website has a three minute video from Aaron Plunkett's *Bones from the Beginning* instructional video for two handed bones playing. The video was reviewed in Volume 2, Number 3 of the newsletter. RBS Member Aaron also has an historical and audio-visual tour of music and percussion from around the world at: [www.world-beats.com](http://www.world-beats.com). He has bones for sale. Great site!

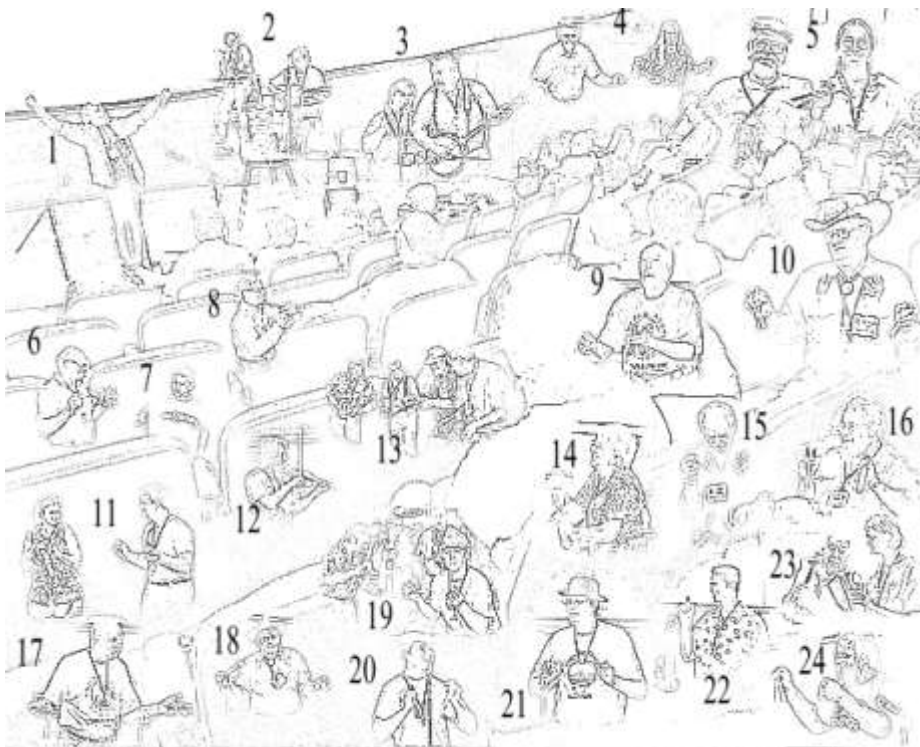
[www.basichip.com](http://www.basichip.com). Check out this website and click on 'Playing Dem Bones' for mp3 songs of Brother Bones and Ted Goon. There are short biographies of both of them and the mention of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Brother Bones. If you like



## Old Time Country Festival - Avoca, Iowa - 2002

Never in my life (all 55 years of it) have I been in the company of more than two other bones players at any one time. As of August, this year, that statement no longer applies. I was at Tonder Festival, in Denmark, where I had been in the company of Mel Mercier and another bones player Cathy Jordan. Until that date Cathy was the only female bone player I knew that had not been taught to play by me. This statement, also, no longer applies for the following reason: On arrival at Avoca, after checking in and receiving my programme for participating in various shows, I soon met Jerry Mescher and his wife Sharon, and then his sister Bernie Worrell who was now the second female player I had not taught to play the bones.

This meeting was the greatest thing that could have happened to me as a stranger in a foreign country, and at a festival with a whole new genre of music that I had only previously heard via radio/tv or a few bands visiting Denmark to participate in various multi-music festivals. I had previously played bones with mainly Scottish Dance music and song (I was born in Scotland) and with Irish roots in my family it was natural to pursue my art within the Celtic Music Scene which, for me, involved singing, dancing, bodhran and bones playing (my father had played bones and harmonica in his youth - although, sadly I did not find out until he was 78 years old, by this time I had already been playing bones for over twenty years). Since coming to Denmark in 1982, and due to insufficient Celtic Music, I have had the opportunity to play with Traditional Jazz bands, Blues Bands, Pop Bands, Rock Bands, Scandinavian Traditional and other ethnic folk-music groups from various cultures. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, or to be more correct, the 27<sup>th</sup> annual National Old-time Traditional Country Music Festival



Index to photograph on Page 8. The montage was created by Everett Cowett's brother-in-law Nicholas Worth. To find a bone's players name match the number above with number in the Table below.

and Contests was already into its second day. At this time I had only thought about what I might do for the Bones contest which was still four days away on the coming Saturday, 31<sup>st</sup> August. My thoughts were to play the harmonica (on a neck holder) or to sing acapella as my own accompaniment. Thanks to the friendly help of the Meschers I was introduced to many musicians as well as other bones players as they arrived for the festival and that, combined with the many jam-sessions, a wonderful bones-workshop and listening to many of the music concerts, I started to formulate some new ideas of what I could do for the contest. I thought it would be better for me to find other musicians to accompany me as it would make it easier to concentrate on the more technical side of my playing without having to think of the song text or tune at the same time. This was the smartest idea as the contest was not for my singing or harmonica playing and as it was the first time in my life I had entered into any kind of solo competition (apart from Drum Major at a Pipe Band Championship), which

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Name Index to Photo on Page 8

1. Spike Bones
2. Banjo Bandits (Ivy and Greg)
3. Mary and Frank Sweet
4. Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell
5. Terry and Sally Carroll
6. Everett Cowett
7. Ramsey Cowett (Ev's grandson)
8. Hank Tenenbaum
9. Joe Birl
10. Will Kear
11. Martha and John Cowett
12. Jonathan Danforth
13. Dan Cowett, Parker Waite, Steve Brown and Jeff Newman
14. Vivian Cox
15. Don Decamp
16. Mike Hannan
17. Steve Wixson
18. John Davis
19. Dan Cowett, Spike Bones, Steve Wixson and Tommy Cowett
20. Dan Griffin
21. Mike Passerotti
22. Al Cowett (our great MC)
23. Joe Birl and Karen Worth
24. Mike Ballard

(Avoca—Continued from page 3)

is a change from performing a live show to an audience who do not sit with a note pad and give you marks for various technicalities of your performance - at least I hope they don't. During the few days prior to the contest I met with Steve Wixson, Steve Brown, Dr. Jerry Barnett, and a wonderfully old character called John Perona who were also RBS Members. As I shared lodgings at a local motel with Steve Brown I found out that he played a tin whistle and could play some Irish jigs. This was to my advantage as I love to play spoons for melodies in 6/8 time, and he agreed to accompany me for that part of the contest. I also had the pleasure of meeting another lovely harmonica player who had been playing for Jerry and Bernie's Bones Shows and workshops, by the name of Gordon MacMasters, and he certainly was an old-time master. As Jerry and Bernie had decided not to compete, I thought it would not be impolite to borrow their favourite accompanist. I still had not decided until half an hour before the contest started what I was going to do. It was then that I heard Gordon playing a wonderful old-time waltz, which made me decide what to do. I asked him to play it for me in the contest, and he agreed but knew an even nicer tune which he then played for me. As a contestant you are allowed three numbers and I had heard Gordon play another number which I knew and had learnt as a vulgar music-hall-style parody of the original song: "She Wore a Tulip." That was all I needed to finalize my programme for the contest. The first number was the waltz to which I played 8 bones (only because there was no more space available between my fingers) and got the impression that this was the first time it had been attempted in the competition. The second number was the Jig on the whistle by Steve Brown to which I played hand-made wooden spoons (as the contest was combined for bones and spoons I was not sure whether it was either/or or both so decided to be safe and play both.) For the last number, back to Gordon's harmonica and with his guitarist, Bernie and myself on the bones again (2x2), we let it rip on the "Tulip" tune

which I know as a song called "Nelly Hawkins" (I really had to hold myself back from outbursts of laughter as I was thinking of the text while playing) which was probably too rude to sing to such a pleasant audience of mostly "old-timers." All we had to do now was wait until the following day, Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> of September - the last day of the festival to hear the results of all the contests. This was a long drawn-out affair which included many guest artist performances, performances by the individual contest winners and the inductions to the Old-time Hall of Fame. This was previously awarded to Jerry Mescher, but on this occasion went to member Dr Jerry Barnett. Eventually they got around to the bones/spoons contest which we thought they had forgotten about, or maybe because it was the "world championship contest" they kept it towards the end. By this time the suspense was killing me, but it was worth the wait to find out I had gained first place and that three other members of the RBS were placed in the first five, namely: John Perona, Steve Wixson and Steve Brown. Maybe, as food for thought, the only two players who played both bones and spoons in the contest were awarded 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> place ie: John and myself. All in all it was a great week of music and the friendly atmosphere of Bob and Sheila Everhart's Avoca Festival (moving venue next year to a larger area in Missouri Valley, Iowa) a great warm up for the "All Ireland Championships" in Abbey Fealle, County Limerick, on the first weekend in May 2003. I hope that there will be some contestants arriving from the USA to show their mettle. Looking forward to meeting some of you there or at the next Bones Fest in

## Tim Reilly Missed BFVI

Tim Reilly missed Bones Fest VI due to a car accident on the way to the Fest. While the Fest was in progress, he dictated an article titled 'Bones at Sea' that will appear in the next issue of the newsletter. This is a well researched historical article, and is an important contribution to the newsletter. Tim, thanks and get well

## Black Bart's Responsibilities of a Bones Player

The first time you develop and sense the vibrations of the bones in you hand, it feels good and you just want to keep shaking! It's sooo therapeutic!

However, that feeling and that sound, as fun as it is, is not so much fun for those unknowing souls around you.

Historically 'bones' have rated far down the line of recognized musical talents. Until you really get good at playing and can keep solid tempos, please be advised...I am simply warning all new bones players about this catharsis. So I suggest the following responsibilities a bones player should adhere to so that our reputation is not downgraded anymore than history already has done.

**Practice.** To practice by yourself in you car, in the privy, in the garage or basement, on the lake or in the woods is very nice.

**Partners.** Your spouse can become very annoyed—unless, of course, you get that person their own pair of bones!

Warning: It is not a good idea to shake them in your partner's face in the middle of an argument either!

**Concerts & Pubs.** Practice with recorded music when you can and nobody else is around. When you are in the audience don't just whip the bones out and play along with the band at your first concert or session. There is a courtesy to ask the musicians first because if your timing happens to be off it's hard for the band to focus and they may tell you. When you're ready, open sessions are a good place to start your public appearance. Approach it moderately until you know "you have it."

**Control.** There's a time to play and a time to sit out. The bones are a nice accent when played properly. Learn to play loud when the music is up and safe when it's down. Learn to vary the pattern. Stop periodically at the end of key phrases. Come back in on the chorus.

**Final Responsibility.** Finally, each bones player has a responsibility to police other players who get carried away (possibly after too much drink), to remind them of their bones manners when they appear obnoxious and especially if they have terrible rhythm.

## Bones Fest Reflections

For me each Bones Fest has had some significant outstanding event, typically it was some player that just blew my doors off and brought Bones playing to a new height. This bones fest, although the playing was terrific, was a bit different. At one point I was asked what did I enjoy the most or find most impressive. With only a moment or two of thought I stated, rather biased, my nephew Ramsey's playing was the most impressive. Then I went home and thought about it and I have come up with something different. For me the most significant part of this Festival was all of the one on one stories I heard from the participants of the festival on how playing bones has touched, changed, and affected their lives. How playing the bones really makes a difference in their lives and how connecting with this group and this instrument is now a significant part of their life - and IT'S ALL IN A GOOD WAY! I am blown away, truly. I want to thank everyone who participated at the festival and shared their story with me. Thank!

*Martha Cowett*

I think we all owe Walt Watkins a big thanks for inventing the "pass off." I believe it's a major development in our Fest and gives us an opportunity to show our stuff and learn from the other players in a way we haven't been able to do in the past. *Steve Brown*

This past weekend turned out to be one of the highlights of my life! Everyone was so cordial to me and I really appreciate that. (This was my first Bones Fest.) I was very apprehensive about the whole thing not knowing how or if I would be accepted because of the way I play, but by Saturday afternoon I was feeling quite comfortable and was proud to play for everyone Saturday night. *Danny Aldridge*

I've been around long enough now that I'm never surprised when I meet a new group of folks with whom I share a common interest to find that our common interest is only the introduction to a broader friendship. The humor of the group was not

unexpected, given our unusual avocation, but the depth of the good humor exceeded my anticipation. I could name many who dazzled me with their skill and artistry, but that would be to belabor the obvious to those skilled in our art. Instead let me say that my fondest memory of Bones Fest VI will be the friendship and good will exhibited by everyone to each participant be they veteran Bone Festers or first timers like myself.

Finally, I must say that there could be no better ambassadors for our off beat hobby (that should be ON beat, I guess) than the Cowett Family. Rarely does one have the opportunity to meet a family group involved in something that brings such obvious joy to them all as this does. *Mike*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest VII.** July 25-27, 2003. Louisville, KY. Hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben.

**Bones and Spoons Contest,** August 25-31, 2003. This event previously held in Avoca is moving nearby to Missouri Valley, Iowa. Contact Jerry Mescher (sharon\_mescher@hotmail.com)

## Don Sarrall Dies

Don Sarrall, who graciously played banjo for Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, died suddenly at home, June 2002, following his weekly performance at the Mountain Opry. Don was a champion claw-hammer style banjo player who also played the

## Tips and Techniques More on Duplets

There were several people at Bones Fest VI who played a two-beat, double-beat, double-tap or what I called a duplet in the Volume 4, No 2 column, that is a triplet without the middle sound. I assumed that not many people played it but I was wrong. Russ Myers says he plays it so much he has trouble playing a tap. Steve Brown says he first heard it from Paedar Mercier and member Ronnie McShane, and later from John Burrill.

I asked several people how they

produce a duplet and they did not describe a technique that is easy to teach. Jerry Mescher uses his ring finder to provide extra control. Russ Myers turns the bones so they point towards his stomach with the side towards the ground. Steve Brown produces it by starting with the dominant hand, and doing kind of half a rattle, not going to far back to the left, enough to get one beat and back to the right to get the other. If you play a duplet, please share your

## Len Davis Daughter Remembers Him

Dad did make 'learner bones' and for a while these were supplied through two British traditional musical instrument retailers - Dave Mallinson Music (now called The Music Room) and Hobgoblin. I've got a double set of the child size bones and pair of adult bones in my collection but as far as I'm aware all other pairs have been sold. He also sold them at workshops. They were made from a plastic called urea formaldehyde resin, which Dad was told was unbendable but he worked out a simple way of bending it (the method for which I know but he swore me to secrecy!). They were sanded down to look more like wood.

Dad appeared on a number of records. One or two by Sadie Green Sales Ragtime Jugband, one by Italian band Tre Martelli (this one is ace), one by Alias Ron Kavana (although this isn't very good, the bones are too quiet). My favourites are the live recordings though - I've got one of him playing with legendary Fairport Convention fiddler Dave Swarbrick and also the recording he made with Al Svendrowski, a harmonica player, in the Idlewood Inn in Pennsylvania (also on video). There are probably others but those are the ones I know about. I've also got a couple of radio interviews/sessions taped. Dad also appeared on What's my Line? (a quiz show) and a local news programme. *Louisa*

(Note: This is email Louise sent to Steve Brown. Steve says Louisa is fiddler and bones player for the Oddsodds, an English Irish band (sounds contradictory)).

## **Minutes of the General Membership Meeting**

The meeting was called to order by Everett Cowett at 4:10 pm on August 3, 2002 in the J. Bryan Auditorium on the campus of Guilford College.

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as previously published in the newsletter.

Ev announced that Gil Hibben will host Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY. He asked for a straw vote on the best time for the Fest. The results were; Spring, 9; Summer, 14; and Fall, 7.

Elections were held. The nominations from the Board were presented and the floor opened for further nominations. With no further nominations made, the nominees were elected by acclamation (see Board minutes below for names.)

Ev announced that Jonathan Danforth will take over the website from Martha Cowett. There was a request that members be able to easily submit information including mp3 samples of their bones playing.

There was a brief discussion of future Fests. The Sweets suggested Florida. Mystic Seaport was also suggested.

Steve Wixson announced that the IRS has approved our application as a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization.

Regional meetings were discussed and the membership liked the idea, the west coast in particular.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:39 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## **Minutes of the RBS Board of Directors Meeting**

The meeting was called to order by Everett Cowett at 2:15 pm on August 2, 2002 in the Library in the J. Bryan Auditorium. All of the Board members were present except Mel Mercier. There were several members present as visitors.

Ev gave an overview of the Bones Fest VI plans.

There was a discussion of the

Logo. First there was confusion as to whether an email vote had approved the logo, and with that confusion it was concluded that a valid vote had not taken place. The only point of discussion was the type font for the words 'Rhythm Bones Society.' The motion was made, seconded and approved to authorize Ev to complete the Logo as he sees fit.

There was discussion as to the legality of our Society using William Sidney Mount's painting "The Bone Player." Ev asked Sally Carroll to seek permission from the Boston Museum.

Ev announced the email vote for the Meritorious Service Award for Steve Wixson. The award will be presented at the banquet on Saturday night. It was moved and seconded that the Meritorious Service Award be given to Everett Cowett for his efforts in organizing the early Bones Fests that led to forming the Society and for his leadership efforts. Motion approved. It was further moved and seconded that the Meritorious Service Award be given to Martha Cowett for her work in developing the website that is responsible for many people finding the Society.

Ev noted that several people who play related instruments (Jews harp and spoons) have approached him with the idea of broadening the goals of the Society to include these instruments. A discussion ensued and the consensus of the Board was that the Society should continue to focus only on Rhythm Bones.

The concept of small regional bones events was discussed. There are many people who want to meet more than annually and others who cannot attend the annual Fest due to the travel distance involved (ie, west coast). No motion was made, but this will be discussed with members.

The location and time for Bones Fest VII was discussed. Gil Hibben, a visitor, volunteered to host it in Louisville, Ky. The motion was made, seconded and approved for Gil to host the Fest. The Board has talked about a fixed annual date for the Fest, but has not set one. There are good reasons for Spring, Summer and Fall dates. A survey will be taken at the

Membership meeting.

The question was raised as to whether we should sponsor a bones contest during the Bones Fest. A discussion ensued that noted a strength of the Fest is the lack of competition such that almost every bones player feels comfortable performing in front of their peers. The consensus of the Board was no bones contest.

Ev called for the Board to serve as the Nominating Committee for election during the Membership meeting. Russ Myers declined the nomination for Assistant Director due to health reasons. The motion was made, seconded and approved to nominate Ev for Executive Director, Steve Brown, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Sally Carroll, Gil Hibben, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher as Board Members.

Ev announced that Martha Cowett asked that someone else take over the website maintenance. Jonathan Danforth, a visitor, offered to take the job, and was selected by consensus.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:35 pm.

## **Minutes of the Board Meeting Following the General Membership Meeting**

The meeting was called to order by Ev at 4:54 pm on August 3, 2002 in the Library of the J. Bryan Auditorium. Gil Hibben was welcomed to the Board.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to create the membership category of Fellow. The motion was made, seconded and approved to designate Russ Myers as a Fellow of the Rhythm Bones Society for his efforts on behalf of the Rhythm Bones Society and for bones playing in general.

The motion was made, seconded and approved that the hands shown in the Society's Logo be those of Everett Cowett.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:01 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

*(Highlights—Continued from page 1)*

does at the cabaret where she works.

Russ Myers although suffering from health problems showed us that he can still change the pitch as well as before. Sally and Terry Carroll continue to improve their play. Spike Bones Muhrer was the showman of old with a new CD. If you have not listened to "Bones Meets Jazz" by Spike Bones, you are missing something very special. I could not believe my ears. This CD could put Jazz and Bones Playing on the map again.

Parker Waite still can play a hip-hop beat and Steve Wixson was doing new and unusual things as usual. Old standbys such as Walt Watkins, who I declare most improved player, Don DeCamp, the "Tiger Woods" of Bones, John Davis and William Kear, both two-handed players now, Jim Nelson from the underground, Jerry Mescher and sister Bernie Worrell were outstanding together and Michael Ballard bringing back that California touch. And don't forget Gil Hibben; host for BFVII, doing the Latin beat.

Although I am nostalgic about the past, it was the new bones players that I met that really turned me on. Dan Griffin (the rocker), Mary and Frank Sweet doing old-time music in costume, Hank Tenenbaum (where have you been with those quiet sounds), Jonathan Danforth (fiddle, vocals and new web page master), Jeff Newman (a copy of Don DeCamp), Karen Singleton doing bones and clogging and Danny Aldridge who thought he was holding the bones the wrong way. Mike Hannan, Mike Passerotti with the sound machine and Floyd Breedan (hope you are feeling better) were all great and enjoyed by everyone.

For those of you that I missed or those that I have not named who elected to jam with the group rather than play solo, thank you for coming. You helped make this Fest so wonderful. Next year we hope to see you on stage.

The banquet without speeches went over fairly well and we stayed more or less on schedule. Steve Wixson, Martha Cowett and Ev Cowett each received the Rhythm Bones Society

Meritorious Service Award while Russ Myers was designated FELLOW of the Society. Congratulations to all and thank you. This was followed by a tribute to Freeman Davis, better known as "Brother Bones," in honor of the 100th anniversary of his birth.

During the membership meeting on Saturday officers and board members were elected for the fiscal year 2002-2003. Gil Hibben will host Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY on July 26, 2003. Mark your calendars for the best Fest yet.

Special thanks are extended to my family for bringing this event together. Martha for nametags and registration, Tom for the printed program, Al for T-shirts and MC activities, Dan for CDs, tapes and sound system, Val for food and beverages and John and the Cowett spouses for all of their support before and during the Fest. Without everyone playing a part nothing would have happened.

A special thanks also goes to Steve Wixson for all of his help during the year and the special Brother Bones event and birthday cake.

Steve and Dan Cowett, while hiding in the auditorium control room all day, recorded a sound track of the Fest, which is outstanding. Steve has titled it "Bones Fest VI Live." We don't know exactly what we are going to do with it yet but all that have heard it

## Paul Duhon Update

Paul was born on September 28, 1917. He has overcome many health problems which started at birth. Shortly after he was born the doctor told his parents that he probably would not live more than six months. Evidently Paul did not know about this or just didn't agree because he is 84 years old now and has successfully tackled all obstacles while enjoying his life. He has accomplished a great deal and has touched the lives of many people in the US and Canada.

The favorite of all his activities was working at Acadian Village as a volunteer for over 20 years. This work provided a stage for him to entertain people with his bones playing. Playing the bones has been a



Paul Duhon performing at Bones Fest III  
Photograph by Sally Carroll

big part of his life since he was 14 years old when an old black man taught him how to play the bones.

Paul has practiced bones playing for many years and has become very skilled at it. He has played with many local musicians of international fame such as: Michael Doucent and Bean Soliel, Jachary Richard, Jimmy Newman and Christi Guilory. In addition he has performed with the following star country music artists: Willie Nelson, George Morgan, Mark Chestnut, Eddie Raven and Roy Acuff.

A few years ago he went on a tour in Canada with A.J. Leblanc and other friends of Acadian Village. Naturally he brought his bones and play at every opportunity which included a feature on the Canadian TV network.

Paul loved to perform and entertain, but his main source of joy and satisfaction was going to Acadian Village every day to meet the tourists, act as a tour guide and play the bones for them.

Acadian Village allowed Paul to do what he loved. He wanted to do something to acknowledge what Acadian Village had done for him. He and his brother came up with the idea of a small museum to be named the "Tee Paul Duhon House" (in French—La Maison de Tee Paul Duhon). The little house is Paul's gift to Acadian Village in recognition of Paul's gratitude to Acadian Villiage and its staff. The museum was built by his brother Willie and dedicated on May





# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 5, No. 1 2003

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## Executive Director's Column

Greetings to bones players everywhere. The year 2002 was a great year for bones players and followers who love the sounds and accompanying music. We had over 100 dues paying members last year and hope for a modest increase in 2003. To date more than 90 have renewed their membership. If you are one who has not, please remit \$20 to the Rhythm Bones Society.

The Newsletter keeps improving, as does the quality of bones playing by all members which is evident from viewing the many hours of video tape from Bones Fest VI. Editing is under way and should be completed before the one goes out.

Our editor of the Rhythm Bones Player, Steve Wixson, has been known to troll malls and other public places for bones enthusiasts with great success and lots of fun. If you have tried it send a letter to the editor describing your experience. Steve and I as well as other members would love to hear about it.

Bones Fest VII is just around the corner. July 25-27 should be marked on your calendars. Gil and Linda Hibben will host the event in Louisville, KY and they know how to throw a party. Plan to be there. They would also appreciate suggestions for the program.

May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

## Bones at Sea

This study starts with records from 1817 to 1820 with the *Uranie*, a French frigate, and her expedition. They used castanets to gain confidence with the native aborigines in Sharks Bay, Australia. There is a picture of a meeting between the natives and Monsieur Arago, an artist on the voyage, who is holding the castanets. The natives were actually knocking on a piece of wood as the castanets were being sounded. Then the party opened

up trade goods and traded back and forth for food stuffs for the crew and the ship and also trinkets for the natives.<sup>1</sup> The real recorded time line sort of starts there.

Out at sea the instruments help keep connection with the land playing tunes and accompanying songs that sailors sang when they were not working. This is an important demarcation because when working, just songs

*(Continued on page 5)*



The photograph from the deck of the USS Wasbash was taken in 1863 by Henry P Moore while the ship was off-shore from South Carolina. Note the bones player on the left. Photograph courtesy of Jean Mehaffy

# Editorial

I suspect all of us would like to thank Tim Reilly personally for his article on *Bones at Sea*. Tim dictated it while in the hospital following a car accident on the way to Bones Fest VI. Part 1 is in this issue and Part 2 will be in the next issue.

Hank Tenenbaum submitted the obituary on Richard *Mr Bones* Thomas. Richard said he would attend Bones Fest III, but never showed up. His CD, *Bones and Blues*, was the Recording of the Quarter in Volume 2, No. 2 of the newsletter.

The obituary states that Richard was inspired to play the bones after seeing Sammy Davis, Jr., his uncle and father perform. Does anyone know anything about this trio and their bones playing?

Hans Weehuizen, a member from the Netherlands, sent a short article and photograph on some very unusual and interesting bones.

As you must know by now, I troll for bones players when I travel. That is I make a fool of myself by walking around playing bones. And it works! We spent part of the holidays in Mexico and, in the small town of San Miguel de Allende, Fred Edmund's nephew came up and introduced himself. He had heard Fred play many times but was not a bones player himself. Fred Edmund inspired Ev Cowett to organize Bones Fest I and has one of the bones instructional videos. Small world!

## Letters to the Editor

Ev, We got it!! The old Louisville Theater in downtown Louisville. Seats 200 with stage and good acoustics. The date for Bones Fest VII is July 25-27, 2003. We will work on getting a room rate downtown. Also, where to have our Friday night clash. All the best, *Gil Hibben*.

My name is Tom Lockhart and I come from Bannockburn in Scotland. Myself and my good friend Paw Broom both mastered the Bones after being blown away by a two handed player we had the opportunity to hear

down at a folk festival in Edale England. They took a bit of learning but we mastered the technique and are in demand at all sorts of folk music events, especially Paw who is like a Chinook Helicopter in full flight. They sound beautiful miked up.

The bones I own, which are about seventy years old and made of ebony, have a deep stinging rattle to them. They used to belong to a professional entertainer and his daughter, who gave me them to me, told me he appeared playing them on very early BBC Radio programmes. The best sound I ever made from bones was from real whale bones, very heavy and an indescribable sound; they were also very old. I wrote to Tromso in Norway to try and obtain a piece of whale bone to manufacture my own as they are still allowed to take whales there for scientific purposes but to no avail.

I enjoyed visiting your web site. I am presently on an oil rig in the middle of the North Sea. Good luck to the world's fellow bones players; it is amazing the enjoyment the 'Worlds Smallest Percussion Instrument' can bring to so many people with a lot of them asking, "What is that you are playing?" Just like I did as they have never 'clapped' eyes on them before.

I once played them in Mexico with a Macharachi Band. They loved them and asked what they were. I told them Scottish Castanets. Kindest Regards, *Tom Lockhart & Paw Broom, the "Scottish Castanet Players."*

I spoke to Ted Goon last night and he told me that his beloved wife Barbara died on December 18th after an eight month battle with illness.

I was fortunate to meet Barbara on both of my visits to Ted in LA. I was hoping to see her again on my next visit. She was a wonderful, warm, and caring person, full of vitality and fun. She made me very welcome in their home and I will miss her.

Ted's loss is a great one. *Mel Mercier*.

I thought the Guilford College venue was superb. Why not just make it our permanent site for the Fest? We could have an occasional fest at other venues; we should even have Regional Fests like one a quarter at some venue and

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 5, No. 1  
First Quarter 2003

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

the annual Fest at Guilford. Our Regional Fests should attract more local members and give them a less expensive opportunity to participate.

Seems to me it is time now to also recruit some musician members to the society. We could use Blue Grass, Dixieland, Ragtime, Blues, Celtic groups to play live. This could even evolve to where the society could put on shows at folk fests, Broadway, and Hollywood!!

Host responsibilities at Guilford could be rotated; I would not expect Ev to be burdened with any of it. Also, Guilford could play a more direct role. Use their staff. Hey I get carried away. *Walt Watkins*

I have worked with rhythm bones for over 30 years...mainly with Percy Danforth who played bones for many events. Percy would accompany me to schools where I, as a composer, would involve the

*(Continued on page 3)*

(Continued from page 2)

students in writing songs about the history of their area and then we would teach them how to play the rhythm bones...especially in connection with my musical about lumbering, T-I-M-B\_E-R (www.songsalive.com/plays.html)!!

I have a nursing background and am currently a music and health consultant at U of Michigan's Mott Children's Hospital here in Ann

## Bones in Modern China

Recently Bob Everhart, organizer of the National Traditional Music Festival and Contests (including the Bones Contest) formerly in Avoca, Iowa, went to China and performed some traditional music for them. He sent a news release of that effort to all of the people on his email list including me. I sent a return email asking if he saw anything like bones in China. Here is his reply:

"We did! In Xian we saw a blind couple performing in the street. He was playing a one-string fiddle-like instrument, but the woman was playing with what appeared to be bones. They were wider than those we are familiar with and tied with string on one end to keep them together. They 'clapped' more than anything but she kept a remarkable rhythm with them to the old fiddler. We watched them for some time and found it very interesting. Both of them were quite old, and passers-by dropped in small coins quite often. We didn't see much begging anywhere but these two blind ones must have had permission to solicit. Actually they were pretty good, so we left a donation, too. It was

## Bones in Ancient China

The Harper's New Monthly Magazine article titled *The Ancestry of Brudder Bones* appearing in the 1878-9 issue states that bones were among the musical instruments of Chinese Emperor Fon Hi the first. The date was around 3500 B.C.

## Call for Regional Bones Fest Organizers

Members have expressed interest in getting together in between Bones Fests at what might be called Regional Bones Fests. These would be one day events for people within a couple of hours driving time. Lunch could be as simple as delivered pizza and motels would not be needed. Steve Wixson would send email and snail mail notices to members and non-members in our database. The event would probably be similar to Bones Fests I and II that Ev Cowett organized and he will share that organizing experience. If you are interested in organizing such an event, contact Ev Cowett at 336-294-5332 or

## Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas Obituary

Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas passed away peacefully in his sleep Friday morning, November 29th, 2002.

Mr. Bones, a fixture in the Washington music scene for at least seven decades, was born in Pomonky, MD July 30, 1922 and was raised in Washington, DC from six months of age.

Developing an interest in the bones at the age of six, after seeing a vaudeville performance by Sammy Davis Jr., his uncle and his father at a train station, he crafted his first set of bones from a cigar box. He then began fashioning them from wood and finally settled upon 6 to 7 inch beef rib bones (a process that takes approximately nine months).

During World War II he was drafted into the Army and was a member of the famous Red Ball Express. During the war he earned four Battle Stars. After the war he worked a series of jobs in both the private and public sectors until his retirement.

Mr. Bones met Archie Edwards at the recording of *Blues and Bones*. After the recording they performed at the Chicago Blues Festival, and in



Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas from the [www.acousticblues.com](http://www.acousticblues.com) website

1997 they performed at the St. Louis Blues Festival.

Along with other Barbershop members (Archie opened the Barbershop in 1959 and it soon became a meeting place for local and national musicians, and was the first meeting place of the Washington, DC Blues Society), Mr. Bones had been a hit at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Bull Durham Blues Festival, Blues in the Burg (where he was a featured performer), the DC Blues Society Festival and various local festivals. He had also performed community service benefit shows at hospitals, schools and civic events.

Mr. Bones' percussion, which sounds similar to castanets and tap drums, can be heard on "*Blues and Bones*" with Archie Edwards. He also recorded with Michael Roach on the CDs "*Ain't Got No Home*" and "*The Blinds of Life*."

Mr. Bones' craft is compatible with most, if not all, musical genres, including blues, jazz, folk, Latin, etc. He had a delightful personality and was always a crowd favorite.

Mr. Bones was a senior member of the AEBHF and last July Mr. Bones turned 80 years old. For more information about Mr. Bones and the Foundation, please go to website [www.acousticblues.com](http://www.acousticblues.com). Submitted by Hank Tenenbaum

## Recorded Bones Music

**Flapjack.** Old time Bush Swing with Teilhard Frost on bones and feet. There are only two bones tracks (3 and 5) but the feet percussion sounds like slow bones. See [www.flapjack.ca](http://www.flapjack.ca) for information on this CD.

**Benoit Bourque.** May I suggest these CDs on which I play bones: 1) TB-035 Hommage à Alfred Montmarquette, 2) TB-091 Les pieds qui parlent, 3) Matapat on Borealis Records, 4) Petit fou on Borealis Records. Here is where you can find a lot of very québécois music including the first two recordings: [www.qbc.clic.net/~thirtybe](http://www.qbc.clic.net/~thirtybe) Call Borealis Records at 877-530-4288.

## Website of the Quarter

[www2.nlc-bnc.ca/gramophone/src/m2-1041-e.htm](http://www2.nlc-bnc.ca/gramophone/src/m2-1041-e.htm). This website is great if you like French Acadian music which I do. I have several of Alfred Montmarquette's tapes and CDs that I got from the Smithsonian Folkways Records several years ago (See Recorded Bones Music, Volume 3, No 1 for their address). Click on Virtual Gramophone Database to listen to lots of old recordings. *Ev Cowett*

## Albert "Bones" Baker Dies

We will always remember 'Bones' as a tall, thin man, wearing razor-sharp pressed trousers and spotlessly clean dress shirts. His clothing was accented with highly polished dress shoes and gentleman-style hats.

At age 89, Bones was the eldest of the Fruit Jar Picker's band members. Over the years he played on the TV show Hee-Haw with Roy Clark, and on the Grand Ole Opry. Al had a great sense of rhythm, rattling the bones at a break-neck pace which added the winkle to the music.

When Albert joined the U.S. Army he brought his 'bones' with him. The bones were cow's ribs, shortened to about seven inches. In the evenings he would join with a few other soldiers to play music. See [www.fruitjarpickers.com](http://www.fruitjarpickers.com) for more details. *Submitted by Steve Brown*

## Review of Barry Patton's Bones Instructional Video

Barry "Bones" Patton's 13 minute video is titled *Introduction to Playing the Rhythm Bones*. It begins with a one-handed bones demonstration with Byron Berline playing the fiddle.

Barry first shows how to hold the bones. He then teaches the forward roll followed by a figure-eight roll. This is followed by the stop (or tap).

He moves to two-handed (or double fisted) bones playing. He demonstrates several different two-handed licks again with Byron on the fiddle. He shows how to play a rhythm beat in one hand to go with the pattern played in the other hand.

Barry suggests that the student get recorded music and practice to learn how to keep the rhythm. He has some advice on what level of proficiency a student needs before jamming or playing with other instrumentalists.

He concludes with a small bit of the history of bones playing.

Barry also sells bones and information on purchasing this video or his bones is available at his website: [doublestop.com/barrybones.htm](http://doublestop.com/barrybones.htm) (temporarily down for reorganization) or call 316-221-9201. *Steve Wixson*

## Indiana University Playin' The Bones

The Rhythm Bones Society was able to help the Indiana University add bones playing to a theatrical play by introducing them to former member Malcom Dalglish. This effort was quite successful and Malcom helped the actor learn to play a little and he managed to do all of the effects that were needed live. The following is their initial request.

"I found your address via a website about your Bones Players Society. I am hoping that you might be able to help me with a problem. I am a lighting designer working on my MFA at Indiana University. I am working on a new play written by one of my fellow MFA playwright students called *Playin' the Bones*. It is a terrific play set in Appalachia about a girl who can see and communicate with the dead. The play uses the bones as a representation of the dead communicating with the living.

"I need to find some bones recordings to use for sound cues. I am hoping to find recordings of the bones alone (without other instruments). I would be grateful for any help or leads that you may offer.

"Thank you for your time. I hope that we can help spread the beauty of this musical media." *CC Conn*

# Bones Fest VII

## Louisville, Kentucky

### Hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben

## July 25-27, 2003

### Saturday at the Louisville Theatre in downtown Louisville

### Details in the next newsletter

# Bones Calendar

**March 8th.** Downeast Country Dance Festival. No word if there will be a bones workshop, but Steve Brown will be there selling bones and playing with Ryan Thomson. Information at website [home.gwi.net/dance/decdf](http://home.gwi.net/dance/decdf).

**March 30.** 2-4 P.M. McCabes, 3101 West Pico Blvd. Santa Monica, CA, 310-828-4497. Join Aaron Plunkett for a one day workshop at Mc Cabes (Just West of the 10 Fwy.) where he will present an exciting "hands-on" look into drumming styles and rhythms from Ireland (Bones, Spoons, Bodhran), The Balkans (Teppan), Egypt (Dumbek/Table), India (Tablas), Persia (Tombak), Indonesia (Gamelan), Africa (Anlo Ewe), Cuba (Congas) and Brazil (Birenbau, Pandeiro).

The workshop will accommodate beginner, intermediate and advanced playing levels. Participants will learn the elements that make up music: beat, rhythm and pitch and the class will play traditional musical forms from various regions around the world. Basic instruments will be provided for you or you can bring your own.

Cost is \$30.00 and you are encouraged to bring your cassette recorders and notebooks; however video taping or digital recording is not allowed. For further information contact Mc Cabes at 310-828-4497 or Aaron at 818-569-5465.

**April 25-27.** New England Folk Festival, Natick Mass. Steve Brown's Bones workshop tentatively scheduled for Saturday at 12-1 pm. Member Adam Kline and Constance Cook performing just before. He hopes to have some of the kids from the school Constance teaches at come to the workshop to show their stuff, as well as the usual cast of characters from up here Shorty Boulet, Tim Reilly, Rob Rudin, Parker Waite, etc. The NEFFA web site is [www.neffa.org](http://www.neffa.org).

**May 5.** All-Ireland Bones Competition. Abbeyfeale, Ireland. First prize 300 Euros. Several members have expressed interest in this event. For information send email to [info@fleadhbythefeale.com](mailto:info@fleadhbythefeale.com).

**June 14-16** (tentative). Sea Music

Festival. Traditional music. Jam sessions where bones players are welcome. Contact Tim Reilly at 860-245-0789 or 860-572-0711.

**July 25-27.** Bones Fest VII. Louisville, KY. Hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben.

**August 25-31.** Bones and Spoons Contest at National Traditional Country Music Festival. Bones Contest is traditionally on last Saturday, August 31. Contact Jerry Mescher or [www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com).

**September 27th and 28th.** Celtic Festival in Cincinnati at the beautiful and historic Coney Island. The festival has many things going on and the music is top notch. I'd be willing to open my home to anyone wanting to go to the festival. Jam sessions at my house available. If someone wants to come in, I'll setup a jam session with a celtic band. Mike Passerotti, (513) 505-6545, [mikepasserotti@hotmail.com](mailto:mikepasserotti@hotmail.com).

**Sandor Slomovits' Gemini Calendar**  
**March 21,** 616-754-9163

Greenville Area Community Center, 700 E. Kent Rd. Greenville, MI  
A Gemini family concert at a wonderful, intimate theater where they have played an annual concert for the last 11 years. For part of this performance they will be joined by a local children's choir.

**March 27-29,** Grand Rapids, MI,  
They will be presenting workshops at the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children Conference.

**April 12,** Whitewater, WI, They will be presenting workshops at the Early Childhood Conference of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.

**April 26,** Kerrytown Concert Hall, Ann Arbor, MI, San will join members of the Phoenix Ensemble, the wonderful group he worked with on his most recent CD, "The Orchestra Is Here to Play" for an evening of classical, folk and jazz. For details look on [www.hoenixensemble.com](http://www.hoenixensemble.com).

**April 30,** Lansing, MI, San sings as part of the Annual State of Michigan Holocaust Commemoration in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building.

**May 4,** 734-665-4744, Temple Beth

*(Bones at Sea continued from page 1)*

were employed, in a call and response pattern called chanting. With both hands full of ship's gear, sails, lines, large pieces of wood or iron, and in all weather, there was no where to use an instrument effectively. It was when they were off watch in between work shifts most notably the end of the solar day that the idlers or day men and the crew with instruments gathered to play tunes.

In my research the day men consisted of cooks, stewards (the ship's butler), the sail maker, the carpenter, blacksmith and the cooper on whalers who normally worked from 6 in the morning to 6 in the evening every day. This is also the time where there would be a staggering or dogging of the four hour watch system and normally a four hour watch for half of the crew would be dogged into two two hour watches which each half would take. That way you did not have to stand the same watch all the time. (Sally Carroll can bear out the fact of this having had the same experiences.) It's time to patch your clothes, swap stories, sing ballads or national or patriotic airs, or practice instruments if they had them. If more than three or four were present, including bones and percussion, you were likely to have a fu-fu band, named by the effect it had on the officers. Jack London has a very, very good quote about a fu-fu band in the *Mutiny of the Elsinor*. He mentions bones playing and mentions the possibility of bones being made out of rib bone that were hanging out of salt meat; when the meat was actually consumed and the bone was left over, somebody would grab it knowing what the instrument was like on land from the minstrel bands. They were constructed out of the rib bones and they would polish up nicely in the sun and salt water.<sup>2</sup>

There are several document references to bones playing aboard ship. One that is very important to our Society is the Virginia Minstrels trip to Liverpool from New York City in 1844. While the actual log is still to be found of the packet ship *New York*, it is probable that Dan Emmet

*(Continued on page 6)*

(Continued from page 5)

rehearsed their material on the month's voyage to England, from April to May 1844 (perhaps we need to check Han's Nathan on his biography), composed new tunes for their British Isle tour which started in May. Our revered father, Frank Brower, was on that tour and played with Emmet even as the troupe was disbanding and that is quoted in Nathan that the troupe actually disbanded for a little while and later got back together.<sup>3</sup>

In 1853 the USS Powaton dropped anchor in Tokyo Bay. Matthew C. Perry had come to open negotiations for trade with Japan. One of the American things that the Japanese painters recorded was a minstrel troupe made up from different members of the crew in full regalia. I recently got the American Heritage Junior Library's copy of Perry's visit to Japan which shows that whole minstrel troupe and it has a little of the text of that visit. Officially it doesn't say exactly what tunes they played but you can see the bones player playing in the left end of the depiction.<sup>4</sup>

In 1855, the San Francisco Minstrels went to Australia and at that time Sydney would have been the biggest city to play in. It was still more or less a settled penal colony. It was also a very popular place for whalers to come in and reprovision, as were places like Russell and Auckland, New Zealand. We know this from the *Charles W. Morgan's* logs as well as first hand narratives of other whalers. The San Francisco Minstrels crossed the Pacific either by steamer or sail, probably the latter because the coaling stops for steamers were still being established in the Far East. This is the time of the Australian gold rush and mass settlement in the port cities of the West Perth, Dunbury, Fremantle and in the South in Adelaide and in the East in Melbourne and again Sydney. The whalers caught the minstrel craze early usually from crews who had been shipped from New York City to New Bedford as Herman Melville was and used the songs and music as a tangible link to better times back home. The whalers were on the sea continually for as long as four or five

months between water and recreation places and three to five years away from home. There's also a cross reference from *One Whaling Family* by a man named Williams who saw a minstrel troupe in western Australia which I believe might have been the San Francisco Minstrels. The publishing date of the narrative is very, very close - within a few months of the trip that the minstrels made.<sup>5,6</sup>

There are bones playing references from the voyages of two whale ships in 1851, one from New London, CT, one from New Bedford, MA. The whaler, *Julius Caesar*, sailed from New London for the South Georgia Islands down near Antarctica to go Sea Elephant hunting in 1851. A month or two into the trip the writer of the book *Life of a Whaler*, his name was Nathaniel Taylor, notes the musicians on the crew were reticent to play, but soon "the merry notes of a triangle, two fiddles, fife and a pair of bones resounded through the focsle." There is no record given, however, of the name of the man playing the bones or any of the instruments.

In New Bedford, later in 1851, the ship *Eliza Adams* was ready to sail. The day before she did a young man was issued a Seaman's Protection, a sort of ID. He was a US citizen, Albert Evans, 21 years old from Providence, RI. He was five feet, four inches tall with brown hair and blue eyes. He had signed aboard as an ordinary seaman for 1/175th of the profits of the voyage. Ten weeks into the voyage, John Jones, the ships steward recorded a busy deck scene.

Eliza Adams, January 7, 1852, found the fiddler playing the Fourth of July, Evans keeping time with the bones, blacksmith playing the jubler on the banjo, Goss was playing Bonaparte Crossing the Alps on the fife and some of the others were singing Old Dan Tucker Has Come To Town. In addition to this, part of the quote also mentions Portuguese sailors they picked up in the Azores singing in their national language on the focsle, the other end or bow of the ship, and this is on a vessel that was similar to the *Charles W. Morgan*, 100' long by 25' wide. About Mr. Evans; his name in the quote in John

Jones was misspelled so finding his name on the shipping list was part of the detective work. That led me to the Seaman's Protection paper and I found that personal information on him. At this point I haven't found relatives or a photograph yet.<sup>7,8</sup>

You had bones players on steamboats too. In the research that I found there were plenty of minstrel troupes going up and down the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. One of the early troupes was on a boat called the *James Raymond* and it was Dave Reed of his own troupe, Dave Reed's Minstrels. He played on the *James Raymond* in 1856. And then after the *James Raymond's* entry, I have in my research another steamer called the *Dixie*. In 1859 there was a fellow named Billy Manning who was playing on the *Dixie*. But to go back to the *James Raymond*, that was a push boat for the *Floating Palace* that was going up and down the Mississippi River. The *Floating Palace* had no engines, it was a huge museum/entertainment hall and dormitory for the performers and Ralph Keeler in his article, *Three Years as a Negro Minstrel*, mentions what the *Floating Palace* was like and he also mentions the *James Raymond*. They had the Redondo, which was the area the minstrels played in. The *James Raymond* was bought by the Union Navy as a store ship and as a possible floating battery in 1861. The price they got for it was \$40,000 so it must have been a significantly sized vessel.<sup>6,9</sup>

There are lots of photographs of these bones players and I am always looking to find more. I have to try to find more photographs of the United States Navy in the Civil War or just go to different maritime museums. I've tried ours at Mystic Seaport, but I haven't been able to get the access or the enthusiasm yet for the project that I am looking for. I also want to go to the Greenwich Maritime Museum in England because I think their records are a little better. Europeans tended to keep music at sea a lot more and later than the Americans did because of the punishment that happened on the American ships. Their photographs

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are much more comprehensive. There is a wonderful photograph that started all of my research on the instrument at sea that is taken from the 19 teens or early 1920's. It a photograph of a fu-fu band and the man right down on the front row on the left hand side has a pair of bones in his hands and they are bone bones. You can tell by the color of them in his hands. He is wearing a straw hat with no brim and the whole top of the hat is knocked off and cocked at a 45 degree angle.<sup>10</sup>

I think, in the fu-fu bands, they adapted the idea of the minstrel second part and they dressed up in pretty outlandish outfits. A lot of the guys are barefoot. One guy is wearing a beautiful pair of sail cloth pants and 'Boiled' shirts or striped shirts. One fellow in that picture has a southwester hat on over formal clothes which really looks ridiculous. They would often take the songs they had heard from the melodeons or dance halls and there is no great distance between the waterfront at South Street, New York City and the Bowery Theater and Mechanic's Hall where Christy's and Bryant's Minstrels played.<sup>11</sup> You can just see the whole impetus for these guys taking this music out and sailorizing the lyrics - *Camptown Races* in sea lexicon becomes *Sacramento* because it's a reflection of everyone going out to California for the gold rush. You have an obvious influence from the entertainment point of view. The tempo was very fast and very catchy and the men wanted to remember it on a 15,000 mile voyage to California. There is a sea version of *O Susannah* as well.

In the 1840's when minstrelsy was young you have the cotton trade really booming, and you have an itinerant labor force coming from the British Isles and the Northern ports of America to New Orleans, and taking those boats back with cotton to England; there was a lot of transatlantic trade. In Rice's *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, myself and another musician at Mystic Seaport noted a huge influx of British Isle and Western Europeans as minstrels rather than native born Americans or Yanks. You have a huge melting pot as we call it

now. These people who have a natural gift for entertaining people are going on and doing delineations of the lowest class of citizens, but the people who are doing these delineations are themselves on the bottom of the ladder. That's where I did some research into the idea of the African Americans and the Irish being in the same social ladder really popularizing this instrument, both having it in their cultures.

A lot of the music that was played on the ships was saved. I mentioned *Sacramento* before. *O Susanna*, of course, was played. They had *Liza Lee* and *Clear The Track* or *The Bulgine* as shanties and also what they called forbitters or recreational songs or focsle songs. Jibs and reels were also popular music.<sup>11-13</sup>

They were fairly quick rhythmically and they got the attention of the other crew members. It breaks down the idea that you're not doing concert music, you are doing popular music. So in the *Julius Caesar* quote that I gave you before all of the possible instrumentalists come out and start playing along because everyone wants to get playing and cement good feelings. The Captain smiles because everyone is playing together which means the ship is going to be happier, a major point of ship psychology. And if the Captain is getting his coffee on time he is pretty happy as well.

Whale ships in the 1840's and 1850' would be going all over the Pacific so they often chopped wood for firewood and you can imagine they might be going onto a beach that had sandalwood or teak or ebony or rosewood. All of these sorts of wood when they were cut up and polished would make an awesome set of bones. We know that now - that is a given. But they also could uses whale's bones, the jawbone. We know this perfectly from Nick Driver's sets and antique bones that were made out of whalebone. The part that you would make it from would probably be the front third of the whale's jaw under the tooth sockets because it would give you both the length and the density and you could machine in the curve to suit your fancy. There is also a very gentle curve at the back of the jaw in

the pan bone or the mandible. Pieces were given by seniority, but after everyone was done shaping, any scrap could be utilized to make a pair of bones. I have photograph of fiddle pegs and a tailpiece being made out of pan bones complete with scrimshaw. The peg heads all have flower motifs on the flat and the tail piece is a really wonderful piece of patriotic workmanship with a sailor at the top of a mast nailing a national flag to the mast. So with 'stock' measurements all that was needed for bones was 7" long and an inch of width and a little thickness.

(This article concludes in the next issue of the newsletter.)

#### References

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2. [The Mutiny of the Ellsinore](#) by Jack London
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4. [Commodore Perry in Japan](#), American Heritage Junior Library
5. [One Whaling Family](#) by Harold Williams
6. [Monarchs of Minstrelsy](#) by Edward LeRoy Rice
7. [Life On a Whaler](#) by Nathaniel Taylor
8. [To Pass the Time Away](#) by Carol Tobal
9. [Three Years as a Negro Minstrel](#) by Ralph Keeler
10. [Seafaring Under Sail](#) by Basil Greenhill
11. [Songs of the Sailor and](#)

## A Short Biography of Tim Reilly

Tim started playing bones in 1988 at Mystic Seaport after listening to and meeting Martin Fay of the Chieftains. He teaches a class at Williams College on bones and percussion instruments used at sea. He also makes bones.

He became part of Mystic Seaport after going there to read Moby Dick. He is a ship rigger and repairs and restores masts and spars and rigging of tall sailing ships.

He crossed the Atlantic in 1994 and played bones in all of the ports that he visited.

## Special Bones

Last summer we visited friends in Oregon and we had a nice music weekend, 20 miles up Roque River.

During one of our sessions, my friend Bo Shindler found out that there could be more sound (effect) from the bones. I told him that is not possible; bones are bones! A few weeks ago I met my friend again and he gave me three pairs of bones (see the photograph to the right).

The middle pair in the thickened part has a spent bullet cartridge filled with shut hail. The holes are made for giving a *samba* sound.

The left pair has the thickened part closed. No holes, but the cavity space is also filled with shut hail (no bullet spent cartridge).

The right pair is wrought on one side with light metal cartridge-cases in the bones. That gives a special effect, plus when you turn around the bones, there is a much different sound!

I hope you enjoy this photograph of very special bones. Maybe it is also nice to mention them in the newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society. The



Photograph of the 'special bones' described in the article on this page. Photograph by Han Weehuizen.

bones are made from Myrtle wood.

*Hans Weehuizen.*

(Editor's note: Parker Waite's aluminum bones are another example of 'special bones.' I tried them at Bones Fest VI and they sounded very good which is not what I would have

predicted. This article has me thinking about other possibilities for making bones. If you have an example of 'special bones' please send a description and a photograph for a future newsletter.)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 5, No. 2 2003

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## Executive Director's Column

After you read this newsletter I am sure that you will agree that each issue is better than the previous one. How long can this go on? This one indexes all the prior newsletters, therefore, if you are not a Charter Member you may want a copy of one or more that you missed. At a cost of \$2.50 each, Steve may be able to help you.

BONES FEST VII should be marked on your calendar (July 25-27). This will be a great one! A chance to meet many new boners from all along the famous Kentucky Music Trail as well as old friends from everywhere.

A video of Bones Fest VI is now available.

It is 1 hour and 49 minutes of great bones playing, available at cost plus shipping. Send your check for \$15 to the Rhythm Bones Society, 1060 Lower Brow Rd. Signal Mt. TN 37377. The tapes will only be copied after your order is received, therefore plan 2-3 weeks for delivery.

Have you opened the bones web page lately? Jonathan Danforth our new web Master as changed the format and brought most of the page up to date (see [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)). It looks great and is easy to read.

God willing and the creeks don't rise we will see you in Louisville in July.

## Russ Myers—Playin' the Bones

Russell Myers places a set of bones between the fingers of each hand and flips on a recording of "I'm Looking Over a Four-leaf Clover."

For three minutes, the 67-year-old Madison County man clackety-clacks out a beat to the old song, much to the delight of his audience. Somehow, he even manages to change pitch on his percussion instruments, taking his music up an octave on the second verse.

Myers holds the title of World Champion Bone Player, an honor he won in September at the Old Time Country and Bluegrass Festival in Avoca, Iowa.

His goal is to make sure this art does not die out in America.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people in this country don't even know there is such a thing as bone playing," Myers says.

He is probably right about today's society. But at the turn of the

20th century, when minstrel shows were ushering in the vaudeville era, most people in this country knew all about bones.

Bones were one of four instruments traditionally used in minstrel shows, the others being the fiddle, banjo and tambourine.

But bones, which are about 7 inches long and

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Russell Myers of Brightwood, VA is considered one of the world's best bones players. One of his specialties is performing with three bones in each hand, rather than the standard two bones. The set he's holding is made from whalebone. Photograph by Robert A. Martin, used with permission.

## Editorial

Part 2 of the Tim Reilly's *Bones at Sea* article concludes in this issue. This article was of particular interest to me as I learned to play the bones from my father who learned from a sailor. That sailor must have had Irish roots as I learned as a one-handed bones player. Again, Thanks, Tim.

This issue reprints an article on Russ Myers that was picked up by the Associated Press and ran in many newspapers. Russ is a founding member of our Society and until last year our Assistant Director. Mel Mercier wrote a short article that covers his bones playing from a bones player's perspective.

Member Sandor Slomovits, a professional performer who plays bones, wrote the article on Ray Schairer, Percy Danforth's bones maker.

Ev Cowett wrote a review of member David Holt's interesting instructional video that includes bones and a whole lot more.

Check out the Website of the Quarter. Jonathan Danforth has reworked [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) and done it in style.

A few members competed in the

## Recorded Bones Music

**Little Blue Heron.** By member Adam Klein and Constance Cook. Two bones tracks from Bones Fest V. To hear samples and get purchase info go to [artists.iuma.com/IUMA/Bands/Little\\_Blue\\_Heron/](http://artists.iuma.com/IUMA/Bands/Little_Blue_Heron/).

## Letters to the Editor

A quick report from Abbeyfeale.....

Steve brown beat off stiff competition from a total of 15 other bones players (1 other American, 2 English, 1 Danish, the remainder Irish) to win the All-Ireland Bone-playing competition last night. Paddy 'Sport' Murphy, the reigning champion was placed second. Undaunted, and gracious in defeat, he continued to play great music for his family, friends and admirers into the night.

There were some wonderful performances in the competition and it was easily the best year yet. Steve played wonderful music. He was still in shock (and in heaven) when I left him late last night as he 'pressed the flesh' of his new fans! Congratulations to Steve and to all who took part. *Mel*

## Bones Calendar

**June 29-July 4.** Bones and Bodhran workshop by Mark Nelson and Michael Baytop at Common Ground on the Hill, Westminster, MD.

[www.commongroundonthehill.org/](http://www.commongroundonthehill.org/) for details

**Bones Fest VII.** July 25-27,2002.

Louisville, KY. Hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben. See insert for details.

**August 25-31.** Bones and Spoons Contest at National Traditional Country Music Festival. Bones Contest is on last Saturday. Contact Jerry Mescher or [www.oldtimemusic.bigstop.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstop.com).

### Sandor Slomovits's Items

**June 7.** 11:00 am and 1:00 pm, 800-527-2182, Flint, MI, "Kaleidoscope" at Crossroads Village.

**June 11.** 7-8:30 pm, 734-675-0920, Brownstown Rec. Dept. 21311 Telegraph, Brownstown, MI 48183

**June 17.** 734-261-9087, Redford, MI., An outdoor Gemini Family Concert.

**July 6.** 2:30 pm, 800-648-PARK Linden County Park, Clover Beach Pavilion, Linden, MI. An Outdoor event.

**July 20,** 2:30 pm, 845-987-9826, Warwick, NY. Outdoors at Stanley Deming Park, as part of the Warwick

## Website of the Quarter

**www.rhythmbones.com.** It all began back in 1998, when Martha Cowett gave her dad Ev a present-- a web site dedicated to rhythm bones! Until that point, the world had probably never seen (or dreamed of) a web site devoted solely to the bones.

Since then, our site's pages have grown tremendously. Besides lists of players, books, videos, bones sources and makers, articles, announcements, and trivia, Rhythm Bones Central pages host an extensive bones calendar (over 80 events in 2003), reviews of

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Bones Fests, history, ethnomusicology, lists of books, recordings, and web links, as well as information on the Rhythm Bones Society (which sponsors the site). Together with the Yahoo Group mailing list based on the web at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rhythmbones>, the Rhythm Bones Central site at <http://www.rhythmbones.com> remains the most comprehensive internet resource for learning and communicating about rhythm bones.

Of course, as the mouthpiece of the Rhythm Bones Society, the web site wouldn't get far without feedback from RBS members. Check the site often for updates, and email suggestions, links, info, and feedback to [webmaster@rhythmbones.com](mailto:webmaster@rhythmbones.com).  
*Jonathan Danforth*

(Editor's note. Jonathan took the website over from Martha Cowett following Bones Fest VI. He has recently reworked it and it is in great

## Ray Schairer - Percy Danforth's Bones Maker

Percy Danforth is a name familiar to most people in the bones-playing community worldwide. Percy, who learned to play the bones as a young child in the early 1900's, began teaching them to others in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the mid 1970's and went on to play and teach the bones throughout the United States and in Great Britain up until his death in 1992.

Less well known, but perhaps equally deserving of credit for the bones rise in popularity in Percy's wake is Ray Schairer, the man who has fashioned the bones that Percy and his many students—and the students of his students—have played.

Ray, born in 1922, is the third generation of Schairers to farm land near Ann Arbor, Michigan. He was born on his family's 120-acre family farm and grew up running it alongside his dad and then continued by himself after his father's passing. He planted grains, milked cattle, raised sheep and chickens — doing what used to be called general farming.

Along the way, he also became a fine woodworker. His dad taught him the basic skills as a young boy (Ray still has the first workbench his father made for him) and Ray went on to hone his skills, fixing and making furniture and fashioning everything from wooden bowls to miniature mantle clocks, lathe works and other craft articles. As a young man he began teaching woodworking to boys and eventually, as the times changed, also to girls in the local 4-H program. Recently, the Washtenaw County Extension Service honored him for 55 years of 4-H leadership.

His fame as a woodworker and teacher is probably how he came to the attention of Percy Danforth. By 1976 Percy Danforth had enough bones students that he needed a steady supply of high quality wooden bones. Percy played everything from genuine bones to ones made of plastic and ivory but he preferred the sound of

wooden bones, especially pine. He came to Ray's workshop one day in 1976 and showed him the bones and asked if he could set up a system to turn out large quantities of wooden ones. Ray still has the curved piece of pine that Percy brought with him that day to show the exact curve he wanted on the bones.

A business relationship and friendship was formed which lasted till Percy's death and even beyond. Ray continued to send royalty payments from the sale of bones to Percy's wife Fran and now sends them to his children.

For more than a quarter century, in the converted chicken coop on his farm that served as his wood shop, Ray has turned out bones. The wood shop is small, with its low ceilings serving as a reminder of the original purpose of the building. It is filled with all the standard woodworker's tools: band saw, belt sander, table saw, lathe, stone sharpening wheel and a full assortment of hand tools, plus some custom-made power tools to shape and sand the bones.

To make the bones Ray takes 5/4 inch boards of wood and first cuts out the curved shapes, about a foot long and about 3/8 inch thick, on his band saw. Then he pushes each piece twice through the shaper he designed and built with the help of an engineering professor at the University of Michigan. The shaper puts the concave shape on the bones that makes them comfortable to hold and play. Then he sands each bone on a three-belt sander he fashioned, first with medium grade sandpaper, then with fine and finally with emory paper. Then it's back to the band saw to cut off the extra length on each end. (When finished, the bones are 7-3/8 inches long but he needs the extra length at the beginning of the process to push them through the wood shaper and to hold them on the sanders.) Then it's over to the drum sander to sand the edges he's just cut. A coat of Minwax is next and finally he affixes the tiny *Danforth Bones* decal in the center.

Ray estimates that in the past twenty eight years he has made over thirty thousand Danforth bones. "I haven't had chickens in here for thirty



Ray Schairer in his workshop. Photograph courtesy of Sandor Slomovits

years. I make more money turning out bones than raising chickens." That comment says more about the economic conditions of the family farm than it does on the profitability of bones making.

Although he's shaped thousands of bones, Ray has, literally and figuratively, never cut corners. He uses the most modern of power tools, yet is a true craftsman in the old tradition of woodworkers. Certain that it would be possible to set up a mass production system for turning out the bones, he says that's not his way. He likes his more deliberate hands-on approach and takes pride in knowing that he handled every pair of bones before they left his shop.

Percy sold the Danforth bones at his many concerts and workshops at schools, coffeehouses and festivals. He usually played bones made of soft pine, but people asked about other woods and so Ray began turning out bones made of cherry, hickory, walnut, oak, maple and exotic woods like ebony and rosewood. As Percy's fame spread, he began getting orders from music stores and individuals all over the US and from as far away as Europe, Australia and Japan. Today, ten years after Percy's death, Ray still fills orders from all over the world.

Ray himself has learned to rattle the bones, but his primary musical

*(Continued on page 4)*

(Ray Schairer - continued from page 3)

instrument is the piano. He still plays on the beautiful old upright that his grandmother bought for his father when his father was six years old. "That's the piano I learned on too. We had a trio, my dad, my sister and I. He also played the violin and my sister played the saxophone." With typical and misplaced modesty Ray adds, "As long as I was accompanying them, I could get away with it. But I didn't want to be up there as a soloist."

Ray is retired now. He and his wife Jane recently celebrated their Golden Anniversary and now live in the Chelsea Methodist Retirement Community. Retirement has allowed him to play his beloved piano a little more but has not slowed him down a bit. Ray and Jane sold the family farm to a distant relative and so he still has access to his wood shop there but the Retirement Community also has a well equipped wood shop in the basement. Many mornings find Ray down there working on various projects and, of course, fashioning more bones.

He continues to experiment with new woods. He recently heard of a company in Wisconsin that is making lumber from logs discovered at the bottom of Lake Superior, wood that had sunk there well over 100 years ago when the virgin forests of Wisconsin were first logged and tree trunks were lashed together in huge rafts and towed down to Chicago. Lake Superior's frigid waters have preserved this wood — from forests standing long before the Declaration of Independence was signed — in impeccable condition. Ray now fashions maple, birch and pine bones from them. The wood is very close grained and beautiful and Ray says admiringly, "This is real wood. You don't often see wood like this anymore." The sound is different too, sharper and crisper than bones made from the same conventional woods.

Ray has never advertised, but word of his well-crafted bones keeps spreading. Bones players who learned from Percy are legion and when people see his fine instruments they want their own. Some of Percy's students who play music professionally play them in their

concerts and after the shows people ask where they can buy them. There is even the principal of a nearby elementary school, himself a bones player, who every year teaches all his fifth graders how to play. He uses tongue depressors to get them started and then orders a pair of bones for each of them as a graduation gift.

"Sometimes I think that interest in the bones has waned and maybe I've made my last set of bones but then I get another big order," says Ray. "This thing just has a life of its own. I love making the bones and I'll keep doing them as long as I can."

Sandor Slomovits, who learned the bones from Percy Danforth in 1976 and who Percy came to refer to as "my prime protégé," is one half of the children/family music duo of Gemini. He plays the bones in all Gemini's concerts at schools, teacher's conferences and concert halls and even with Gemini's performances with symphony orchestras throughout the US and Canada.

To order Ray Schairer's Danforth bones, in a wide variety of woods, including the ones from virgin forests, visit Sandor Slomovits' website [www.geminichildrensmusic.com](http://www.geminichildrensmusic.com) where you can also find a copy of the instructions Percy used in teaching people how to play the bones. Or contact: Sandor Slomovits, 2021 Penncraft Ct., Ann Arbor, MI 48103, 734-665-0165,

## Tip and Techniques More on Tuning

I approach this from an intuitive or scientific angle. As is so often the case, the two overlap.

Fundamental frequency vibrations are multiples of the point where the fingers are held, typically near the top of the bones. This determines where the bones hit towards the bottom of the bones. Common sense basics.

To achieve the tone one is looking for-- that harmonic sought by the individual-- most of the variables are the curve of the bones, the shape of the hand/fingers, the material used for the bones, the mass of the bones, the shape of the bones and WHERE ONE

## POSITIONS THE FINGERS

For sake of discussion, take a set of bones and place the together thus, )( . Pinch them together at the mid point node. Pinch them again 1/2 the distance from the mid-point toward the bottom of the bone anti-node. Now slide your fingers down from the top until they stop. This is the point at which one STARTS to tune the bones.

Now we start the process of sliding the fingers up or down a millimeter at a time, moving one bone or the other up or down a millimeter at a time, turning one bone or the other (or both) top to bottom, finding bones with different shapes or thicknesses at one end or the other. The variations are endless, all based on the above mentioned variables and a few hundred others that each of us discovers as we "go along".

Regardless of all these factors, we all know or discover the "tuned" tone we seek. This is particular to the individual and the volume is basically inconsequential and only a product of the need to be heard in a given setting. Shifting the bones to move the anti-nodal point can be used for effect and to color the sound. This is particularly important based on the music one is playing with and the effect one is trying to achieve.

The above pontification is based on 40 years of playing and experimentation and all I can say for myself is I ain't dead yet. *Hank*

## First Regional Bones Fest

I am interested in sponsoring a regional one day bones fest as suggested in the most recent newsletter and have picked a date, June 22nd. This is in conjunction with Mel Merciers attendance at Gaelic Roots and I would like to have Mel do a presentation based on his research. I will be looking into a location and let the board know as I progress. Preliminary schedule is: coffee and discussion 9 am-10 am, Mel's presentation 10 am-12 noon, lunch 12 noon -1:30, afternoon performance 1:30-6 pm. Any thoughts or suggestions? Hope everyone is well,



*(Russ Myers continued from page 1)*

an inch wide, far predate the minstrel show, which was born in New York City in 1842.

There are pictographs of high priestesses playing bones in the Egyptian temples of Luxor some 4,000 years ago. The instruments were used as part of religious ceremonies to honor Hathor, goddess of fertility.

"And in those pictures, the priestesses hold the bones the same way we do today," Myers says.

In fact, bones may be the oldest musical instruments known to man, perhaps predating even the drum. Cavemen may well have banged two bones together after supper, long before they used them as drumsticks.

Although bone playing has become a lost art in America, there is one place in the world where it is alive and well: Ireland. "Almost every pub in Ireland has a bone player," Myers says. Irish immigrants in 1719 brought more than potatoes to their settlements in New Hampshire. They brought bone playing, too.

There is a written record of bones being played by a German musician in the Bronx Theater in 1740.

And there is a scene in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that refers to bone playing.

Still, it was the minstrel show that made the playing of bones an art form in America.

"Only the main musicians in minstrel shows traveled," Myers explains. "The end men were picked in each town where the troupe played."

The "end men," called because of the seats they occupied on stage, were the bones and tambourine players.

Myers' father was an end man with Lowes Minstrel Show in the late 1890s, but gave up bone playing when he became a district manager for Shell Oil Co.

Myers says he was unaware of his father's talent until 1941.

"My father attended a dinner meeting and the company put a set of bones beside each plate. Everyone knew what they were, but only my father could play them."

Myers' father brought the bones home and played them for his son. "Until then, I didn't know he had an

ounce of music in his body," he says.

Myers learned to play the bones, slowly mastering both the tap and the roll, the only two rhythms these instruments make.

Bone playing almost died out with vaudeville. By 1970, these musicians had become so rare in the United States (only 10 were thought to remain) that the Library of Congress called Myers, who then lived in Northern Virginia, and asked him to make some recordings.

"They were afraid that bone playing would die out altogether and they wanted some record of what these instruments sounded like," says Myers, who admits, "I thought I was the only bone player left."

A few months later, when Michigan bone player Percy Danforth came to Washington to make similar tapes, the Library of Congress got the two together.

It was then that the two bone players--along with the Library of Congress--decided to try to revive the art.

Danforth inspired two University of Michigan theses. And Myers began playing bones for civic-club gatherings in Madison County, where he moved in 1975.

The real turnaround in the bone world, however, came in 1997, when the first Bonefest was held in Greensboro, N.C., and the Rhythm Bones Society was formed.

Eight people showed up each of the first two years, says Myers, but 38 musicians took part when Bone Fest III was held at Myers' home in 1999.

That number swelled to more than 100 at Bone Fest VI in 2001 in Phillipston, Mass., and the future of bone playing is now beginning to appear much brighter.

In fact, the membership of the Rhythm Bones Society has grown to about 125. Myers is further encouraged by the fact that a 12-year-old boy took part in the Iowa competition in September. The Rhythm Bones Society now even produces its own newsletter.

"My concern is that bones won't die out forever," Myers says.

Rhythm bones can be made of animal bone, wood or plastic. Each set

produces a similar yet distinctive sound.

When playing, only one bone is moved while the other is held against the palm of the hand. The two are clicked together not by finger movement but by a twist of the wrist.

Typically, two bones are held in each hand, but some talented musicians--including Myers--can hold three. Myers is the only U.S. bone player who can change the pitch on his instruments as he plays.

While there are few commercial bone-playing recordings being made these days, it was not always so. Several records in the 1950s sold more than 250,000 copies.

And if you think you've never heard a recording on which bones are played, you're probably wrong--especially if you have ever seen a Harlem Globetrotters basketball game.

That team's theme song, "Sweet Georgia Brown," features Freeman "Brother Bones" Davis on the bones (he also does the whistling), and a vocal reference to the bone man is made at the beginning of the record.

Myers, in his effort to promote bone playing, says their clacking rhythm would be perfect for today's rap songs and would also do well with modern country tunes, too.

Because of the way they use their wrists, Myers says, keyboardists make great bone players. Drummers, on the other hand, have the worst time adapting.

You might catch Myers and his bones in action if you attend one of the Brightwood General Store's Friday-night picking parties next summer or you might see him on the Virginia Public Television show "Virginia Currents."

If you are interested in learning to play the bones or just keeping the art alive, the Rhythm Bones Society is looking for members.

The days of the minstrel show and the end man may be gone, but their bones are alive and well.

Russ Myers hopes they will go on clicking and clacking forever.

*Story by Donnie Johnston, The (Fredericksburg, Va.) Free Lance-Star, and Photo by Robert A. Martin, The (Fredericksburg, Va.) Free Lance-Star. Used with permission.*

# Bones at Sea

## Part 2

The bones made it into songs and poetry on vessels, too. There is a neat quote from a song called *Down The Ohio* with the initials EWF. I have no idea who that is, but the poem dates from the 1830's or 1820's. "Oh, da master is proud of the old broad horn cause she brings him plenty of tin. The crews of darkies and the cargo of corn and the money come tumbling in. There's plenty on board for the darkies to eat and something to drink and smoke. The banjo and bones and the old tambourine, there's the clown with the comic joke." They say that the broad horns were named because the oars stuck out on either side like horns on a bull. They said the only currency to pay the crew was Monongahela rye whiskey and if you failed to ship it you would not get a crew at any price. The men wore woolen trousers, no shirts and heavily studded brogans.<sup>11</sup> They would get ashore and just rip up the place and get back on the raft. There's a kind of a reference to the free and easy lifestyle in the *Jolly Flat Boatman* painting by Caleb Bingham. There's also a reference in *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain. I found a book called *Showboats* the day after Bones Fest V and that had a lot of information about the flat boats and also on the James Raymond.

There is a very old tavern in New London, CT on a street called Green Street which is called Dutch Tavern. I just recently visited the Dutch Tavern during our Sail Festival in New London. It was opened in the 1680's so it qualifies as one of the oldest pubs on the East Coast of the United States and definitely the oldest pub in Connecticut. Its one of the places where sailors would come to hear music and pick up improvisational entertainment in New London. The city also had a concert location, and I know of a minstrel troupe performing in New London in 1862. At this point I am still trying to research the actual place by the papers in the area.

One of the biggest hurdles to clear was the question of availability of the

bones for sailors. Provisioning a ship like a whale ship in the Port of New London, CT, the purchase of a lot of the beef that was used to outfit the crew was a big expense. The beef itself would have come from either Bank Street along the Thames River or maybe two blocks up on Golden Street. There would be an order placed by the captain of the vessel or the First Mate for how many barrels of beef, pork, flour, hard tack, molasses, coffee, sugar, etc. the ship would need on the voyage. You know you are going to South Georgia on the *Julius Caesar*, and you're going to be out for two or three years, so most of your food has to be non-perishable. If they put up the beef in the same way that salt fish was put up, you would have several sections of bone in large slabs of meat that the 'doctor' or the cook could cut down. To serve in New London, the sea provisioners would have included a fellow named Brooks on Main Street which was two blocks from the water. The most famous one was a fellow named Hobron who was on Bank Street leading up from the wharves. Another named Tinker was on State Street and there was also a prison on the bottom of State Street next to the commercial wharf where the whalers tied up; that was probably to get the real troublemakers right off the ship and into the brig at the end of a voyage so they couldn't file any grievances up the street at the courthouse.<sup>12</sup> These people listed would all provision the ships. The casks were several hundred pounds, rolled down and carried in carts to the wharf. After they were opened several weeks into the voyage, anyone who really wanted to make the instrument would try to get in well with the doctor and get all that left over bone. As a rule on a ship, even crossing the Atlantic in 1993, which I did in a short handed motor ship, wasting food and lying were the two biggest crimes onboard the ship whether there were 37 or 7 people on the crew.

So once you had gotten the bone from the cook you could scrape down the beef bone and have a set. A friend of mine, Don Sineti, who is a cetacean scholar in Connecticut, showed me a pair of bones he was lent from a man

on Nantucket Island who bought them at an antiques auction. It's a pair, obviously, of beef bones and both of the ends are rounded. There was also a very long piece that was included in the auction which is probably whalebone. It's very, very thin, a 1/16 of an inch thick and ten inches long. The beef ribs are about 7 1/2 inches long by 1 1/4 inches wide and very flat in cross section. We were led to believe looking at the bones that these might have been a triple set with the long flat piece being held in the center and the two curved clappers hitting against it. What I think might have happened is that it might be a busk, but it's too skinny in the width and pretty long. The maker of these bones, if it was his name, engraved very, very lightly on one of the bones the word 'Sear' just like Sears, but we were looking all over for the 's' but we didn't find it. I met the fellow who bought these at the auction at a concert a couple of years ago, and he was rueing the fact that he didn't have those bones with him so I could go up and play them with Don. I think that's in the works if I ever record. We're going to let him know, and he is going to bring them into the studio, and I'll play them on a tape.<sup>13</sup> On the whale ship if a nobler pair of bones was fancied, you could also use the jaw of a whale. I don't know that you could use the teeth because of the way the teeth are made. You are cutting down the length and it's similar to cutting out a piece of wood. I don't know if the ivory would stand the shock of playing (we know that jawbones do), so that is just conjecture right now although some castanets have been made from elephant ivory.

There were two sets of bones played on the whaler Chas. W. Morgan in 1886 by a Philippi no cook named Chrispolo De Aris. He taught a young American man how to play the bones and that man's name was Joseph Bement. His grandson, Frank, was given these bones his grandfather played as a memento of the voyage, a hand me down, a keepsake. Frank, the grandson, brought them to the Mystic Seaport Museum in 1991 as a part of the Morgan exhibit that was being

(Continued on page 7)

*(Bones at Sea—continued from page 6)*

celebrated for the ship's 100th anniversary. I never got a chance to play those bones, but there is a photograph of one of the staff musicians with the bones poised in his hand. The real heart-rending thing about that photograph is a bones player and historian is the fact that this fellow is holding these very antique instruments over an open hatchway grating and if they slipped out they could have gone right into the bilge and probably not be found. I've actually taken working dimensions off of those and came up with these measurements, 7 x 1 x 3/8 inches. The wood that they're made from is either dark rosewood or ebony.

Shortly after those bones were donated, there was another set found at the antique show at Brimfield, MA which was all solid bone and I wanted to take photos of those, but I wasn't allowed to because, I guess, of security or logistical reasons. But those two small ones are just about 6 inches long by 1 1/4 inches, and they have a bluish white tint to them. I have to go to the senior curator and see if he did a test on them to see if they are whalebone or beef bone. The pitting is fairly pronounced on them; the pores of the bone and I really don't know what they are. They were found completely by accident and brought into the museum. Initially, I was going to be called in to take a look at them to see if they were shoehorns or bones but because of a scheduling difficulty, I wasn't able to actually see them until later.

I am always looking for more maritime references. So if you know of any that I might not have gotten, I'd love to share out information. I don't think this should be any secret knowledge for people to hoard their own information; it is better for the Society to have a broad large base of as many related aspects of the instrument as possible. *Tim Reilly*

#### References

11. [The Making of a Nation](#), American Heritage Books, [The French Quarters](#), Herbert Coksury
12. [Bear's Atlas of New London County](#), 1868, Mystic Seaport Museum.

*(Continued on page 8)*

## A Bones Player Meets Russ Myers

I received my first (and only) American speeding ticket on a sunny morning about five years ago. I was about half way between Greensboro, North Carolina and Brightwood, Virginia, when, seduced by the quiet, mid-morning lull in the traffic, the joy of the American freeway (in comparison to the Cork-Dublin road!), and the powerful gallop of my rental-horse, I sped into the sights of the tallest policeman I have ever seen. So long, in fact, that his knees rested on the dashboard beside his in-car computer as he issued me with my ticket. A good-guy! He listened to my story about the music that I had heard the previous night in the Cowett family home during the celebration of Everett's birthday. He seemed bemused and not a little confused: "Bones-playing"? he repeated with a genuine curiosity. "Yes", I said, "a whole family of them - two-handed players, not like in Ireland where all the bones-players are one-handed"! That didn't help!

I had a wonderful time in Greensboro where I met Everett for the first time. I was delighted by the warmth and generosity of the Cowetts and thrilled by the bones-playing I heard there. Now I was on the way to meet another musician for the first time, Russ Myers. Everett had spoken very highly of Russ when I interviewed him. He told me how they too had only recently become friends and how Russ was not only a great character, but also quite the virtuoso player. I was excited!

By the time I arrived in Brightwood, I felt like I already knew Russ. Meeting Wilma, Russ's wife, I was struck immediately by her gentleness, and as the day passed into evening I experienced the calmness and peacefulness of their home. Russ spoke to me about his love of the bones, his research into their history, and his own bones-playing story. Russ generously shared a version of it with me in his own inimitable style; a mixture of humility, humour and historical accuracy. My favorite part

of the story is when Russ joins the ROTC band during the Korean War. The photograph of him on the ROTC parade ground in full uniform, playing his bones as part of the army band, is the single most extraordinary image of my bones research to date.

Russ also played for me and I was amazed at his remarkable technique and musicality. The fine sense of form and rhythm evident in his bones arrangements, and the accurate performance of complex rhythms and 'pitch-shifting' (his trademark) leaves me breathless to this day. This, of course, is only as it should be because Russ is, quite simply, one of the master bones-players. *Mel Mercier*

## Review of David Holt's Folk Rhythms Video

This 47-minute video has been available since 1996 and is as valuable to your library today as it was when first recorded. You can learn to play Spoons, Bones, Washboard, Hambone and the Paper Bag by viewing this entertaining video. The folk rhythms, 1 and 2 and 3 and 4, with accents on 2 and 4, are central to all five instruments, and folk music for that matter.

The video begins with the basic folk rhythms and detailed instruction on wood and metal spoon playing showing the versatility of this simple instrument when playing on body parts and clothing. This leads into stories, hamboning, use of the body as a drum machine and the selection and play of a washboard. All great fun.

Then comes the bones instructions. Although bones playing is limited to only 7 minutes of the video, bone types, sizes, how to hold them, creating a snap and a roll with one and two hands is covered. As all bones players know, practice and patience are important. Holt feels that 5 minutes a day for two weeks is sufficient to play snaps, rolls and various combinations. You are almost ready to go public.

This is a very fun video by an award-winning multi-instrumentalist folk historian from 5 generations of bones players. The video closes with



Photograph Legend from upper left. Sailor's band on an American ship and another sailor's band on a British ship. Both about the turn of the 20th Century. Photograph to the right is an 1854 Japanese painting of Perry's minstrel troupe (see story in Part 1). Photographs courtesy of Tim Reilly.



*(Continued from page 7)*

13. Personal Correspondence, Don Sineti, Tim Reilly and William Grady, Mystic 1995.
14. The Log of Mystic Seaport, Autumn 1993.
15. Personal research, 1995.

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 5, No. 3 2003

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## Executive Director's Column

Bones Players are finally coming out of the closet. You can find them almost everywhere and good ones are not that hard to find. At a summer music camp in Winston-Salem, NC (a referral from John 'Mr. Bones' Cahill) I recently added 44 more and had a great time doing it. The students were in grades 5-8, yardsticks were cut into 6" pieces to make 176 bones and most everyone was playing simple rhythms using both hands after only two 35-minute sessions. Starting with a pair in each hand appeared responsible for the success. My grandson Ramsey was also helpful and related well to these children who were only a year or 2 older. By the end of four 35-minute sessions I was so

proud of all of them that I almost cried out loud. The Rhythm Bones Society has had a spectacular year. We have more than 115 members worldwide. The web site, *rhythmbones.com*, is up-to-date and the newsletter, *Rhythm Bones Player*, is outstanding. Several members have won major competitions (Yirdy Machar in IA USA and Steve Brown in Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Maybe we should hold one. I am confident that Russ Myers, Steve Wixson, Don DeCamp, Vivian Cox, Ramsey Cowett and about a dozen or more members would like to meet them head on. Let me hear from all of you on this one. May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

## Fred Edmunds - Hearing Rhythms of the Bones

Lexington (AP) - July 18, 1993. Fred Edmunds was hoping for something as big as the yo-yo or Hula-Hoop—something that would create a nationwide craze.

He's still hoping. (*Editor's note: Fred Edmunds died December 28, 1997.*)

But more realistic now, he will settle for less. Edmunds would be happy just to pass along his beloved art of playing the bones to the next generation.

"It would be a shame to let a musical instrument that has been around for 5,000 years fade into complete obscurity," he said. "The bones are obscure enough as it is."

In fact, Edmunds, 73, is nearly alone when it come to bones.

A retired physician, he flirted for more than half a century with his fascination for the simple rhythm instrument before it became a serious pursuit—some might even say obsession.

The bones date back to ancient Egypt and Africa and enjoyed a long heritage in America through the Civil War. They were made from shank bones of cattle and played by gripping a pair of bones in each and smacking them together.

Edmunds first came across the bones at a church retreat in North Carolina when he was 15 years old. "I heard a bunch of kids

knocking them around."

A man was selling them and gave the young Edmunds a demonstration. He brought a set right then. He says they were easy to play.

"Once you can hang on to them, you can play."

(Continued on page 7)



Dr. Frederick Edmunds in his Lexington home with his beloved bones. Photograph used with permission.

## Editorial

The story of Fred Edmunds in this issue is long overdue and is a reprint of an Associated Press article that appeared in 1993. I learned a lot from the article and subsequent research and if I had it to do over again I would print this story as the first Rhythm Bones Player feature article. Ev Cowett and Russ Myers call Fred the father of the Rhythm Bones Society and that makes him uniquely important in our brief history. Look for a display of his memorabilia at Bones Fest VII.

Russ Myers wrote a short biography of Fred that is also included.

Jim Meyers bought the rights to Fred's Bones Unlimited business and recently donated the rights and materials to the Rhythm Bones Society.

Walt Watkins met Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas (see last issue) and wrote a nice tribute to him. Walt made a video of Richard and is bringing the video to Bones Fest VII for anyone who wants to see and hear him. I will bring his Bones and Blues CD.

At the last Board meeting, Terry Carroll suggested that we get a Library of Congress ISSN number for the newsletter. We did and thanks Terry for the idea.

My wife, Janet, and I took our daughter and our grandkids on a Caribbean cruise recently. I signed up for the talent show and performed for almost one thousand people, my biggest audience. During the next day and a half about one hundred and fifty people stopped to thank me or find out more about rhythm bones. I told Ev Cowett about this and he said he had

## Letters to the Editor

*Editor's note: I asked Bob Everhart of the National Traditional Country Music Association Bone Contest about making prize money be in line with the All-Ireland Contest and about how are judges selected. Here is his reply.)*

Actually, we'd much rather be a springboard for competitors to go on to something bigger and better.

I'm sure Ireland, with concentrated

attention to the single facet of bones playing, can do a much better job than we can with more than 35 contests. If we 'upped' the ante on one, I'm sure there would not be any interest in other competitions to "up" the ante on theirs.....would there?

We use three judges. One is the previous year's winner, one is a bones player of equal or better reputation and one is someone who likes the bones but does not necessarily play them (sort of our audience representative.) It usually works out pretty well, though the end result is sometimes what we never expect.

You're right, 28 years is a long time to 'host' any kind of competition. I would hope that in the 'international' sense, that it not be just in Ireland, but travel around to various countries that show interest, and eventually come to us, with us being the USA host. Something for you to shoot for.

Thanks for coming to the festival, sure hope you help support our move to Missouri Valley this year. *Bob Everhart*

## Bones Calendar

**25-27 July.** Bones Fest VII hosted by Linda and Gil Hibben, Louisville, KY  
**25-31 August.** National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests with 29th Spoons and Bones Contest on Saturday the 23rd. This year's event has been moved to Missouri Valley, IA about 60 miles from Avoca.

**21 Sept.** 2 - 4 pm, Mc Cabes, 3101 West Pico Blvd. Santa Monica, CA 310-828-4497. Join Aaron Plunkett for a one day workshop at Mc Cabes (just west of the 10 Fwy) where he will present an exciting "hands-on" look into drumming styles and rhythms from Ireland (including bones), the Balkans, Egypt, India, Persia, Indonesia, Africa, Cuba and Brazil. The workshop will accommodate beginner, intermediate and advanced playing levels. Participants will learn the elements that make up music: beat, rhythm and pitch, and the class will play traditional musical forms from various regions around the world. Basic instruments will be provided for you or you can bring your own. Cost is \$30.00 and you are encouraged to

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

bring your cassette recorders and notebooks; however, video taping or digital recording is not allowed. For further information contact Mc Cabes at 310-828-4497 or Aaron at 818-569-

## Website of the Quarter

**www.earpower.com.** Sally Carroll found this website. You can play a random or custom rhythm pattern and the program will tell you if you did it correctly. To develop 'spot-on' timing try the steadiness option. Free trial.

## Recorded Bones Music

Cecil Hiatt's Oklahoma Bones LP album (see story on Page 5). Produced by Byron Berline and BCH Productions. Barry Patton learn to play from Cecil. This is a unique LP record with Cecil talking about bones playing as well as playing the bones. Byron has a few of these LP's left. Contact him at [www.doublestop.com](http://www.doublestop.com)



# On The Road To Abbeyfeale

And that was exactly where I found myself that May 2nd., traveling up the N21 from Kilarney on my way to Abbeyfeale, in West Limerick right there on the Kerry border, to attend the 'Fleadh By The Feale' and to eventually compete in the All-Ireland Bones Playing Championship. Still in shock to be in Ireland at all and somewhat woozy from the jet lag and trying to get my energy back. And of course wondering how I would be received here playing my American style of bones playing in a country which had developed its own and quite beautiful style of playing bones. The phrase 'Yankee Go Home' wandering in the back of my mind. Soon I was settling in with some of the friendliest people I could imagine with my sleep deprived insecurities behind me.

Abbeyfeale, a little town in West Limerick right on the Kerry border, has hosted the All-Ireland Bones Playing Championship for the last nine years as part of the 'Fleadh By the Feale,' a gathering of traditional musicians from all over Ireland during the May Bank Holiday weekend. At any given point you can go into any one of 20 pubs and find a session, an informal gathering of musicians, going on.

Other parts of the Fleadh include concerts, master classes in traditional instrument playing, competitions in a variety of instruments for children as well as the Bones Competition which is the last event of the weekend held on the Monday night.

This year the competition was especially steep with players coming from Denmark, England and the USA as well as from all over Ireland. But the strongest competition comes from Abbeyfeale and the surrounding area where almost half of the 16 competitors come from almost entirely due to the inspiration of one man, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy (See Rhythm Bones Player, Volume 2, Number 3 for an article on 'Sport' written by Mel Mercier.)

Now in his late seventies Paddy 'Sport' has been playing the bones for almost 70 years. In fact he showed me the pair of bones he said he had been playing for 65 years and another one of the contestants, David Murphy (no relation but a fine bones player in his own right,) told me his inspiration to play had been seeing Paddy 'Sport' play when he was a boy of 12 and he is now in his 40's. In deed the fact that the contest is held is a testament to Mr. Murphy and the significant impact he has had on bones playing in and around Abbeyfeale.

His playing personifies style; fluid, distinct, exact to the music, reflecting the liveliness of the Slaibh Lucarra region he lives near. In fact I found that many of the players who come from this area have this unique quality to their playing although Mr. Murphy is the essence of it.

My experience in Abbeyfeale was particularly special for me due to the presence of one of my long time bones hero's, Ronnie McShane (RBS member), who had come all the way from Dublin to compete in the contest. Ronnie is an alumnus of both the ground breaking group Ceoltori Culleann and the Chieftains as well as a close personal friend of legendary musician Sean O'Raida. In fact I've been listening to Ronnie since before I could play the bones and add to this that he is truly one of the nicest people I have ever met. You can see why we talked non-stop for four hours upon meeting.

The competition this year included several two handed bones players such as Yirdy Machar from Denmark, the current World Champion and RBS member, Vicky Smith from England (another RBS member,) and Rob 'the bones' Coppard a native Englishman living in Ireland for the last 9 years. And a number of excellent one handed players such as previous winner Paddy Donovan from Ardagh, Co. Limerick, David Murphy from Ballagh, Abbeyfeale himself a finalist several times, Brian Hickey from Adare, Co. Limerick, also a previous finalist and bodhran player Min Gates who had come all the way from Bloomington, IN (USA) to compete.

The contest was held on an old flat

bed truck converted to a stage in the center of Abbeyfeale Square on a cool night that gradually turned misty and then rained. The crowd was undaunted, however, and I have images of multiple umbrellas covering a good size crowd determined to stick it out to the end. I must defer at this point from reviewing the performances due to my participation in the contest, but will say that Paddy 'Sport' Murphy was brilliant and in my opinion deserved first place.

Regardless of the contest outcome, I had a great time in Abbeyfeale and have great memories including: playing until the wee hours with Paddy Donovan and David Murphy, meeting and talking with Ronnie McShane and his lovely wife Vera, meeting Paddy 'Sport' Murphy for the first time and my entire stay with my Irish family Tom and Noreen Browne (no relation) at the world's greatest bed and breakfast Park Lodge (if you go you must stay there). Thanks to all my new friends Steve Johnson and Min Gates, Vicky Smith, Rob Coppard, but especially to old friend Mel Mercier whose encouragement and support kept me going. And if you do go to Abbeyfeale a couple words of advice: be sensitive to those other bones wary musicians, get plenty of

## Steve Brown Win's All-Ireland Bones Contest

WINCHENDON. Ezekiel cried "Dem dry bones." Stephen T. Brown calls them a musical instrument rich in tradition.

In a time when one man's spare ribs is another man's shake, rattle and roll, no one has a bone to pick with Winchendon's bones daddy when it comes to being named the undisputed 'All-Ireland Bone Playing Championship.'

The 'All-Ireland Bone Playing Competition,' which is part of 'Guinness Fleadh by the Feale,' took place on the first weekend of May in the town of Abbeyfeale, located on the border of Cork, Kerry and Limerick in Ireland.

For coming in first place, Mr. Brown - who plays, makes, and sells

*(Continued on page 4)*

*(Steve Brown Wins—Continued from page 3)*

bones, as well as is the Assistant Director of the Rhythm Bones Society -came home with lead crystal rose bowl, 300 Euro and bragging rights for his triumph.

"What does being the All-Ireland Bone Playing Champion mean?," Mr. Brown said. "It really, probably, means little. It's a little bit like winning the National Tiddlywinks Championship. Nobody has any idea who you are. For bones players, though, it's a big deal."

Bones are a percussion instrument that come in pairs, made of two slender pieces about seven inches long. Originally, the instruments were made from animal bones and, in some cases, they still are today. Some people are one-handed players, while others play with two-hands. Mr. Brown is a two-handed player.

The 53-year-old percussionist, who has been beating the drums for 46 years, has been playing the bones for a quarter-century of his life. And, for the last 20 years, Mr. Brown has been making bones from the shin bones of a cow and, also, out of wood. He won the competition playing homemade bones made out of hornbeam wood. To contact Mr. Brown about purchasing some of his bones, you can email him at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com).

Mr. Brown's interests in the bones grew out of his love for traditional folk music. In the early '70s, Mr. Brown went into a record store and an album sleeve with an illustration of all these strange looking instruments (including the bones) sparked his curiosity. The rest is history, he said.

"I had no idea what the bones sounded like," he recalled. "I never even heard of the bones before. It was like, buy me, and I bought it. I went home and listened to it. And I was like, Wow! This is the strangest music I've ever heard."

Mr. Brown credits legendary bones player, maker and teacher Percy Danforth as being his mentor. He sent Mr. Danforth (who learned to play the bones from the minstrel shows) an inquisitive letter to his home in Ann Arbor, Mich., and Mr. Danforth sent him back a picture of himself, instructional material and set him up

with his first pair of bones.

"The bones is an instrument that's so of the people," Brown said. "It's so informal in a lot of ways. Clearly there's no formal way of learning, no formal people teaching it. It's kind of an instrument that people pick up. And we're talking about an instrument that dates back thousands of years, way beyond the Irish influence in it."

Although bones playing has an important niche in traditional Irish music, its influence stretches way beyond that. More than happy to rattle off some of the historical significance of the hand-held percussion instrument, Mr. Brown details how the ancient Egyptians played the bones, how Shakespeare wrote about the bones, how the bones were a crucial part of the traveling minstrel shows in American history and how Sears even carried a whole variety of bones in its popular mail-order catalog.

"Bones go back a long, long time, way before we used spoons to eat with," said Mr. Brown. Bones are one of several types of clappers, which are often confused with spoons, which are also clappers. Fellow bones player and good friend Ronny McShain (who was in the contest and who once played with The Chieftains,) once told Mr. Brown that "Spoons are for soup and the bones make the soup."

Mr. Brown explained that this was a very unique year, in a lot of ways, for the annual 'All-Ireland Bone Playing Competition.' It was the first year women competed. It was the first time international players competed. And it was the first time two-handed players competed. Traditionally, Irish bones players use one hand.

So that makes Mr. Brown the first international player and the first two-handed bones player to reign supreme. And just because he plays with two-hands (which translates to a pair of bones in each hand,) doesn't mean he had an unfair advantage, he said.

Some people might say, "Well, gee if you play with two hands, you will automatically be better than somebody who play with one hand." Absolutely not true at all," Mr. Brown said. "Two-handed bones playing and one-handed bones playing is different. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that

they are different styles and that one is not necessarily better than the other by the nature of what it is."

What's so unique about the part of Ireland in which the competition was held, Mr. Brown said, was there's a considerable number of bones players who have emerged out of the area, solely because of one guy, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy, a man who has been playing the bones for 65 years and who has never been defeated in any bones competition (that is, until Mr. Brown crossed his path).

Of the 16 who competed in the contest, England, Denmark and the United States, were represented against a strong contingent of Irish players, many of who live within two miles of the festival site, Mr. Brown said.

Whether he was playing the tap, the double tap or the rattle, Mr. Brown proved to be a bones player to reckon with, even though he didn't fully believe it himself. He was just happy to have an opportunity to hobnob with such bones playing greats.

"I will be honest with you," Mr. Brown said. "I think I could have played better. There was one place that I thought I blew the reel."

In the competition, bones players have to play two tunes of dissimilar time signatures with an accompanist (which Mr. Brown never found one that he could rehearse with beforehand) and a bones/percussion expert judges their performances.

"I was hoping that I might place and then they did fourth and third and I wasn't mentioned. I was like, Oh no, this is not good. And when they announced second place was Paddy 'Sport,' I'm really thinking it over. Who could have beaten Paddy Sport? This is ridiculous. And then, all of a sudden, it started to occur to me. I was like, this isn't happening. And they announced first place was me. Holy Cow! I'm still in shock."

Coming in second and third place, respectively were Paddy 'Sport' Murphy and David Murphy (no relation), both of Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Paddy Donovan of Ardagh, Ireland, came in fourth.

When Mr. Brown triumphantly

*(Continued on page 8)*

# Cecil Hiatt

## Oklahoma Bones

Cecil Hiatt and his family have been friends of my family since the late 1920's. He was born in 1912 and raised near Braman, Oklahoma, where he worked on the ranch and dairy farm. Music was a pastime that everyone looked forward to, especially after a long day's work, as a means of getting together with family and friends.

Cecil's early influence was his father, a musician who played several instruments. Cecil bought and learned every Jimmy Rodgers tune that was released. I will always remember Cecil playing guitar and harp, singing and yodeling those Jimmy Rodgers songs.

Cecil met my Dad, Lue Berline, around 1930. They lived only ten miles apart, but music is what eventually brought them together. Cecil was playing with a local band, the South Haven Ramblers, every Saturday night in the little farm town of South Haven, Kansas. The show was free and held outdoors on a little stage in the middle of town. Herb Bullene, a good fiddler from South Haven, was the band's organizer and leader. He found out about my Dad and got him to join the group. They occasionally played a few other small towns nearby, staying together as a band for eleven years.

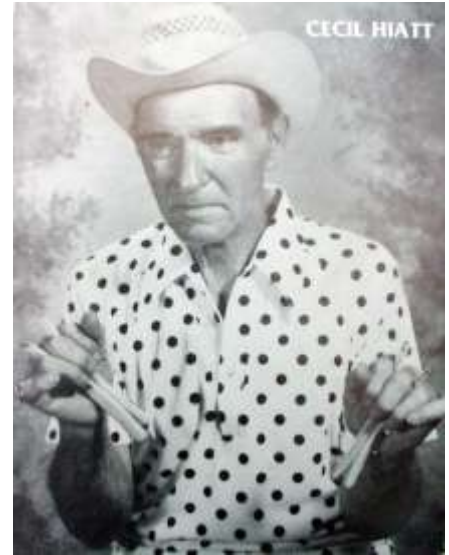
In 1928 the South Haven Ramblers were invited to play at the famous 101 Ranch annual shindig. The 101 Ranch was located near Ponca City, Oklahoma and employed 500 cowboys to work its 101 thousand acres. Every year they would have a big barbeque to honor the ranch and the people who worked there. One of the most famous and favorite of all cowboys was Frank "Pistol Pete" Eaton. Frank was born in the Oklahoma Territory in 1860 and became a U.S. Marshal at the age of 16. He also played the fiddle and sang great old songs. Cecil and my Dad played for their annual party from 1928 to 1968. Very few of the original 500 cowboys were still alive when I first went along with Cecil and Dad. Pistol Pete died in 1957 and Cecil was

asked to play and sing "Cowboy Heaven" at the funeral.

Cecil's (first) introduction to the bones came by way of a traveling medicine show to Braman when he was just five years old. They were so fascinating to him that he went right home and fashioned a pair for himself out of lath boards the very next day. Little could he know that he would be making an album with bones as an instrument some 65 years later. He has since made over 2000 pair out of every kind of wood available. He even made some from a piece of orange wood cut from a tree in my backyard, but for this album he used a couple pair of old cow ribs. They get the tone Cecil likes best for recording.

Cecil hopes this album will help get other people interested in the bones as an instrument. In addition, he wanted you to hear some of the favorite old songs that he has learned through the years. My nephew, Barry Patton, was one of Cecil's first bones students. He is already making quite a name for himself; Cecil is really proud of him and hopes other young musicians decide to take up the instrument and see how much fun it is. Dan Crary, John Hickman and I were grateful for the other musicians who helped Cecil make his debut album. Tom Sauber, a walking historian and scholar on old-time music, plays banjo and guitar. Carol Yearwood, a fine bass player, who is involved in several Southern California bands and is a wonderful singer. Skip Conover enjoyed working on the album because of the material that lended itself beautifully to the dobro. Bill Caswell, who in my opinion, plays the most incredible Jaw-Harp you ever heard! I am sure Cecil is as proud of this album as I am and his thanks go out to all the musicians. But I am sure he would also want to thank his family, especially Bernice, his wife of almost fifty year.

It is a shame there weren't any tapes or records made of the bands that Cecil and Dad were involved in. Some marvelous music was made back then and there's marvelous music today. That's why BCH would like to present to you...Cecil Hiatt. *Byron Berline.*



Cecil Hiatt—Oklahoma Bones Player. Photograph from the back of his Bones LP album. Used with permission.

## Barry Patton on Cecil Hiatt

I can remember being five or six years old and a man came up to the door with a guitar case in hand. It was my first introduction to Cecil Hiatt, a bone player. When I was older I went with Cecil to jam sessions and watched him play the bones. When I was about 14, he started teaching me how to play the bones. I was playing one handed and he would say "you gotta get your left hand in there and you got keep practicing." You know, I finally got the hang of it.

Later we'd go down and play at jam sessions at the Walnut Valley Festival. He'd play a song and then let me play a song. I'd get to watching him and he'd go back and forth using both left and right hands alternating the two of them and then play both hands at the same time. That's pretty much how I picked up those traits.

One time we were playing with Mason Williams (he wrote Classical Gas) and the Tulsa Philharmonic Orchestra. The violins got off rhythm and after it was over Cecil said "did you see how I kept 'em right on beat with my bones."

We played bones together on his 84th birthday. He said, "Barry, this is the best birthday party I ever had I do believe. It was one of the last times he played his bones. Come Spring he

## Excerpts from Edmunds Newsletters

Fred Edmunds started a quarterly newsletter in late 1994 and here are some highlights from the 12 issues. Fred used the newsletter to promote his Bones Unlimited business and those promotions are not included.

**Issue #1.** Hallelujah! Bones playing is catching on across the land. I think. Maybe. Possibly. I'm not sure. We would just love to see a real revival of this once extremely popular musical pastime. The real craze ended about Civil War time but we can still hope. Reasonably, I believe.

There are lots of ways to have fun but none are as fun and convenient as bones playing. Everyone loves it once they get started. Another thing that bones players love is hearing about other bones players. I get calls all the time from people telling me about other people. It occurred to me that a NEWSLETTER would be just the ticket for all of us boners. (How about a computer hookup? Not yet.)

**Issue #2.** The response to the quarterly Newsletter Issue #1 was good and very much appreciated. If this thing really flies we may even have a convention some day.

**Issue #4.** So far you have not mentioned the possibility of a bones convention. We don't seem ready yet but I have hopes. Think of it-lots of boners, all together, rattling around with nothing in mind but fun and frolic. Really and truly getting instructional materials and good bones out among the population is the only hope for the revival of this great lost art. And isn't that the point of everything. I think so.

**Issue #6.** Art Scholtz (RBS member) sent a long list of stores and several of them bought my products. I learned that J.E.B. Stuart, famous Confederate general, was a bones player. (Note from Russ Myers. Stuart had his own bones player with him in all his camps—he could not play the bones himself.)

**Issue #7.** *Contains a brief biography of Fred.* I'm out of space but the point is that maybe we could have our bones convention at

Appomattox.

**Issue #8.** Everyone will recall, I think, that I have mentioned several times in these Newsletters the happy prospect of a big get-together for all of us in one place at one time for a bones convention. We should be a society. The others do it and we should too. Of the "simple" instruments ours is by far the most versatile and exciting. By far the best crowd pleaser.

**Issue #9.** There is a very enthusiastic bones player here in Virginia who is all keyed up by the notion of a bones festival. A lot of work will be necessary he says. (*That was Russ Myers.*)

**Issue #10.** Now! The Bones Festival. So far so good but the June date is out and October is in. It will be in Appomattox, VA or Greensboro, NC.

**Letter dated May 1997.** Mr. Everett Cowett of Greensboro, NC has very kindly volunteered to have the first one in his house. No rent and no insurance. He'll even hold a free cookout for us. Date: September 20, 1997.

**Issue #11.** I want to meet as many of you as possible. It's not enough to just know your names. We need a society through which we establish all these wonderful personal friendships. It's incredible but many of the people who have bought my products have never known or even know of another bones player.

**Issue #12.** We said we would and we did and that ain't bad. Small in number but gigantic in spirit. For three years we have been talking and writing letters about establishing a Bones Unlimited Annual Festival and the ball has started to roll. The first one will probably be in September 1998 in Appomattox, VA.

**Postscript.** Fred died before the second Bones Fest and Ev Cowett took the lead and organized Bones Fest II in Greensboro in September of 1998. Martha Cowett gave Ev the Rhythm Bones Central website that became the computer hookup Fred mentioned in Issue #1. Russ Myers hosted Bones Fest III in Brightwood, VA where the Rhythm Bones Society was officially organized with Ev Cowett as Executive Director. A Society was mentioned in Issue #8 and

Ev suggested it in his opening remarks at Bones Fest I. The new Board of Directors created this newsletter that continues Fred's newsletters.

Fred's mailing list contained the names of 165 people. In 1997 he

## Short Biography of Dr. Frederick T. Edmunds

It was 1935 and Frederick T Edmunds, a 15 year old lad, was vacationing with his parents in North Carolina where he purchased his first set of wooden bones from a peddler at a church retreat. The future gynecologist had to teach himself to play to the annoyance of his friends back home in Charleston, West Virginia.

He must have achieved a high degree of proficiency because by the time he entered the army during WWII he played cadence during 20-mile marches while his company commander volunteered to carry his rifle.

Upon retiring to Lexington, Virginia, Dr. Edmunds became interested in 'reviving' bones playing which he had come to believe was a lost art. He knew nothing of Percy Danforth, although they were contemporaries, and knew of only two other bones players. Like Percy, Fred developed a course and video on bones playing.

Fred had a set of "Driver" bones, although he did not know the maker by name. His favorite set of bones were made of Pakkawood (now called Dymondwood) a laminate used mainly in knife handles and cremation urns, which he had especially made in Waynesboro, Virginia to his own design. They were not only beautiful but had a very sharp sound and felt good in the hands during play.

Fred started his "Bones Unlimited" Newsletter in December 1994 and continued it until his death three years later. It was his list of bones players that was used to summons the faithful to Bones Fest I, hosted by Ev Cowett, which he attended as perhaps his last performance. He was acknowledged as the "Master of the Tap".

In many ways we should perhaps

(Fred Edmunds—Continued from page 1)

Playing them well is another story. Back home in Charleston, W. VA., Edmunds didn't play so well. But it wasn't for lack of trying.

"I'd take them to dances and make an annoyance of myself," he said.

To this day, he says he is remembered among his Charleston classmates as the guy with the bones. He even was asked to play them at his 55th high school reunion.

"People thought it was a stupid thing to do. I agree with them, but I was having fun, so that was the end of that."

His interest in the instrument waned, however, through college, medical school and adulthood. "They would stay in the drawer sometimes two years at a time."

Only occasionally would his interest be rekindled.

One time was at the 1939 World's Fair, where Edmunds met Frank Wolf, the owner of Frank Wolf Percussion Instruments in New York City.

The man who sold Edmunds his first set of bones had told him that they originally came from Wolf's store.

So, Edmunds inquired.

Wolf said he had not carried bones in years.

"He said it was a completely dead art," Edmunds said.

Indeed, Edmunds has done research and found that the bones in America started fading in popularity after the Civil War. (They are featured for about two seconds during a scene in 'Gone With The Wind.') By the turn of the century they were rarely played outside of minstrel shows. By the 1920s, there were rarely played anywhere.

On another occasion, in 1955, Edmunds' interest was sparked again when he came across the only true set of bones—made from real bones—he had ever seen.

All the other bones sets he has seen were made from wood.

He found his authentic bones in a Savannah, GA Music store. They were in a dust-covered glass display case in a back storage room that he had wandered into by mistake. He asked to buy them.

"I said how much do you want for those?" He said, "What are those?"

He got them for \$3. He calls them his 'bone bones'

It wasn't until about eight years ago, though, when he retired to Lexington, that Edmunds developed such a keen passion.

With newfound time on his hands, he took his bones out again. He says he started experimenting with different rhythms and more complex beat patterns.

"Then it dawned on me, 'My gosh, write a book for posterity.'"

He wrote two books, one for beginners and one for advanced players. He created 166 different bones exercises and invented his own musical language. A capital 'R' means play a 'right-handed click.' Capital 'L' means a 'left-handed' and 'T' means play both hands together.

He even writes about how not to play.

"Almost every bones player is so bad that it is embarrassing. Here is the way they play:

'click-a-de-click, click-a-de-click click-a-de-ick-a-de-ick-a-de-click.'

"Just the same thing over and over."

As far as Edmunds knows, his books are the only written instruction on the art of bones playing. He also has made an instructional video.

This then left him with a dilemma. He had the books. He had a video. But he didn't have any bones. How could the next generation carry on the legacy without any bones?

He started thinking big. He contacted some manufacturers and had some prototypes made. "I had a notion that it might go in the direction of the Hula-Hoop or yo-yo or something like that."

He admits now that he got a little carried away.

Radio spots in Lynchburg and Roanoke yielded not a single call. He attended a music merchants' convention in Chicago. Again, nothing.

Finally, he decided to target folk music stores and compiled a list of 150 of them by combing library microfilm of the Yellow Pages from every sizable city in the country. It was a project that took him three solid

weeks of eight-hour days.

Then he called the stores. About half agreed to stock him book, video and bones. After three years, he says sales are picking up. He expects to sell \$5,000 worth of books and bones this year and to double that next year.

Who knows? Maybe it will turn into a craze, after all. "It could happen that this thing could suddenly catch fire." *Story by Mark Morrison, The*

## A Tribute to Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas

Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas was not talkative. He had a great sense of rhythm. When asked to play, he just shook his head OK.

He played short beef ribs. He aged them and polished them. They had a soft mellow tone.

He knew how to improvise - probably the best at that I have ever heard. My understanding of improvisation is playing a rhythm outside of the rhythm of the tune but in consonance with the beat. Sometimes the music could be stopped with him just playing on and when it started again he would hit the beat perfectly.

He always played seated and could play even when one sang without stepping on their being featured. In other words he could play along just like any band member. Bones players do not do that very well. But he did.

The barbershop is the place in NE Washington, DC where the players meet every Saturday at 1 pm and play until they get tired. It is at 2007 Bunker Hill Road. Their phone is 202-526-7539. Put a contribution in the can for the Archie Edwards Heritage Foundation and you are welcome. Don't go in big groups; they can hack bones players just one at a time. Call before you come.

Most of the music is bluesy. No blue grass played here. Lots of whinny harmonicas around and lead guitars but enough bones rhythm to turn you on. I told Thomas I liked his play; he smiled and shook his head up and down which I believe meant he liked my play too. He was great and an asset to the craft.

Worthy of emulation, he is sorely



Steve Brown photograph by Worcester Telegram & Gazette. Used with permission.

## Jim Meyer Donates Fred Edmunds' Video Rights

After Fred Edmunds' death in 1997, RBS member Jim Meyer bought the rights and remaining materials of Bones Unlimited from Fred's widow and sold the books, videos and bones to bones players. Recently, Jim donated the rights and remaining materials to the Rhythm Bones Society. The Board of Directors at their meeting at Bones Fest VII will decide their future. Thanks, Jim.

(Steve Brown Wins—Continued from page 4)  
embarked on the stage, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy came over to him and said, "" You know, I'm glad you won." Mr. Brown acknowledges that this was very gracious but had to be really tough for a guy who has never been defeated and defeated by a foreigner on his home turf, no less.

As a result of his win, Mr. Brown enjoyed instant celebrity status where strangers were congratulating him on the street and people raised their pint glasses and gave him standing ovations whenever he entered one of the many neighborhood pubs.

Mr. Brown said bones players are wonderful, warm people who share their knowledge every chance they can. And one thing that he always tries to do is give a way at least one pair of bones to help keep the tradition alive. On this trip, he gave away two sets.

"It's planting the same seeds that were planted for me," Mr. Brown said. "It carries things on. That's what it's all about, making sure that this tradition doesn't die and continues to live because it's a tradition that has roots so tremendously deep."

Mr. Brown considers his bones



Mel Mercier plays two-handed bones for Prince Albert in Monte Carlo in October 2002

playing style to be 'in fluxed' and describes it as being a cross between two-handed and one-handed bones playing.

"I have been really, really fortunate that I have learned from so many great bones players and I've learned so many things," Mr. Brown said. "I'm a sponge. I soak it right up and I love it." *Craig S. Semon*. Reprinted with

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 5, No. 4 2003

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## Executive Director's Column

The highlight for Rhythm Bones Players for the year had to be Bones Fest VII. What a great time was had by all. Many new faces but most of the old timers were there too (see BFVII Story). The quality of play was better than ever and our hosts, Gil and Linda Hibben, could not have been better. Louisville and the Kentucky Theater will be remembered forever by the participants. The video of the event is great (5 hrs of bones playing) so order while they last. I also cry for any of you who missed the Sunday brunch at the Hibben Ranch and tour of Gil's workshop. It was a wonderful learning experience and lots of fun.

Our membership continued to grow in both quality and numbers with well over 100 members. Already about three-fourths of you

have renewed your membership for the 2003-2004 year. If you have forgotten please send \$25 to the Rhythm Bones Society.

As you can see by reading this Newsletter the quality and content continues to improve. What a great job editor Steve Wixson is doing. A big thanks to each of you who have contributed to it. Without your contribution to letters to the editor and newsworthy articles Steve would have little to report.

Other activities, which we are proud of this year, include participation and winning bones playing contests and teaching in classrooms and workshops where "would be" bones players are taught the fundamentals. Keep up the good work. May your bones be with you.

*Ev Cowett.*

## Highlights of Bones Fest VII

Bones Fest VII was hosted by us, Gil and Linda Hibben, in Louisville, KY, on July 25, 26, & 27, 2003 at the Kentucky Theatre. This historic theatre was a great place to hold a Bones Fest with great acoustics and side rooms for jamming and practicing.

Bones players who were here a day early were featured on 3 separate TV shows, all very early morning news programs. We also had a very good article in the Louisville Eccentric Observer which caters to the arts community...the result of the combined publicity brought quite a few people to the Kentucky Theatre for the Saturday night performance.

Friday night was a reception at the Theatre with heavy hors d'ouvres catered by Linda and her sister-in-law Sally Cochran. Former member Dr. Sandra Graves provided her original paintings and flower arrangements to set the tone for a very welcoming reception area. There was plenty of jamming and with the stage this was one of the best jam scenes we have had.

Steve Brown received the Meritorious Service award and then showed off his winning All-Ireland style. He is indeed a champion.

Saturday morning opened at the Theatre with coffee and pastries and the show

*(Continued on page 6)*



Gil and Linda Hibben, hosts of Bones Fest VII

## Editorial

Bones Fest VII was another great success and many thanks to Gil and Linda Hibben for hosting. As in previous years the highlights of the fest is the feature article.

I learned of Joe Brent from Ev Cowett. He is a Broadway musician and bones player as well and has written a most interesting story.

Ken Wolin is another new member with a great story. He lives in the DC area and hopefully will attend the next Bones Fest.

Bill Vits gave us the first quadruplet roll played at a Bones Fest. During the Sunday morning brunch, he held an informal workshop on this sixteenth note technique to a small but interested group.

Aaron Plunkett plays this lick and demonstrates it in his Bones instructional video. I asked him to write a Tips and Techniques column on it which he has done and he included a whole lot more information.

Your editor finally won the 2003 Bones Contest now in Missouri Valley, Iowa. Since I asked recent winners to write their story, I too have written an article on my journey.

I attended the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas and what a great event! This is Barry Patton's home town and he is a featured performer. He also has a large following of people who like bones players. I enjoyed seeing Barry again and listening to his great bluegrass bones styling. I also spent some time with one of Barry's champion bluegrass banjo friends who listened to my bones playing and pointed out timing (that I was not playing) that

## Letters to the Editor

When Barry and I arrived in Louisville for our first Bone Fest, we felt like country 'bone'pkins until we were greeted at the Kentucky Theater by Gil and Linda. We immediately felt a 'bone'fied friendliness from all the participants. The Saturday morning and afternoon sessions were a 'bone'anza of great talent as each

musician demonstrated their various techniques. A 'bone'tiful lunch and supper were enjoyed at a nearby Cunningham's restaurant. The evening session was a 'bone'us round featuring some of the most talented percussionists. When all the guests played together, 'bone' demonium (according to Bill Vits) broke loose. After a delicious brunch at the Hibben's home. We bid each other 'bone'voyage til next year. *Jean Palmerton*

Dear Ev, Annette and I want to thank you for driving all the way up here to see us. We enjoyed being with you and hope to get together again soon. The web sight is [www.oldtimeband.com](http://www.oldtimeband.com) <<http://www.oldtimeband.com>>. You can order our CD on line from [www.paypal.com](http://www.paypal.com) <<http://www.paypal.com>> for \$14.95 plus mailing but if any bones players want a CD they can send me there address and \$12.00 and I will mail them one. My address is Mitch Boss 101 Culler Way, King, NC 27021.

My dad taught me how to play the spoons when I was 7. Latter after I saw a man playing the bones in a minstrel show he made me a par of wooden bones. Dad played one handed and that's how I started , but it wasn't long before I decided the only right way was with both hands. For years I amused myself playing along with whatever was on the radio and with records and cassettes. We were living way out in Stokes County 18 or so years ago and one night I heard Jerry, Ellis, Lawrence and Junior playing old time music across the pound at Al's house. I wanted to play with them but I was embarrassed to ask if I could click along . Well Annette went right over there and said "can my husband come play with you", (just like she was my mother and I was 3 years old). After

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Bones Calendar

**August 20-22, 2004.** Bones Fest VIII hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll in the Reston, VA area. Details in next issue.

**September 4, 2004.** 29th Annual NTCMA Bones and Spoons contest. The festival lasts from Aug 30 to Sept 5. Look for details in spring newsletter.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Website of the Quarter

**[artists.iuma.com/IUMA/Bands/Little\\_Blue\\_Heron](http://artists.iuma.com/IUMA/Bands/Little_Blue_Heron).** Adam Klein and Constance Cook's website where you can learn about them and listen to or download two mp3 bones cuts. One of the cuts is *Pick a Bale of Cotton* from Bones Fest V. The other is *Liza Jane* performed at Bones Fest V, but this is a different performance. *Adam Klein*

## Recorded Bones Music

**'BOUT TIME!** CD with RBS member Mitch Boss and the Snow Creek Old Tyme Band. The CD has 16 tracts including many old time favorites with bones playing on each tract. You can listen to MP3 clip samples of each at <[www.oldtimeband.com](http://www.oldtimeband.com)> RBS members may obtain a CD by sending \$12 to Mitch Boss 101 Culler Way, King NC 27021 or you can order from the web site for a few \$ more.

## Bone Playing in the Broadway Bizarro World

Many of you, no doubt, remember the latest Broadway Musician's strike in New York. The daily news programs showed images of musicians playing for free outside of the various houses, which no doubt would have helped our cause had we not also been hampered by lousy negotiators. But what was most striking of all was surely the diversity of the musicians featured; brass jocks, woodwind doublers, string virtuosos, and percussionists of every permutation imaginable.

I am one of those poor players who makes a living playing in shows. But unlike most of those hardy souls you saw braving the winter chill to demonstrate our solidarity, I don't have an easily definable instrumental category. Mostly, I play stringed instruments - violins, guitars, mandolins, ukes, banjos, etc. But because I exist in the 'bizarro' realm inhabited by a versatile few, I am also frequently called upon to play instruments you might not have seen in those news clips. I suppose the logic goes: "He's already got all those other noisemakers taking up room in the pit, what's a few more? The uppity *flautists* sure as hell couldn't be bothered."

Thus began my love affair (of convenience) with what I affectionately call my 'toys'. Bones, spoons, shakers, rattlers, rollers, and even a few doohickeys of my own invention. In a recent show I had to choreograph a quick change from violin to siren whistle to cowbell to ratchet to shaker, and finally to guitar to close the number. On the original cast recording of Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt's *Roadside*, that's me playing the spoons, just before my big clave solo. And since I also orchestrated that show, I made sure to share the bizarro duties with Barry Mitterhoff, my doubling partner-in-crime; in one number, he was using one of my egg shakers while I beat a rumba on the back of a my 'Lady Godiva' - essentially, a viola I stole from my undergraduate school, broke

the neck off of, and had painted in a mermaid motif by a scenic painter friend of mine. One day, I plan to cut some ridges on the side of it so I can scrape it with a guiro stick.

In my instrument closet, which I have named the Forbidden Closet of Mysteries (thanks to Chief Wiggam), I have musical saws, an udu, a New Year's Eve tooter which I once played in the exit music of another show, a rattler known as the kpoko-kpoko, gourds, drums, shakers and beaters, and bells and whistles to shatter the eardrums of my neighbors down the street, along with my stringed, woodwind, brass, and keyboard instruments.

But whenever I have a spare moment, and nobody else is home to complain, I always return to my bones and spoons. Say I got some food cooking on the rangetop, or I'm waiting for a ballgame to start; is there a worse feeling in the world than boredom? So I whip out the old clackety-clackers and wail away. I bought my bones several years ago in an unsanitary but well-stocked musical instrument and sundries store on Bleeker Street. By the way, if you know the one I'm talking about, help me boycott the dump, they charge you 10 bucks to get in the door, and they mostly just overcharge for the same stuff you can get at Lark In the Morning for much cheaper.

But at the time, it was well worth it to me. They're real rib bones, and had already hardened a bit, which means they had been sitting in the store for quite some time. I guess people just assumed they were what was left over of the previous owners, which is not a bad guess on Bleeker Street, but I knew what they were for, and I snapped them up.

Over the years, they have really dried out and now are capable of sorts of great sounds, from dull *thuds* to clave-like *whacks* to rim shots to whip-like *snaps*. They have a greater range of sound than my rosewood claves, although they're not as loud. But for small bands, they're great; I sometimes bring them to jam sessions with folk or Irish bands. I also have wooden spoons I bought from the Chinese super-store Pearl

River (they were actually intended to be used in the consumption of food, imagine that) that have a similar sonic range, and between the two of them, I don't have to pick up a fiddle for hours. Which is great when your primary concern is finishing your beer without spilling it on your outrageously expensive Cremonese violin. Also, I get to listen to the other players, which most fiddle players don't bother to do.

The other great thing about the bones is that nobody looks at you cross-eyed when you bust them out, regardless of the musical genre. The fiddle has classical and bluegrass connotations, so nobody wants to hear me play jazz on it. I have a bowlback and a flatback mandolin, which respectively have classical and folk/bluegrass histories to overcome; thus, I get the evil eye when I break out a funk groove on it. And no matter what kind of guitar I use, some other guitar player is always suggesting a better guitar/rig combination. I hate guitar players.

But after the initial "yes, they really came out of the inside of a dead animal" shock, people pretty much give you the benefit of the doubt when it comes to the bones. I can do a clave or reverse clave, a backbeat, or even an Elvin Jones-ish jazz fill thing, and people are usually pretty receptive once they hear it. Other times, not so much. Sometimes, you just gotta be patient with people who don't want to play with a bones player. Sometimes, though, I tell them I got the bones from the last guy who didn't want to play with me, that usually gets me in.

I haven't had the opportunity to play my bones in a Broadway show yet, but I'm sure I will soon. Recently I got a call to play the tenor banjo/snare drum book in a Dadaist opera, which, believe it or not, is actually my second experience playing banjo in opera, so Bones on Broadway wouldn't even be that weird for me. In the Bizarro

### Note from Mel Mercier

I had twelve novice bones players dressed up as Butchers chasing after pigs on the streets of Limerick last week as part of a street pageant!! *Mel Mercier*

## Steve Brown's Bones Workshop at NEFFA

Spring is always a renewing time of year, making me feel energetic and chipper, and the New England Folk Festival always helps instill some energy, and a sense of feeling younger.

Never more true than this year when the bones workshop was bolstered by the presence of a number of students from the Louis F. Angelo Elementary School in Brockton, Mass. Nothing warms the old heart like seeing kids with enthusiasm for playing the bones and these kids certainly have it. Along with their mentor Constance Cook, music teacher, and their inspiration Adam Klein, the kids were supported by the presence of RBS members Rob Rudin, Tim Reilly, Jon and Melissa Danforth, Richard Clifford, and nearly 50 or so participants, all geared toward learning, experiencing, and perhaps catching a little enthusiasm from these energetic youngsters.

Backed by the ever young Reiner Family Band consisting of Dave, Andy, and Eric Reiner, with Cindy Eid-Reiner, who are riding their recently released CD, "The Reiner Family Band -Live" provided just the right level of support and energetic music to learn and perform bones by.

Highlights were of course the six students from the Angelo Elementary School, performances by Adam Klein, and Tim Reilly, and a ground breaking rendition by Rob Rudin which can only be described as "Bebop Bones".

Although only allowed 45 minutes for the workshop this year, a splendid time was had by all, and we would thank all the participants as well as the NEFFA Performance Committees who

### Tips and Techniques Quad Roll and More

This column is dedicated to my relative, the late great Irish saint, Oliver Plunkett (<http://www.louthonline.com/html/>

[oliver\\_plunkett.html](http://www.louthonline.com/html/oliver_plunkett.html)). May his bones rest in peace.....

Bone and stone (wood, too) are the oldest instruments known to man besides the human voice and most likely were first used as tools, simultaneously doubling as instruments to the unknowing cave man using materials to survive in his/her environment some 2.5 million years ago... who knows when the tool became the instrument (art) or when the instrument (art) became the tool. There are wood/stone/and bone players from vast regions all over the world. All of the bone players play their instruments using a similar technique, mechanically speaking, yet the finger positioning/manipulation and materials used varies from region to region. In South India to Mongolia where they play with stones, to Egypt where the cult of Hathor, the avenger and daughter of Ram, has a tribe of percussionists who played in her honor, to the six Celtic regions and all the way to Panama, bone playing is alive or has lived in these vast areas of the world at some time or another.

Drums come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and each produces sound using different materials which are broken down into sub-categories. A phone is any thing that produces sound. Membranophones are instruments that are covered with skin to produce sound and bones are Idiophones which are things that make sound entirely from themselves. Russ Myers and myself are the only bones players in the U.S., let alone the world, to change pitch while playing an idiophone.

All drum and percussion instruments require a slight whipping motion to produce the sound. A piano is 88 drums and requires the same up and down wrist motion as a drumset player or a hand drummer. The motion is simply channeled to accommodate differing techniques. However, the mechanical whipping motion used by the bones to produce sound comes from a flick or rotation of the forearm. The wrist acts as a sympathetic lever and must stay in a vertical position in order to keep the bones vertical, allowing them to hit each other like a pendulum, while the fingers gently

cradle over the front rails of the bones, pulling them in, semi-snug, to the palm of the hand.

There are as many rhythms to articulate on bones as their are stars in the sky, however, to explain sixteenth notes in Russ Myers' terms - one of the worlds greatest bones player who defined the bones as making only two rhythms, the tap and a roll - sixteenth notes are produced on the bones by connecting a roll and a tap. Repeat and voila, sixteenth notes... In other words you produce a triplet and connect that to a single hit all inside of one pulse beat (this all happens very quickly). The combination of the two rhythms or movements in connection with each other produces a group of four sixteenth notes. Repeat these two rhythms over and over again and you'll have running sixteenth notes on one hand while the other hand is free to play whatever it wishes - cross rhythms, polyrhythms or simpler rhythms. Now start the sixteenth notes with the opposite hand and repeat.

*Aaron Plunkett*

Free Bones Lesson = [http://www.world-beats.com/cd\\_vid/VID\\_bones.htm](http://www.world-beats.com/cd_vid/VID_bones.htm)

Biography = <http://www.world-beats.com/Biography.htm>

Web Site = <http://www.world-beats.com>

Store = <http://www.world-beats.com/>

### More Letters to Editor

*(Continued from page 2)*

that first night I feel in love with "old tyme" and now when I'm playing I feel like I am 3 years old.

Ev, I would like to put access to the rhythm bones web sight on my sight if that's OK with you. It's 1130 P.M., Good night----*Mitch*

(This email was sent to Ev Cowett who forwarded it to use as a Letter to the Editor. Mitch is a new RBS member.)

I have several extra pairs of bones (expertly crafted by Ray Schairer on commission for me) that I would like to sell or trade with other members. 248-375-0044 home, 586-492-0771.  
*Jim Embach*

## Wixson wins NTCMA Bones Contest

I finally won the bones contest, but my win begins four years ago. There was a rumor about a bones contest, but no one could pinpoint it. Finally enough clues were found and the event was located in Avoca, Iowa. I borrowed a camcorder to record the contest for the next Bones Fest and took off with a CD of backup music. I was lucky to find a motel.

I paid my entrance fee and started videoing the National Traditional Country Music Association's annual Festival and Contests. If you have seen the video, there are 10 stages of music, over 600 musicians, an old time pioneer village and campers all over the place. It is not the largest event of its kind, but impressive.

I went to sign up for the bones contest only to discover that backup was live music and I had none (shucks/whew). Well since my purpose was to video the event, I would do that.

Jerry Mescher opened the contest with a demonstration and he was followed by the previous year's winner, a talented spoon player. The contest was held and member Bernie Worrell won.

After the contest, I introduced myself to Jerry and discovered he knew many people who would have backed me for the contest. Jerry and Bernie became instant friends and we and Jerry's wife, Sharon, paled around together. Jerry and Bernie put on a bones workshop and I helped with that. There are many opportunities to jam with talented musicians and I spent many hours doing that (after asking for permission to join in).

I missed the next year when Don DeCamp won, but I showed up the year after, the year that Russ Myers won (Walt Watkins was also there and came in second). Jerry Mescher made sure that I had backup. That was the year I wrote the "Legend of Mr. Bones" and I was bound and determined to perform it even though I was advised it would not be well received by the judges (another

excuse). I came in third, but I competed.

The following year I continued jamming and joined in with a group that I soon realized was practicing for a performance. Lee Muller liked my playing and invited me to join them on -stage. I discovered that while jamming is great, performing is better.

The contest that year had the largest number of competitors of any year that I have attended. Several RBS members were there including Steve Brown, Yirdy Machar who won the event, John Perona who came in second, Randy Seppala and a few spoon players. The contest began and my backup did not show. Two of Jerry's friends volunteered to help me.

Part of the scoring is appearance (the others include ability, rhythm, showmanship and audience appeal all of equal value) and at the last minute, I put on a brand new green western shirt. Steve Brown gave a great performance, but you could see the surprise in his eyes when I went on with this spiffy new shirt. I came in fourth and Steve fifth. Steve is convinced to this day that the green shirt was the reason I placed in front of him.

This year was different. I was a regular with Lee's group and performed at all of his shows and at a few others. What a great opportunity to become more comfortable in front of people (I am not a natural performer as many of you know). And Lee was happy to back me for the contest.

I had previously selected three songs from a CD of Lee's music and had practiced them at home. Contestants draw numbers for order of performing and I was last. That gave me a few extra minutes to practice with Lee and a guitar player who joined us. By the way, Lee is a champion banjo player.

I had practiced Jerry and Bernie's style including their offset. They had won with it, so I decided to compete with it. I picked a piece that was a bit slower than when they perform and I made it through. The next two songs were played to different styles and I was finished. I had done about as good a job as I could do and was satisfied. I

left before the contest winners were announced and it was three long days before I found out I had won.

Looking back, I was not ready to win in those earlier years and I knew it. I practiced hard this past year and after a show with Lee, former member Bill Rexroad came up and told me how much I had improved. It was a process and the bones contest and our Bones Fests were the motivation to practice. Judging from the growing quality of bones playing at our Fests, most of you are improving and maybe you need to give the bones contest a try. As Steve Brown said in his article on his All-Ireland Bones Competition win, "with a dollar and the trophy you can buy a cup of coffee. It doesn't mean much except to other bones players." And me!

I thank many people for helping me; my dad who taught me to play the bones, the RBS membership who inspired me to become two-handed and introduced me to some great licks, and Aaron Plunkett's video and Fred Edmund's book and video for specific skills. It's great to be a RBS member.

Jerry and Bernie put on some outstanding shows during the week long event. Their costumes are striking and their bones playing outstanding. Their bones workshop was very well attended and you got the feeling that a few new bones players might have been born. There was also some great late-night jamming around a fire (the first part of the week was hot, but by the weekend it cooled off)..

Now that Steve Brown has won in Ireland and thinks it was a green fluke

## John Hill wins World Bones Contest

Steve Brown discovered that John Hill won a World Bones Championship held in Australia (see [www.abc.net.au/southeast/sa/stories/s942940.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/southeast/sa/stories/s942940.htm)). This was the first word of another World bones contest (the NTCMA event is recognized as the World Spoons and Bones Championship though in recent years it has been won by bones players.) John is now a RBS member and has been asked to write-up his event.

## Bones with John Williams at the Kennedy Center

On July 11, 2003 "The President's Own" United States Marine Band (the oldest musical organization in the country) celebrated its 205th anniversary with a gala performance at the Kennedy Center under the baton of guest conductor John Williams.

As a percussionist with "The President's Own," one of my duties is part assignments for the section. Looking over the percussion instrumentation for "Far and Away," I noticed a part for bones and eagerly dusted off the pairs that had been lying in my drawer for the last 26 years.

I originally purchased these bones from Percy Danforth during a master class he presented at the 1979 Michigan Percussion Festival.

Unfortunately, after a few weeks I still couldn't produce most of the sounds that Percy did, so, frustrated, I packed them away.

Years later, while attending the University of Michigan School of Music as a graduate student, we were fortunate to have Percy as a guest soloist with our percussion ensemble. He played so effortlessly that I seriously doubted I would ever become half as proficient as Percy.

Needless to say, seeing "Bones" listed in a John Williams score was just the boost I needed to start practicing again and really try to master this art. Fortunately, I found the Rhythm Bones Society on an internet Google search. Its list of resources were a key part in making the Kennedy Center performance successful. Thank you RBS!

Now I proudly carry my bones wherever I go and am looking to get together and share ideas with other bones players/musical groups in the Northern VA/Washington D.C. area.

Thanks for reading! - *Kenny Bones' Wolin*

## Review of Tommy Hayes Bodhrán, Bones and Spoons Video

This one hour and 44 minute video devotes one hour and 22 minutes to the bodhrán, 15 minutes to spoons and only 7 minutes to rhythm bones. Rhythm bones players will enjoy Tommy Hayes and his bones playing skill, but you will wish he had more bones instruction as he is a good teacher. If you want to learn traditional Irish rhythms, you will benefit from the rhythms taught for the bodhrán as many of them apply to bones playing.

The bones section follows the bodhrán section and begins with a short bones demonstration. Tommy then shows how to hold the bones. He demonstrates both the tap and the triplet describing the wrist and arm movements involved. He describes bones playing as difficult, particularly jigs, and students should practice the demonstration until they can reproduce it. He mentions two-handed bones playing. He demonstrates using three bones in one hand something he personally enjoys. He finishes with a great three bones demonstration with accompaniment.

### More BFVII Highlights

*(Continued from page 1)*  
began...what fun!! Everyone who wanted to get up and play had the opportunity and everyone was fantastic!! Both lunch and dinner were served at Cunninghams', a very well know Louisville restaurant, just 1/2 block away from the Theatre.

Saturday night was the public performance and it was awesome. The 200 seat theatre was packed and people were standing in the aisle. The publicity paid off, especially since the public performance was free. People who never heard of "Playing the Bones" were grinning from ear to ear and clapping like crazy after each performer finished.

The finale was great. We were up front and what a joy it was to see everyone playing bones together. Jerry

Barnett counted at least 65 people playing bones in the Congo line, so we must have some closet bones players as only 51 signed up as bones players.

Sunday morning was a brunch at our place in LaGrange, a bit of a problem for those who needed transportation from downtown, but it all worked out in the end. The brunch consisted of mostly homemade breakfast casseroles by Dr. Sandra Graves, Linda Ott and Linda Hibben.

The following is some individual highlights. There are people we didn't mention that were brilliant, but we ran out of space. Sorry.

We noticed a lot of the double beat technique this year instead of just triplets as in the previous Fests.

Shorty Boulet and Ernie Duffy played great and brought along Sky Bartlett who is one of the most awesome young talents that we have ever seen. Sky initially was very timid. Gil remembers when he came to his first bones fest in Chattanooga. He didn't know where he stood with other bones players and discovered that he could rattle with them. Anyway Gil invited Sky up when we were just warming up and when he got his feet under him he turned out to be one of the stars at least for his age.

Later this New Hampshire trio passed the bones and had such fun. More about passing bones below.

Spike Bones is such a virtuoso. He is "Mr. Bones" you know. You put him and Joe Birl together and who is the real one; that is the guy who kind of represents the vaudeville era.

We have to admit that Spike did entertain the troops. We sat next to some people who obviously hadn't ever seen rhythm bones played before and we watched them. We saw a few smiles come upon their face and people reacting to being entertained.

We had John 'Mr Bones' Cahill himself. As far as we are concerned he should be in the history books.

Sally Carroll represented the ladies by playing very well.

Vivian Cox is a shining star and what a doll. She shows how long you can play rhythm bones for joy and happiness. She is indeed beautiful and played wonderfully.

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*(Continued from page 6)*

The Cowett family shined again and they were fun. They have become a tradition and a delight. To get the family involved is a fun thing. Fun stuff.

This is why Gil wanted to perform with our two sons and daughter, Tommy singing, Derek on the guitar and Lira. Gil liked playing his Abba number trying to keep up with the kids. He tried to challenge himself with a lot of syncopation.

Thanks, as in major thanks, is due to Dan Cowett, the sound man, who came from NC and took over the Theatre sound system in a matter of minutes - Dan, you are a genius!! And no Bones Fest would be complete without the effervescent personality of our MC, Al Cowett - way to go guys!! And, to Martha Cowett for the name badges.

When Jonathan Danforth got up, he whistled and played the bones. It was almost a meditation. Jonathan also brought his fiddle and provided live music for several performers. He played very well on this impromptu thing. A big hearty thanks to him.

Don DeCamp is incredible. Inspiring. This guy is one awesome bones player and I really admire him.

The Frazier family probably didn't know what they were getting into, but I think they left the Bones Fest a lot more comfortable. We felt like we had new friends in our family and hopefully they felt the same way we did. What they did was surprise father Norris by coming to the Fest without him knowing about it. They did a great job playing bones and hopefully we will see a lot more of them in the future.

Mel Mercier is one awesome bones player and another big star of the Bones Fest, both playing two-handed and one-handed. He invited Tim Reilly to play with him and Tim did extremely well. Mel is a good ambassador from Ireland and a delight to listen to and to get to know. Mel is a virtuoso.

Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell, both world champions, are

absolutely first class. They are elegant and the precision of their rhythm bones is outstanding.

Scott Miller performed with his kids Jake and Erica. While they didn't know now to play the bones, he did get his family involved.

Russ Myers makes it look so easy and we love his humor like his story about being in the military and being a bones player. He is like the foundation of all of us since he has been playing so long and a real fine human being.

Mike Passerotti represent rock and roll through what he called God rock. He marches to a different tune.

Tim Reilly played with Jonathan Danforth and his playing is so unpretentious and his style is inspiring.

Barry Palmerton wearing the uniform of a Civil War doctor and playing bones was very entertaining.

John Perona played to Red Wing, a very good song for the bones. He represents an old tradition except he also played silver spoons bones style. Randy Seppala played bones accompanied by Perona on the accordion. They are using music as a medium to be good friends.

Sandor Smolovits is a guy that can sing and play the bones. We got one of his CDs and he is a trained musician. He did a great job.

Hank Tennebaum got up and played the bones without any music, a difficult and impressive feat.

Kim Thounhurst is a beginner who got up and faced the audience playing well. This will make the second time a whole lot easier.

Parker Waite has improved like so many from when we first heard them years ago. Much improved.

Bill Vits is a professional percussionist with a symphony orchestra and an incredible percussionist. His playing of 16<sup>th</sup> notes on the bones was great and Gil thinks we're all going to be working on that lick.

Walt Watkins was much improved. It's a neat thing about these Bones Fests is to observe people who were once a one-handed bones player now can play with both hands. He did a great job and we would put him down as much improved.

Steve Wixson came up with a whole board of different bone shapes and we

thought was another of the most improved players since we first met him. Gil also thought the tambourine thing was outstanding. We liked his tribute to Matteo, the castanet player who presented castanets so nobly and thrilled us all at Bones Fests III and IV. Matteo inspired Gil also.

What is unique about the Bones Fest are the unique personalities and different methods of playing the bones. People are holding them high and holding them low - different grips. It's so fun to get together.

We like the impromptu thing like passing the bones and we need to keep that in the future. We don't know about you, but Gil loves playing the bones to something he's never heard. He loves the challenge which adds a lot of spice and excitement.

Walt is given credit for passing the bones though it was probably an old idea from the jazz days. Maybe a variation would be to draw names to see who you would play with. Of course we did see several players rehearsing over in the corner. It would be fun to have teams.

It was fun to see world class bones players having fun with the art. The excitement, the camaraderie, and actual love that we all experienced in this medium of rhythm bones playing.

We saw a lot of people approaching world class bones playing. Bones Fests give us the opportunity to push ourselves to do better. We improve for the love of the art and we like to call rhythm bones playing an art.

It's like when we go to a knife show. When Gil sees a better knife, he wants to come home and make an even better knife.

It was a good thing to see even little kids performing. They've got a way to go on their bones playing, but to see family participation was really good. Willie Waylen is one of Gil's beginners. He has only been playing the bones for about a week and decided to get up to the microphone.

It is obvious that most of the bones players have a passion for it and Gil guesses he is one of them. It makes you connect with your inner self. What a joy rhythm bones can be.

A lot of bones playing and new friendships occurred over the



Mike Carter Montage from BONES Fest VII

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 1 2004

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Keep on clicking or perhaps get your old bones out again. Bones Fest VIII (BFVIII) is in the formative stage and Lake Anne Plaza in Reston, VA is waiting for us. See lakeanneplaza.com. Also plan a visit to our Nation's Capital while you are in the area.

We were introduced to many new (to us) but experienced bones players during the past year. I am looking forward to going to the DC area for Bones Fest VIII because there will be many new faces, but I will not overlook old friends with new 'licks.' Great examples of this over the years include Steve Wixson, Chattanooga TN; Mel Mercier, Cork Ireland; Bill Vits, Grand Rapids MI; Walt Watkins, Arlington TX; Spike Bones Missouri/Illinois and others too numerous to mention. I hope that each of you in

your own way will become a 'new you' as a bones player this year. I have taken mine out of the box, got a new can of rosin and plan to start the process. You can do it too with a little push and some practice.

For those of you who may have forgotten to renew your 2003-2004 membership, it is not too late. Since our fiscal year runs from October through October of the next year and you don't recall whether or not you have already renewed, just send a \$25 check payable to RBS to Steve Wixson and he will handle it. If you have already paid the renewal fee your check will be returned.

Have a great year and visit with my family and me in Reston, VA in 2004. May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

## Frank Brower, First Minstrel Bones Player

Frank Brower was a circus performer for most of his career, but he is better known to us as the first minstrel rhythm bones player. There is not much written about Brower and even less about his bones playing. This article is the only article titled with his name other than his obituaries though there are likely stories I could not find buried in the newspapers and magazines of his time. This article contains large sections of material from three articles along with other material that is woven into a story. Some of it is quoted verbatim from the sources with minimal editing. The first is from a hand written manuscript by John A. Dingess.

"We present the name of Francis Marion Brower, better known as Frank Brower, who first saw the light in Baltimore, MD, November 30th, 1823, and made his first appearance on the stage, singing and dancing, at Richard Myers' Museum at the corner of 3rd and Chestnut streets, Philadelphia, PA, about 1838. Frank Brower's first engagement with an equestrian company was with Rogers, Shay and Meteer's Cincinnati Circus, which started from that city in the Spring of 1840. In this connection I must here introduce another

(Continued on page 6)



Frank Brower, courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia. From their Theatre Collection.

## Editorial

This issue has an historical article on the first minstrel bones player, Frank Brower. Founding member, Deborah Brower, thinks Frank is a distant relative of her husband.

Today, to many, Brower is politically incorrect, but in his day he was a respected performer. Mt. Vernon, Ohio, honors its hometown son, Dan Emmett, who with Brower founded the Virginia Minstrels. We, too, need to find a way to honor Francis Marion Brower.

A parallel article briefly tells the story of a few other early minstrel bones players.

Member Yirdy Machar traveled to Scotland and met an old minstrel bones player.

Member John Hill tells the story of his winning the Australia World Bones Championship. It turns out that his father was a minstrel bones performer.

Thanks to Bill Vits for his Tips and Techniques column on the quadruplet roll he performed at Bones Fest VII.

Congratulations to Board member Mel Mercier on being honored by his University College Cork in Ireland.

The last of the known bones instructional videos is reviewed in this issue. The next issue will have an article that compares all of the reviewed videos. There is a lot of good instructional material out there.

## Letters to the Editor

We've confirmed the use of Lake Anne Plaza in Reston, VA. (20 minutes from Dulles Airport) for Bones Fest VIII to be held August 20-22, 2004. Plan to attend from Friday afternoon through Sunday afternoon. See insert for preliminary details. *Sally and Terry Carroll.*

Thanks for the copies of the newsletter with Tim Reilly's article on Bones at Sea. I met him (and actually did some filming with him, as I now recall) at Mystic Seaport quite some time ago. It's really quite a thorough treatment of the subject, though as he says, there is probably much more to be uncovered in other archives. I,

myself, did a paper for Mystic on music at sea - specifically music in the short-lived Confederate Navy, which was surprisingly abundant. No references to bones per se, but several to ad hoc minstrel bands which must have included them.

I also attached the autobiographical piece I send out with the rib bones I make for Lark In The Morning. I never found wooden bones of particular interest, though I've been playing rib bones for over two decades. Even solid ivory doesn't thrill me, even the ones in the Smithsonian once owned by a famous minstrel player from the 19th century the curator once let me play. I actually made a set of ironwood (*lignum vitae*) bones back in the late '80s which were laminated in such a way that the matching insides of the laminates were hollowed out to give the final product the deep sound of rib bones. Sounded quite nice, but still not as rich as the real thing.

Another unusual set of 'bones' I once picked up on the beach in Washington State, near La Push. Some of the black, flat, sea-rounded stones there are seriously thin and oblong, 5-6" and put out an astonishingly loud sound. Unfortunately, overenthusiastic playing results in them suddenly spontaneously smashing to pieces.

Cheers,  
*John Townley (DrJack811@aol.com)*

Kay and John, How can I ever thank you for all your help with the bones. Music Camp is in full gear and they are all having a ball. The older kids are learning about and how to play the bones. For bones they used yard sticks cut into 6 inch pieces. Ev Cowett is teaching the older kids at camp to play them. Our grandson, Joey (12 yrs) has learned to play them pretty well. He can do both hands and has learned how to make them snap and roll.

Ev Cowett is called Dr. E. at camp. Besides the bones, they are learning about the psaltery, the tumbrel, the shofar and the pipe--all ancient instruments. Every year they have a different format for the camp and teach different instruments. *Marty Mitchell*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Marty is Kay's cousin and attended the Saturday night of Bones Fest VI in Greensboro. He asked us to help with Music Camp and since we were too

## Bones Calendar

Webmaster Jonathan Danforth keeps an up-to-date calendar at [rhythmbones.com/calendar.html](http://rhythmbones.com/calendar.html). Check it out often.

**April 24.** New England Folk Festival. Steve Brown's annual bones workshop featuring several of our bones players. Contact Steve Brown at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com)

**May 3.** All Ireland Bone Playing Competition. Contact Steve Brown.

**August 20-22.** Bones Fest VIII at Lake Anne Plaza, Reston, VA hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll. See insert.

**August 30-September 5.** Old Time Country Contest & Festival. On September 4th, the 29th Annual Bones and Spoon Contest. See back of insert. Contact [www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com).

## Tips and Techniques Bill Vits Shares his Quadruplet Roll

After performing at Bones Fest VII, Steve Wixson informed me I was playing a quadruplet roll. I hadn't really thought about it, but had a bit of time to share it with my bone brothers at the Hibben's Sunday brunch. After a few months reflection, I will try and explain playing groups of four notes, 16th notes, with each hand.

I've been a percussionist for most of my life and approach the bones with many traditional drumming patterns. I first learned from Percy Danforth in 1978, but it took many years for me to develop my own style. To master rudimentary drum patterns one must control the single, double and triple taps with a drum stick. I use the same technique in my bones playing.

Try playing three quick taps in a gallop rhythm. Keep the thumb facing up and play da da da, da da da using arm motion in front of your body. This is very similar to a fast jazz ride pattern you would play with a stick on a cymbal. At slow tempos it would swing, but at fast temps it becomes three even notes.

Once this gets comfortable, you get the fourth note when you pull the arm quickly back towards the chest. You must relax so you get the fourth sympathetic note from the quick pull back. The arm spends three-fourths of its time going out from the chest and a quarter of the time coming back.

I don't feel I've mastered this lick because it's tough to control at different dynamics and tempos. When it feels right, however, it's like a perpetual motion of 16th notes. This pattern works well in bluegrass and fast sambas.

Another familiar drum pattern is the paradiddle. Try saying par-a-did-dle as you play the bones; right, left, right, right, left, right, left, left. This is a good alternating exercise. It's especially effective with two different pairs of bones. You can even add a flam, a grace note, to the beginning of each paradiddle for the advanced lesson. *Bill Vits* Percussionist, Grand

## Yirdy Machar Finds a Minstrel Bones Player

I recently visited Scotland to meet a fabulous character called Fergie MacDonald. He owns a hotel on the most westerly peninsula on the mainland of Scotland. He is a button-accordion player, probably the best known in Scotland, having recorded 23 albums of Scottish dance music. ([www.fergiemacdonald.co.uk](http://www.fergiemacdonald.co.uk)).

While visiting him a coach-load of English tourists arrived for afternoon tea. Fergie asked me to play bones along with him to entertain his guests. When we finished playing, and the coach-party was leaving, a sweet old man came up to me and thanked me for 'making' his holiday. He told me that he used to play the bones 60 years ago in a Minstrel Band from Worthing, Sussex, in the south of England, and had not played since. He is now 90 years old and lives in Chester in Northwest England.

I was curious to know if he could still play and handed him a pair of bones. Although he said he could not play anymore, he immediately started to play with one pair in a style where he rolled both hands around one another. To me it was obvious that he played two-handed so I gave him a pair for his empty hand and he amazed me with his double-handed style as if he had been playing all his life. I wish I had a video camera with me; it really was great. I did manage to get a photograph. His name is George Southey.

I have had some wonderful playing experiences recently with the Dubliners, from Ireland, Ally Bain the great fiddle player from the Shetland Islands, and Phil Cunningham, accordion virtuoso from Scotland. It really has been a busy year and I am still trying to get my web-sites up and running. Hopefully, in about two months I should have the main bones one finished (macbones?)

I have a guitar and mandolin maker, Victor Smith, Flatbush Stringed Instruments, also from the Shetlands, making some bones for me in different types of wood. The first batch should be ready for me next week as I am



George Southey in a Pub in Scotland. Note the bones which are played curved sides facing the same and not opposed as most of us play.

doing a bones workshop at a Festival in Norway, *The Sailors Wake*, at a place called Farsund ([www.nordsjofestivalen.no](http://www.nordsjofestivalen.no).) He also made me a terrific pair of spoons from Brazilian Rosewood which I have just used in recording a CD. I hope all is well with you and yours and will maybe see you next year, at the Bones

## Website of the Quarter

[www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/wrapping/](http://www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/wrapping/)  
and [www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/gallery/](http://www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/gallery/)

I'm Jeff Lefferts and here's a story about my leather-wrapped bones. The leather quiets the bones down quite a bit, but it also gives them a fuller, richer sound...more of a 'clop' than a 'click.' It sounds great with slower, darker songs (I play everything from old-time to Eastern European to Klezmer to Persian to Irish to waltzes on the bones). When played quietly, you mostly get the more subdued sound of leather-on-leather. But when you play them more sharply, the wood beneath begins to resonate, and you get a bit of "crack" to the sound.

You can hear each set of bones being played by clicking on the picture. The leather is held on by friction only (no glue or anything). If you have trouble finding suitable leather, I can send you some from around here. Look at a fabric store, near where they sell twine, elastic, and the like. *Jeff Lefferts*, 188 N. Sunnyvale Ave, Sunnyvale, CA



## Review of Chris Caswell's Bodhran and Bones Video

This 50-minute instructional video covers bodhran (38 minutes), bones (4 1/2 minutes), spoons (3 1/2 minutes) and the Scottish Highland drum (4 minutes). The video begins with a bodhran and tin whistle duet with Phineas Og Mac Boilermaker.

In the bodhran section, Chris starts with the basic rhythms, those divisible by 2 and those by 3. He describes the use of box bottoms and attaché cases as beginning drums for students.

He describes how to use the hand (Chris is left-handed) and the stick to strike the drum surface and then how to hold the drum. He demonstrates the two basic rhythms with variations and how to perform up-accented for jigs. He demonstrates the difference in center and edge strikes and how to use the hand inside the bodhran for dampening and tuning

After another demonstration, he adds rim strikes and double sticking. He talks about how to play to a melody and demonstrates polkas and strathspey rhythms. He also talks about when to play and when not to play; he believes in the 'less is more' philosophy. He concludes this section with another bodhran and tin whistle duet.

In the bones section, Chris begins by noting that the bodhran rhythms apply to the bones and that the bones naturally produce the equivalent of double sticking. He shows how to hold the bones with the stationary bone between the thumb and first finger and the moving bone between the first and second fingers (he plays one-handed.) He demonstrates taps, double taps and triplets and how to change tone by varying how you hold the bones. He demonstrates several different types of bones and for what kind of music each is best suited. He demonstrates playing slow triplets needed for jigs. He concludes with playing three and then four bones in his hand.

The video is available from Lark in the Morning, [www.larkinam.com](http://www.larkinam.com).  
Steve Wixson

## Brief Summary of Early Minstrel Bones Players

Many of the early minstrel bones players were documented by Edward Rice in his book *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date*. Here are some quotes.

"George Christy was with Christy's Minstrels in New York from February 15, 1847, until October 29, 1853, during which period he played every conceivable part, and he was a great endman and as a bones player ranked with the very best.

"William B. Donaldson was the inventor of the jawbone used as a musical instrument by black-face performers several years before the first minstrel performance was given.

"Bob Edwards (Dean) was one of the earliest bones players, and in his youth was known as "Master" Edwards. In 1841-42 he was a member of the famous Ethiopian Serenaders. Subsequently he withdrew from that company, and joined Sanford's Minstrels in Philadelphia, where he remained for a long time.

"George Winship was one of the pioneers of minstrelsy. As early as 1849 he occupied the bone end with the New York Serenaders, a famous minstrel company of that day.

"E. Freeman Dixey was one of minstrelsy's greatest bones players, and was a household word in Philadelphia, where he spent practically his whole professional career and the major portion of his life.

"His first engagement was in Boston, at the age of eighteen; subsequently he went to Philadelphia, and opened there at Cartee's Lyceum, the present site of the 11th Street Opera House, with the Julien Serenaders, December 4, 1854.

"On April 23, 1855, the house was opened as Sanford's Opera House, by Sam Sanford, and Mr. Dixey was a member of the company, and continued with Sanford. He was born in Marblehead, MA, July 29, 1833; he died in Philadelphia, March 2, 1904."

## Recorded Bones Music

**Mr. Bones** by Sandor Slomovits. This CD is a compilation of twelve tunes he has recorded over the years, with his brother Laszlo, as the duo, Gemini. The brothers have played music for children and families for the past three decades and Sandor has been playing the bones almost that long. He met Percy Danforth in 1976 and learned to play the bones from him. Sandor lives in Ann Arbor, MI and the two struck up a deep friendship over the years. Percy and Sandor played in concerts together many times until Percy's death in 1992. Percy used to call him "my prime protégé." At Bones Fest VII, Jonathan Danforth, Percy's grandson, told Sandor, "You look just like my grandfather when you play the bones."

The CD includes a wide range of music; an Appalachian style fiddle tune, *Fid Ban Bone*, written by Sandor's brother for fiddle, banjo and bones, traditional songs like *Mary Mack* and *Dry Bones* (perfectly suited to the bones,) a traditional African game song, a wacky bluegrass version of the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* and a unique version of *I Got Rhythm*, for piano, pennywhistle, voice and bones. (Some may remember Sandor's a cappella version at Bones Fest VII.) The title song is a tribute Sandor's brother wrote for Percy Danforth on the occasion of Percy's 80th birthday and tells the story of how Percy learned the bones in Washington, DC around the turn of the 20th century. That cut is a live recording (though most of the rest of the CD was done in the studio) and you can really hear the audience's excitement and enthusiasm for Sandor's bones solo. There is even a tune for bones, *I can Feel It In My Bones*, accompanied by a full symphony orchestra!

To order copies of the CD, send a check for \$18 to Sandor Slomovits, 2021 Penncraft Ct, Ann Arbor, MI 48103. Sandor also works with Ray Schairer, the man who has been making all the Danforth bones since 1976. You can order bones from Sandor in a variety of woods, most of them for \$10. Email [Slomovits@hotmail.com](mailto:Slomovits@hotmail.com) or call 734-



## John Hill Tells His World Bones Championship Story

Being retired, I was planning to drive up north one cold winter to visit some lifelong friends. Consequently, I entered into this event as a bit of fun.

It was the first one of its type that the 'Variety Club of Queensland' had tried. The Club is involved throughout Australia, running all types of events, including car rallies, to raise funds for underprivileged children.

I arrived in time to enter into the fifth heat and was asked to return for the semi-final and for the Grand Final; these were about a fortnight apart.

The 'World Title' as far as I know is not connected to any other competition, but probably used to attract attention. A chap by the name of Tommy Champion was the organizer and very easy to get along with. I have tried but have not been able to contact him to see if he intends to run one this year.

The heats were attended by approximately 200 to 300 people and the Grand Final by maybe 500 odd.

It was truly a variety show held on Sunday afternoons. Variety was in the form of harmonica, spoons, birdcallers, yodeller, comb & tissue paper, penny whistle, kazoo, Jewsharp, tea-chest whistler (bass), musical saw, gum leaf player, lagerphone, and of course, bones players. All of this was interspersed with professional singers and performers from the 'Gold Coast' (a holiday retirees' playground near Brisbane in Queensland.)

The Grand Final was a great event that had the right atmosphere right from the start, helped along by the compere and comedian Ken Bennett. Having such a variety of entrants, it was necessary to divide it into sections as you couldn't compare a 'birdcaller' to a bones player.

There were three bones players in the Grand Final. One was a very good two-handed player and the other, Lem Bann, was single-handed.

The backing music was optional—either live or in most cases we used a track from a CD – one number only.



John 'Hillbilly Bones' Hill playing his whale or Ivory Bones. From 'The Border Watch,' a newspaper of Mt Gambier, South Australia. Used with permission.

It took a while to hand out the various trophies to the place getters and toward the end I was overwhelmed to receive the 'Bones Championship.' As well as this; they had a trophy for 'Most Outstanding Artist' that really topped my day off. It was my first competition that I've been in and was thrilled to feel the lift in my personal profile both in Queensland and when arriving home.

They call me 'Hillbilly Bones' and this tradition was handed down by my dad. When I was a little tucker he was in Blackface Minstrel Shows--banjo, bones, mandolin, top hats and bow ties. At the age of ten when I picked them up, I just rattled them. Then I got a job and the music unfortunately just floated away. In recent years I picked the instruments back up and still use the bones that I got from my father.

I am very proud, underneath it all, to be continuing in my father's footsteps on bones playing. I play what I think are whale bones (but they could be ivory) along with two bullock bones that replaced two of the bones that I lost years ago.

I am so pleased to find the Rhythm Bones Society and to be a member of our unique group. *John Hill* (Note: check out these websites: John at [www.abc.net.au/southeastsa/stories/s942940.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/southeastsa/stories/s942940.htm) and Lem Bann at [www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s916160.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s916160.htm). John lives in Mt Gambier, South Australia, half-way between Adelaide and Melbourne. He

## Mel Mercier Honored

Mel Mercier, Lecturer in Music at UCC, was on Friday 5 December 2003 presented with the 2003 UCC Alumni Achievement Award as the nominee of the faculties of Arts and Celtic Studies, in recognition of his achievements in the fields of composition and performance. "I am proud to be associated with the tradition of excellence for which UCC is renowned," he said.

The annual UCC Alumni Achievement Awards honour graduates who have obtained extraordinary distinction and success in their chosen fields and whose achievements have brought recognition to UCC. This year there were seven awards, representing the various faculties in UCC. Presenting the awards, the president of UCC, Professor Gerard Wrixon, said "It gives me great pleasure to present an Alumni Achievement Award to these graduates whose outstanding accomplishments have brought great honour to their *alma mater*."

Originally from Dublin, Mel comes from a family steeped in traditional music; his father, Peadar Mercier, a member of the Chieftains until 1976, was one of his teachers. Mel graduated from UCC in 1989 with a degree in music and was subsequently awarded a Masters in Fine Arts by the Californian Institute of the Arts in 1991. He has achieved outstanding success, in both national and international arenas, as a composer and performer of bodhrán and bones. Mel has performed with renowned Irish ensembles including De Danann, Stockton's Wing and Altan and has collaborated and toured extensively with Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin. He has composed and performed for theatre and contemporary dance productions at theatres in Dublin, London, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Broadway and Paris.

Mel was recently nominated for one of American theatre's most prestigious awards, the Drama Desk Award, for the sound design for *Medea*, a production directed by Deborah Warner and starring another UCC graduate, Fiona Shaw. Fittingly, he

(Frank Brower—Continued from page 1)

performer, in the person of Daniel Decatur Emmett, the author and artist, who was a member of the band, and while the company was traveling in Western Virginia, found a banjo player by the name of Ferguson. Emmett wanted to engage him, but the management objected to an increase in expenses, though, they were finally induced to do so, and when the company reached Lexington, KY, in the fall during the races, Ferguson was the greatest card in the show and Brower and Ferguson were the talk of the town. In the meantime Dan Emmett had learned to play the banjo and at the end of the traveling season Ferguson went south where he died of cholera.

“The following spring Dan Emmett, after considerable persuasion, agreed to play in the orchestra and assist Brower in the ring with the banjo. This was the beginning of that popularity which continued so many years and made Frank Brower and Dan Emmett famous. At Lynchburg, VA, during the Fourth of July week, 1841, Frank Brower first introduced ‘bones playing’ before an audience, accompanying Emmett in the new song of ‘Old Tar River.’ [Bob Carlin says the bit about his first playing the bones in Lynchburg is incorrect. He has broadsides describing his bones playing at the beginning of the 1841 season in the spring.] Therefore, I presume no person will dispute the right to the title of ‘The Original [Minstrel] Bones Player’ to Francis Marion Brower.

“For many years Mr. Brower confined his professional career to circuses, and, as a clown, was one of the most popular that ever donned the motley. He was a versatile performer and possessed undoubted dramatic genius. His Gumbo Cuff, in ‘Oh Hush!’, and his act of ‘Happy Uncle Tom’ were as artistic pieces of acting as were ever witnessed on any stage, and in all his impersonations his personal identity was thoroughly concealed. He possessed a fund of dry humor, free from any taint of vulgarity, which greatly amused his auditors.

“Mr. Brower married the celebrated

equestrienne Madam Louisa Howard, formerly Louisa Banks, who was one of the most graceful and daring female riders of her day. She was an immense favorite in New York and Philadelphia and appeared with all the leading circuses throughout the country.

“In private life Frank Brower was a genial companion, engaging in his manners, and his conversation bristled with instinctive intellect. He possessed a large store of anecdotes which he retailed in his inimitable manner. He died at his residence in Philadelphia, June 4, 1874.” *John A. Dingess, 1829-1901, Manuscript, p. 99-100, Harry Hertzberg Collection.*

The story of how the first minstrel group was formed has been told in almost every article written about minstrelsy. It seems appropriate in an article about Brower to include something from his perspective and the following is from his obituary as it appeared in the *New York Clipper*, June 13, 1874.

“[Frank Brower] came to New York and performed his Negro specialties at the Franklin Theatre and the Bowery Amphitheatre. While performing at the latter place, in December, 1842, the first idea of a minstrel company was put in motion by the following persons: Dan Emmett, Frank Brower, Billy Whitlock and Dick Pelham, who all went through a thorough course of rehearsals at the boarding house of Emmett, No. 37 Catherine Street, kept by one Mrs. Brooks. They were all diligent and it did not take long to acquire the scanty versatility necessary in those days for a Negro minstrel to delight his patrons.

“The idea was original; but censure might be deserved by crediting the origin of it to any one of the number, and therefore the honor may be distributed among the party.

“The object of their organization was simply to make up a combination of Negro performances for one night only, for the benefit of Dick Pelham, who was then dancing between the pieces at the Chatham Theatre. Their rehearsals were sufficiently encouraged to satisfy the party that they had indeed found a novelty. They styled themselves the Virginia Minstrels and made their debut at the

## Bones Fest VIII

August 20-22, 2004

Lake Anne Plaza

Reston, VA

(20 minutes from Dulles Airport)

*Hosted by  
Sally and Terry Carroll*

See insert for  
preliminary details

Chatham Theatre for Dick Pelham’s benefit, early in February, 1843, and were received with deafening plaudits.

“During the same week they performed one night for the benefit of John Tryon, then manager of the Bowery Amphitheatre. Their performances met with such astounding success that they were at once engaged by Welch & Rockwell, then managers of the Park Theatre, where they performed for two weeks in conjunction with John Diamond, a celebrated dancer.

“After this they went to Boston, Mass., where they played six weeks with wonderful success.

“They then returned to this city (NY) and performed three nights for Manager Simpson at the Park Theatre.

“Having fairly introduced their novelty, and expecting every day to meet with opposition, they determined upon a trip to England, where rivalry was out of the question, for a time at least. With George B. Wooldridge at their head, they sailed for Europe and, on arriving at Liverpool, gave two concerts there, and went thence to the Adelphi Theatre, London, where they played six weeks in conjunction with (the late) Professor Anderson, the ‘Wizard of the North.’

“After this engagement, owing to some misunderstanding, Richard Pelham left the company, and the rest reorganized in connection with Joe Sweeney, who had then just arrived in that country; and they then traveled through Ireland and Scotland for six

(Continued on page 7)

(Frank Brower—Continued from page 6)

months, meeting with success. The company then disbanded. Such is the history of Negro minstrelsy.”

Hans Nathan’s book, which, by the way, has more to say about Frank Brower than any source that I found, offers another version of the story

“The story is told by Whitlock himself: “One day I asked Old Dan Emmett, who was in New York at the time, to practice the fiddle and banjo with me at his boarding house on Catherine Street. We went down there, and when we had practiced two or three tunes, Frank Brower called in (by accident). He listened to our music, charmed to the soul. I told him to join us with the bones, which he did. Presently Dick Pelham came in (also by accident), and looked amazed. I asked him to procure a tambourine and make one of the party, and he went and got one. After practicing for a while, we went to the old resort of the circus crowd - the ‘Branch,’ in the Bowery - with our instruments, and in Bartlett’s Billiard-room performed for the first time as the Virginia Minstrels.”

While versions of the story have differing details, they agree that something happened that was not expected. At one time or another, all of the original ‘big four’ took credit for organizing this first minstrel troupe. One article and two obituaries for Brower claimed he was the organizer. He was eight years older and appears to have been the senior partner when he and Dan Emmett played bones and banjo duets together in the circus. Dan Emmett outlived all of the others and gets the most credit. Emmett also wrote several songs, including the well known Dixie, that made him famous.

The Virginia Minstrels, as the new blackface troupe was called, honed their act in a number of New York performances before premiering their first full-scale “Ethiopian Concert” at the Masonic Temple in Boston on March 7, 1843.

Almost from the start, the Virginia Minstrels were a smash hit -- but their run would be short lived. After performing to capacity crowds on Broadway, they toured England in the

spring of 1843. There, the reception was mixed, although London crowds showed some enthusiasm. By the end of July, the Virginia Minstrels had disbanded. The group reorganized for a short time with Joe Sweeney playing the banjo.

Brower broke his leg and had to retire from performing. He owned a saloon in Philadelphia until his death.

As a bones player, I wanted to know something about his bones playing and thanks to Bob Carlin, here is an article from the *Liverpool Mail*, May 27, 1843.

“But what shall [we] say of the castanet player? It is almost in vain to describe the manner in which Mr. Brower makes this [supply *sic*] the place of every other instrument necessary to complete a full band. Every limb, muscle, feature, and nerve is brought into operation while he is performing—sitting, lolling, standing, throwing out the arms, legs, head, and tongue, alternately, drawing up the extremities, tossing the arms about in every direction, at one time giving his neighbor's head a rapid succession of imaginary fatal [lumps/bumps], now commencing a serious attack upon his own breast, with an apparent view of quickening the flow of blood through the arteries, at another time measuring himself, with extraordinary determination and celerity, for a coat of unknown magnitude, and repeating similar movements over the head, under the legs, behind his back, and below the soles of his feet. While indulging in these fierce performances, the castanets, or rather a couple of rib bones, inserted between the fingers, sustain a continuous rattle in correct time with the melody.” To me that sounds a little like Spike Bones (Darryl Muhrer) dancing and playing bones at Bones Fest VII; though to be fair to Brower dancing was a major part of his act.

Nathan says, “When Brower ‘trucked’ around a bit, the clicks of his bones would mingle with the heavy thud of his boots. He and Pelham sometimes burst into breakdowns, usually without ceasing to keep their instruments in motion.”

Brower’s bones were sawed-off horse ribs that clattered like castanets.

The length mentioned was 12 inches. Later bones players used other materials and later groups had more bones players - as many as six performing together at a time.

People performed minstrel style music before the birth of the Virginia Minstrels, yet it seems a surety that the addition of Frank Brower and his bones defined the early format for the minstrel movement and contributed to its enormous popularity.

Other authors credit their success to the following: they were great musicians, dancers and performers, they called their performance a concert, the economic times were ripe for an inexpensive venue, they were shrewd managers, and as strange as it sounds today, “[they were] entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas.” (Note that many people writing today about the minstrel movement do not mention bones playing.)

As a bones player, I maybe naturally, want to give the bones more credit since it was the new instrument in the group. It also developed into the heyday period for the bones with thousands and thousands of people around the world having a set of bones. They were inexpensive and you could buy them out of the Sears Catalog or you could make them yourself from last night’s rib roast. While most of these people probably were not good bones players, I bet all of them could make clicks.

It is clear that the Virginia Minstrels found a novelty most likely by accident. Good bones player who have played before an audience that has never before heard bones know the excited response they receive from people hearing this unique instrument for the first time. If the hula-hoop novelty can create a short term industry, maybe the bones did that for the early minstrel movement. I must note, however, that Brower and Emmett played bones and banjo duets as an earlier circus act and that did not seem to catch on. So, while it was an important part of the minstrel format, it must not have been the critical item.

(Continued on page 8)



FRANK BROWER

(Brower—Continued from page 7)

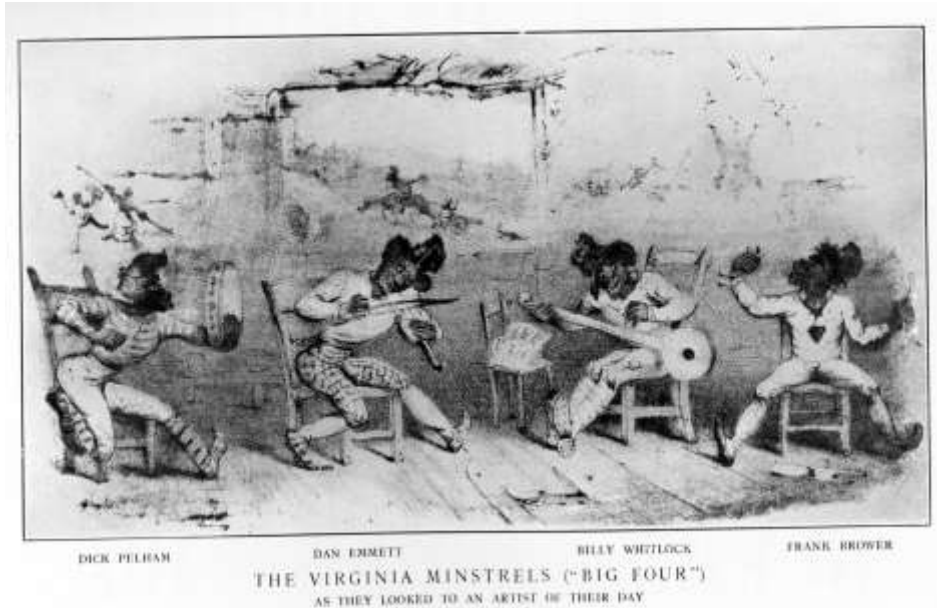
There are other interesting questions for us. What was the state of bones playing during Brower's time? Dana Epstein, in her book *Sinful Tunes*, writes that bones existed during that time in the black community. Did Brower learn to play bones from this community for his Ethiopian routines?

Member Russ Myers tells us about a visiting German who gave a bones concert in New York City in 1740. Brower which comes from Brouwer (meaning brewer) is a Dutch/German

name. Could there be a connection?

So when and how did Brower learn to play the bones? And when was the first time he actually played the bones in public? Intriguing questions and answers may lie in Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore newspapers which are not indexed and will require time-consuming searching.

I received help on this article from the Baltimore and Philadelphia libraries, Mt. Vernon Library (Emmett's home town,) Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Popular Music, Circus World Museum and Bob Carlin who has written a book about Joe Sweeney and early minstrelsy that is being



Frank Brower, on the right above. From the Minstrel Poster collection of the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro., Tennessee

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 2 2004

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## Executive Director's Column

Ever since Bones Fest I, held on September 20, 1997, it has been my strongest desire to have bones players rise to the occasion and lend their support and efforts to the enjoyment of bones playing and the music which usually accompanies it. "You can feel it in your bones" is not just a slogan on a T-shirt but a real feeling not only among bones players but most folks everywhere. That is why bones playing or just listening to them is so unique. You can feel it. Energy is everywhere and bones players have an abundance of it. There is something about the sounds made by this ancient instrument that brings smiles to faces, tapping of toes and the desire to dance or just clap your hands. Bones

players have been doing this for well over 5000 years and 2004 is no exception. I can hardly wait to go to Reston, VA for Bones Fest VIII on August 20-22.

Out of the original crowd of eleven bones players attending Bones Fest I only Russ Myers of Brightwood, VA and I have been able to attend all seven Bones Fests. However, Steve Wixson arrived at Bones Fest II as a beginner, one handed bones player and soon became a Board Member, Secretary/Treasurer and Editor of the *Bones Player*. Remarkable! He even became a National Bones Playing Champion and has made many significant contributions to the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Shorty Boulet—He's got rhythm in his bones

### From Littleton's Senior Center to the Smithsonian, Shorty sure can play

Whitefield, New Hampshire—Elwin Boulet's bright blue eyes light up his face when he talks about bones – rhythm bones that is. He has played the ancient musical instruments for 72 of his 82 years including in Washington, D.C., at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

"All I need is the time of the music; I never miss a beat," he says.

He plays the curved, seven-inch-long pieces of wood like a percussion instrument. Clamping the bones firmly between two fingers on each hand, he creates a clacking, drum-like beat by quickly moving his arms and wrists – not the fingers – he's quick to explain.

It's a link to a past as far back as recorded civilization.

Rhythm bones have been excavated from prehistoric Mesopotamian graves (3000 B.C.) and found in Egyptian tombs, according to information on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) Web site. In Europe today, they're most widely heard with Irish, English and Scottish folk music.

Early English and Irish settlers introduced bones playing in the New World.

Then, as today, they were used as

accompaniment to jigs and reels to keep the beat steady by duplicating the rhythm of the music. Bones were also part of African-American minstrel shows, in vaudeville and jazz music. Rhythm bones have made a comeback in recent years due largely to renewed interest in Celtic music.

For Boulet, better known as Shorty, it was

*(Continued on page 7)*



Shorty Boulet playing rhythm bones at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute



## Editorial

The feature article is on member Shorty Boulet. It is a reprint of an article originally found by member Walt Watkins.

I had the honor of interviewing Ted Goon for a feature article for the newsletter (Vol 2, No 2.) Ted died last year and both his son, Bob, and Mel Mercier wrote obituaries. Ted was our first honorary member. We will remember him with a short ceremony at Bones Fest VIII.

Bob Bolton contributed a short article on bones in Australia. Several years ago Bob donated the diagram of a single hand with bones that appeared in the upper left corner of early newsletters. Thanks, Bob.

A short article compares the eight known bones instructional videos that have been reviewed in this newsletter.

Scott Miller has some thoughts about an International Rhythm Bones Competition Association. Maybe this is something we should discuss at Bones Fest VIII.

I just looked at this year's membership rosters and there are 111 paid members. This is more than any previous year at this point in the year. We normally get several members at each year's Bones Fest.

I forgot to include the minutes of the Board and Membership meetings in Vol 5, No 4 and they are presented in this issue.

One item discussed during the General Membership meeting was a Youth Track in the RBS. The idea was brought up by Constance Cook, but she was not present to discuss it. She wrote a short article on the subject for this issue. She hopes to attend Bones Fest VIII.

Bones Fest VIII is almost upon us and we expect another outstanding event. The Carroll's have selected an interesting venue and have a few surprises for us. We expect several new faces from the Washington, DC area and some old faces we've not seen for a while. You should have received your registration form in a separate mailing. If you have not received it, contact Sally Carroll at 703-709-0020 or email to

## Letters to the Editor

My dad died on August 4, 2003 at age 92. He was ready to go and I am at peace with it. I just wish I could have seen him play the bones one more time.

He enjoyed his friendship with you. The attention you gave him pleased him more than you could have imagined. Thank you for giving pleasure to an old and very talented good man. *Robert H. Goon*

(Editor's note: Bob is sending us a short video of Ted playing the bones that will be shown at Bones Fest VIII.)

Bones are contagious. I just have to learn how to play. I want to teach my grandson too! What a neat form of traditional music. Must keep it alive. *Charlene Rust* (Editor's note Charlene is a new member who found us through Gil Hibben and attended the Bones Fest VII.)

Bones Fest VII was a real hoot for the wife and kids (I thought they'd be bored to tears). They've seen me play bones for as long as they remember, but the fest inspired them to actually pick up some bones themselves and give 'em a rattle. Now they're excited about the possibility of putting on a family act for next year. *Scott Miller*

## Bones Calendar

Here are a few items from the Calendar that webmaster Jonathan Danforth keeps on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**August 7.** Gemini (including bones-player and member Sandor Slomovits). Riverfolk Music and Arts Festival, Manchester, MI. Gemini will be MC-ing and performing, and San will be giving a bones workshop!

**August 13.** Le Vent du Nord (with bones-player Benoit Bourque). Great Lakes Festival, East Lansing, MI.

**August 20-22.** Bones Fest VIII at Lake Anne Plaza, Reston, VA hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll. See insert.

**August 30-September 5.** Old Time Country Contest & Festival. On September 4th, the 29th Annual Bones and Spoon Contest. Contact [www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com).

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Website of the Quarter

**[www.fruitjarpickers.com/memory.html](http://www.fruitjarpickers.com/memory.html)**. The Fruit Jar pickers are friends that sing and play music solely for the sheer joy of doing it. They are not a band in the usual sense, but a loosely knit group. They have a couple of CDs that can be ordered through the website.

Their bones player was Albert Bones Baker who died in 2002. The website has a short write-up on him. .

## Recorded Bones Music

RBS friend, Jennifer Cutting of the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, told us about this rather unusual website titled *Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories*. Scroll down and click on bones, then play the audio. A short bones section is about a minute into the recording.



(Executive Director continued from page 1)

Rhythm Bones Society. Martha Cowett, my daughter, created our first web page that brought so many of us together. Sons Dan, Al, Tom and John have also made many contributions and two grandchildren are ready for the stage. It continues to be a family affair.

Jonathan Danforth, grandson of Percy Danforth who many of you knew and respected as not only a great bones player but also the greatest promoter of this art, made our web page even bigger and better. Steve Brown, a Bodhran and Bones Player from Winchendon, MA arrived at Bones Fest IV and is now Assistant Director of the Rhythm Bones Society as well as the Worlds Best Irish bones player. Sally Carroll, a beginner in 1999 is a Board Member and will host Bones Fest VIII in August 2004 with husband Terry in Reston, VA.

This did not happen all at once. Along the way I was fortunate enough to meet many fabulous bones playing entertainers such as Darryl "Spike Bones" Muhrer, MO/IL, John "Mr. Bones" Cahill and wife Kay from Jonesboro, GA, Joe Birl, Phil PA, holder of a bones patent and Trade Mark of the Rhythm Bones Society, Jerry and Sharon Mescher, Halbur, IA, David "Black Bart" Boyles, Cedarburg, WI, Paul Duhan, a French Arcadian from LA, Vivian Cox, Shelbyville IN, one of the few professional players left on earth, Mel Mercier, Cork, Ireland, Board Member, teacher, writer and great performer, Gil and Linda Hibben, LaGrange, KY, Walt Watkins, Arlington, TX, Don DeCamp, Redfield, IA, Gerard Arsenault, Quebec, Canada. Shorty Boulet, Whitefield, NH and so many hundred more too numerous to mention who in one way or another charged my battery.

The spouses of those who hosted Fests, namely Val Cowett (BFI, BFII and BFVI), Wilma Myers (BFIII), Janet Wixson (BFIV), Jennifer Brown (BFV) and Linda Hibben (BFVII), will always have a special place in my heart. This has been a wonderful ride, down hill all the way. Thanks everyone. May your bones be with you.

## Ted Goon Obituary

I had the privilege of visiting Ted Goon twice. I cancelled a third visit at Ted's request because he was grieving after his beloved wife, Barbara had passed away. Fortunately, on the two occasions that I did visit, I got to meet Barbara. I found her charming and I liked her very much. Together, they received me with great warmth and generosity. My time with them was spent chatting informally in the living room of their apartment or in the dining hall where they would treat me to lunch. I also interviewed Ted in a more formal manner and I made video and audio recordings of these sessions. In the informal chats we spoke about current affairs and family, and Ted and Barbara asked me lots of questions about myself and the Rhythm Bones Society. They were also very curious about the current state of bones playing in the USA and Ireland. Barbara took full part in these discussions and she often joined in the conversation when I was interviewing Ted. She would lay out on the couch and listen in to the interview, contributing clarifications when she thought they were required! They also insisted that I play for them and Ted complemented me on my playing. He encouraged me in my efforts to play two-handed and we played together a couple of times, which was a great thrill.

I remember, with great affection, their affection for each other. After each visit Barbara would write to me on occasion and send me photographs she had taken. I felt very welcome in their home.

I interviewed Ted for hours and he remained lucid and energetic throughout. The most remarkable moment was when Ted decided that he would like to play along to his hit records for me. I captured Mr Goon Bones on video playing along to his own recordings! You can imagine how exciting that was - one of those magical fieldwork moments: ethnographic ecstasy! I was amazed at how well Ted remembered the bones arrangements. Naturally he was no longer able to perform them as he

once did but that didn't seem at all important to me. Rather, I was struck by his faithfulness to the rhythmic phrases he had created half a century ago! And there were moments of great poignancy too: once, or twice, when Ted tried to execute those wonderful syncopated passages from his recordings, his frustration with failing muscle-memory and muscle response was evident.

There are, no doubt, many thousands of miles between Cork and Huntington Beach and yet I always felt right at home when I landed at Ted and Barbara Goon's front door, and I will always cherish my experiences there. Ted, too, has passed on now, but his legacy is great, and, I hope that wherever he is, that he is playing those fantastic syncopated rhythms again and giving joy to all around him. *Mel*

## The Case For An International Rhythm Bones Competition Association

I'm sure you've already thought about this yourself, but maybe the time has come to hatch something such as an "International Rhythm Bones Competition Association" (IRBCA).

Such an organization could lend credibility to bones playing by lifting the professional stature of the instrument.

Perhaps the best way to accomplish this goal would be for the IRBCA to sanction official rhythm bones competitions. It might accomplish this aim by making it easy - and profitable - for prospective music venues to conduct rhythm bones competitions.

The IRBCA could encourage venues to hold rhythm bone competitions through education and support. This could take the form of providing, at a nominal fee, assistance such as contest rules and guidelines; a roster of certified judges; official IRBCA logos and trademarks; listing events in "Rhythm Bones Player" newsletter; access to historical archive of IRBCA sanctioned rhythm bones competitions; and maybe even

## Comparison of the Bones Instructional Videos

Over the past few years eight instructional videos have been reviewed in this newsletter. With the review in the last issue of the final video, it seems timely to compare these instructional materials to help bones players decide which one or ones to purchase.

First note that there are two non-video published materials by Percy Danforth's audio tape and booklet and Nicholas Driver's Bodhrán and Bones Tutor. Also there are two unpublished videos, one by Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell and the other by Gil Hibben. Both of these latter videos have been available for review and purchase at recent Bones Fests.

Irish style bones playing is taught in four videos by Chris Caswell, Tommy Hayes, Mel Mercier and Aaron Plunkett. The first three are primarily Bodhrán videos with bones added, but much of the information about the bodhrán rhythms applies directly to the bones. The first three teach one-handed bones playing while the Plunkett video teaches Irish and other rhythms using two hands.

Two-handed bones playing is taught in five videos by Percy Danforth, Fred Edmunds, David Holt, Barry Patton and Aaron Plunkett.

The Edmund technique is built on taps and is very different from the other videos which teach a more traditional style of bones playing. Bones players who use his drumming-like style can produce a wide variety of rhythm patterns. The book is the main teaching tool with 172 exercises while the video is a supplement that demonstrates the exercises. A person interested in the more traditional sound of bones playing might find this book and video a way to develop some additional skills. Dr. Edmunds' materials were recently donated to the Society. No decision has been made about what to do with them, but they will be on display at the next Bones Fest.

David Holt's video includes

instructions on several other folk percussion instruments. Tommy Hayes includes a short section on spoons. Chris Caswell includes spoons and Scottish Highland drums.

Hand independence (playing different rhythm in each hand at the same time) is taught in the Edmund and Plunkett videos. Danforth and Holt use the left hand primarily for syncopation.

The approximate length of bones instruction varies with each video as follows, Caswell, 4 1/2 minutes, Danforth, 80 minutes, Edmunds, 100 minutes, Hayes, 7 minutes, Holt, 7 minutes, Mercier, 14 minutes, Patton, 13 minutes and Plunkett, 70 minutes.

Two videos have structured exercises, Edmund and Plunkett.

All teachers are right-handed except Chris Caswell.

All of the video reviews are

### Abbeyfeale Report Steve Brown Wins Again Paddy Sport Murphy is Recognized

It's a wet, dark Monday evening in Abbeyfeale, as Steve Brown steps onto the stage to defend his title as All-Ireland Bones Playing Champion. A large crowd is assembled in front of the outdoor stage in the town square, many sheltering under shared umbrellas. There is a palpable sense of expectation in the air – will the two-handed 'Yank' pull it off again this year or will one of the locals wrest the title from him on this occasion? ('local', that is, in the European sense, of course - anywhere from Abbeyfeale to Copenhagen!)

This event is, for many, the highlight of the Abbeyfeale traditional music festival, which takes place annually over the first weekend of May. The competition is adjudicated this year by one of the icons of Irish bones playing, Ronnie McShane. Ronnie was a member of Sean O Riada's prototypical traditional music ensemble, Ceoltoiri Chualainn, in the 1960's. His is an unenviable task, as the standard of competition is always very high and, even though Steve

Brown has become somewhat of a celebrity in the area since his win last year, support for local players is invariably strong.

All nine competitors give a good account of themselves. Former champion, Patrick Donovan plays himself into one of the runner's-up places along with Yirdy Macher, one of only two, two-handed players to take to the stage this evening. In the end, the other ambidextrous clicker, Steve Brown, gives another superb performance to take the title back to North America once more.

Local bones hero, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy retired officially from competition this year, and, in acknowledgment of his extraordinary contribution to bones playing, the festival committee presented him with a special award at the end of the competition. On behalf of the Rhythm Bones Society, I, too, presented him with an award to honour his achievements. His musical and flamboyant style may no longer be witnessed on the competition stage but he can still be heard regularly, enthralling family and friends at sessions in Matt McCoy's Bar on the main street in Abbeyfeale. Paddy's musical legacy, too, can be seen and heard in the playing of many of the younger, local bones players, many of whom have been strongly influenced by his style. One of his protégés, David Murphy, a fine musician, was awarded second place in this year's competition. And, perhaps more significantly, one of David's own students, the four-year-old John Forde, ran away with the Junior title. John, whose feet don't yet reach the floor while he sits, looks and sounds uncannily like 'Sport' when he plays: a bones-playing, child prodigy? I wouldn't argue with that – he is certainly a wonder to behold. Will we have to wait until he comes of age for the title to come back to Ireland? Stay tuned and watch this space.

*Mel Mercier*

(Editor's note: To learn more about Paddy 'Sport' Murphy read Mel Mercier's article on him in the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, Vol 2, No. 3. Back issues are available.)

# Bones Down Under

The playing of bones has a long history in British folklore. Their widespread popularity with Australian bush musicians would appear to be prompted by visiting minstrel shows but the Negro traditions of bones playing only appear in African countries formerly under British rule.

Playing bones are usually short pieces of bullock ribs that have been boiled, scraped and dried or else similar pieces carved from hardwood. One is locked rigid against the next finger by the thumb or forefinger and the second bone is held more loosely between the next two fingers. A rocking action of the wrist causes the bones to click together to the rhythm of the music.

Some virtuoso players can play bones in both hands at the same time with three or four bones in each hand. Cross and counter rhythms are possible and vaudeville stage performers could produce an astonishing array of sound effects to train stories and the like. Dance music is better served by starting with a good solid beat from one pair of bones before making things difficult for yourself.

It becomes increasingly difficult to get a good set of playing bones. The sort of beast slaughtered for beef these days is much too light to give a good firm set of bones. An old ex-butcher I knew had worked as a boner back during the days of vaudeville. He told me of the stage players sorting through the bones looking for 'the ivory ones' - the hard heavy bones best for playing; and that was back in the days when cattle still walked in to market! What hope have we now they are chauffeured in by road train? Your best bet is to ask your butcher for about 170 - 180 mm (6¾" - 7") of the heaviest rib bone he can lay his hands on and make sure you knock up some spares at the same time.

Alternatively you can try making some out of wood. Some old-timers insist Tasmanian Oak (*eucalyptus regna* / *~obliqua* / *~delegatensis*), Gidgee (*acacia cambagei*) or some other hardwood is the only one that

will do. One vaudevillian I interviewed said the only way to make a good set of bones was to carve them from 50-year-old Jarrah (*eucalyptus marginata*) floor boards! Another timber loved by stage performers was *lignum vitae* (*Guaiacum officinale*). You needed to know someone at the Naval Dockyards to get scraps but it does make some really good 'bones'. Unfortunately, it is now restricted by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) legislation. Some really hard Australian hardwoods - particularly the desert mulgas (*acacia* spp. - especially *~aneura*) - are too damn hard to comfortably play as bones!  
*Bob Bolton*

(This article was excerpted from a paper titled *Australian Traditional Bush Instruments* distributed through

## Tips and Techniques More on quadruplets

I am practicing my quadruplet roll as described in the last two issues of the newsletter. I cannot generate enough speed using Bill Vit's technique (three outgoing taps followed by one returning tap) so I am using Aaron Plunkett's method (a triplet preceded or followed by a tap.) I have greater appreciation now for what Bill can do with his hands.

We teach beginners three basic movements, the tap and the triplet which generate one or three sounds and the triplet roll. The tap works with most all music and other music is written in threes, jigs for example, such that the triplet is the basic to use. We also play a triplet in a quarter note beat and that can sound good too.

A lot of music is written in 2/4 and 4/4 with two or four beats to the measure and the beat being a quarter note duration. We are seeing more people playing duplets, twos, and quadruplets, fours to better support that music. Spoon players have an advantage in that it is easy to play twos and fours as well as ones and threes and more.

The last column talked about a quadruplet roll as being 16th notes,

that is four sounds to a quarter note beat. In a more general sense, a quadruplet can be played at any speed and what we heard Bill Vit play was a fast roll version where each sound was a 16th note or four sounds to a quarter note beat.

There are other ways to create quadruplet sequences. A series of duplets or double taps can make a quadruplet and note how different the accents (the louder beats) sound.

We have lots of control over taps and they can be turned into quadruplets. In the sequence tap, silence, tap, silence, this will be a quadruplet if all four elements are completed in one beat. The variations on this are endless particularly when playing two-handed bones.

A triplet without the final tap can be a quadruplet if followed by silence all in one beat. A triplet is typically three sounds in one beat followed by a tap which is the first sound of the next beat followed by two periods of silence. (By the way, have you noticed how hard it is to play just a triplet without following it with a tap.) With practice, the silence can be the first, second or third sound (that is, non-sound) of the sequence.

The two handed bones player can play a rhythm in one hand such that each sound of the rhythm played in the other hand falls half way between the sounds of the first hand. This in essence doubles the timing making a 16th note sequence out of an eighth note sequence.

Aaron Plunkett, on his bones video, teaches how to play 3 taps in one hand against 12 (four triplets) in the other hand thus accenting every fourth beat in the triplet roll creating the quadruplet sequence.

By using more energy and a longer arm swing, the triplet motion can generate four sounds instead of three. I cannot generate a one-handed roll doing this as my arm is way out of position at the end of the swing. So this may not be too useful.

If you have other ways of generating quadruplet sequences, please share it in a Letter to the Editor. *Steve Wixson*

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Ev Cowett called the meeting to order about 4:00 pm on Friday, July 25, 2003 in the Boardroom of the Downtown Holiday Inn Hotel in Louisville, KY. All members were present along with Terry Carroll, Jonathan Danforth, Russ Myers and Walt Watkins

Gil Hibben reviewed the program for Bones Fest VII. The public is invited to attend the Saturday night session for free. The T-shirt company misspelled Louisville on our shirts and donated the defective ones to us. Motion was made, seconded and approved to sell those T-shirts for \$10. A professional video will be made of the Fest. Steve Brown reported on his experience with the BFV video purchased at \$20 and sold for \$25 to pay for postage. Motion was made, seconded and approved to do the same with the BFVII video.

There was a discussion about the need to get new blood on the Board. One possibility that was presented was to increase the number of Board members to as many as 13. Motion was made, seconded and approved to establish a committee to formulate such an amendment to our Bylaws. Ev Cowett appointed Sally Carroll, Chair; Walt Watkins and Steve Wixson to the committee with him being an ex officio member. He requested a report within 2 months.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to purchase 9 years use of the rhythmbones.com domain name for \$135.

Sally and Terry Carroll volunteered to host Bones Fest VIII in the Reston, VA area. Motion was made, seconded and approved for them to do this.

The Board thanked Jonathan Danforth for the great job he is doing with the website.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to prepare a Special Recognition Award to Paddy 'Sport' Murphy from Ireland for his contributions to bones playing. Ev Cowett will modify the existing Meritorious Service Award to generate this Recognition Award.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to raise dues to \$25 per year.

Gerard Arseneault sent us a gift of \$20 and requested some document to show that he was a member. This seemed like a good idea. Motion was made, seconded and approved to generate a Membership Certificate to use as needed. Ev Cowett will create this.

Sally Carroll announced that the Big Bone Lick State Park Festival would like to locate some bones players. This will be announced at the General Membership meeting.

Steve Wixson noted that Jim Meyer donated the rights and materials to Fred Edmunds' bones instructional books and videos to the Society. There was no time to complete this item.

The meeting was adjourned about 7 pm. Respectfully submitted, *Steve*

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Ev Cowett called the meeting to order at 4:15 pm, July 26, 2003, in the Auditorium of the Kentucky Theater in Louisville, KY.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to dispense with reading of the minutes that were printed in the newsletter (Vol 4, No 4).

Ev announced the Board decision to raise dues for next year to \$25 per year.

Ev presented the nominations by the Board for officers for next year; Everett Cowett, Executive Director, Steve Brown, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer and opened the floor for additional nominations. The motion was made, seconded and approved to close nominations and elect the officers by acclamation.

Ev presented the nominations by the Board for Board Members for next year, Sally Carroll, Gil Hibben, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher and opened the floor for additional nominations. The motion was made, seconded and approved to close nominations and elect the Board Members by acclamation.

Ev announced that Bones Fest VIII would be hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll in Reston, VA.

## Bones Fest VIII

August 20-22, 2004

Lake Anne Plaza

Reston, VA

(20 minutes from Dulles Airport)

*Hosted by  
Sally and Terry Carroll*

Registration Forms were sent in a separate mailing. If you have not received this information contact Sally Carroll at 703-709-0020 or email to [BonesFestVIII@att.net](mailto:BonesFestVIII@att.net).

See you there!

Steve Wixson reported briefly on Steve Brown's Regional Bones Fest and Jonathan Danforth as one of the attendees added some comments. We are looking for people to host annual and regional fests and a couple of people informally volunteered. The Board will follow up.

Kay Cahill brought up a idea from Constance Cook who wants a youth track in our Society. There was considerable discussion of this idea. Jonathan Danforth talked about using our website as a youth chat room and maybe the Society could produce educational materials. Ev will have the Board look into this.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:47 pm. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

(Fred Edmunds—Continued from page 1)

bones being played at house dances called kitchen junkets that drew his interest when he was 9 years old. He grew up in Newport, Vt., on Lake Memphremagog near the Canadian border.

“My mother played piano and dad called square dances. We’d go from one house to another [on weekends]. Sometimes we had fiddle players come, too,” he said. “I only owned a little harmonica. I watched someone who came [with bones] and I learned to play. At 10 years, I was playing them.”

Boulet said the elderly fellow, he recalls his name as “Chick,” became a good friend and taught him to play rhythm bones.

“I would borrow bones from him,” Boulet said. “I even dropped one pair in the lake while I was crossing over a channel on the lake. I never found them.”

Music at the kitchen junkets featured primarily French-Canadian tunes, Scottish and Irish jigs and reels. Over the years, Boulet taught himself to play guitar, tenor banjo, mandolin and a little piano, all by ear. He does not read music.

A wiry, energetic man with unbridled enthusiasm for music, Boulet seems ageless when he’s performing, including last month at the Littleton Area Senior Center with fellow Folklife Festival musicians Dudley and Jacqueline Laufman of Canterbury.

Yet his story is more like the song, “It’s a Hard-knock Life.”

His father died when Boulet was 15 and he went to work for a baking company in Newport, making deliveries “and fighting in the ring on weekends to make a little extra money,” he said. “My mother was blind and I had two younger brothers. My mother worried I’d get hurt.” But he continued to support the family with both jobs.

In 1944 he was in the Army and found himself in Japan. “The bones went with me,” he said. “I drove trucks.” His unit built campsites “and we hauled a lot of bamboo. We were waiting for the invasion [of Japan] but they surrendered.”

Meanwhile, his wife, Vaulene, had moved to Lisbon, where Boulet had also lived as a child. After the war, he first returned to New Britain, Conn., and his former job of driving a tractor-trailer for Spector Motors. The couple decided to make Lisbon home.

In Lisbon, he served in the Police Department for 13 years and in the Fire Department for about 17 years “I used to police the Lancaster Fair,” he said.

After the couple divorced, he settled in Whitefield in 1971 when he found a house “that fit my pocketbook then,” he said. He also served in the Fire Department in that community for about four years. His second wife, Audrey Thompson, died of cancer.

He continued to play bones with venues that included the Mt. Washington Hotel with the Blake Mountain Band, a Tri-County Senior Action event with the renown Riendeau brothers from Berlin, and teaching workshops in schools in Dalton, Whitefield and Jefferson through the N.H. Council on the Arts. He’s also played with David Andersen in the lobby of the Nashville Country Music Hall of Fame.

But the highlight of the years for Boulet was performing on the New Hampshire Front Porch at the Folklife Festival in Washington for two hot weeks from June 23 to July 4.

“We were billed as the Franco-American Soiree and Fiddle Traditions,” he said. “During the day, we played three, four sets and then we played at the hotel at night where the entertainers stayed.” The musicians and family members stayed at the Marriott in Alexandria, Va., just outside the city.

For Boulet and his wife, Shirley, it was the trip of a lifetime. “It was a wonderful trip, and educational,” said Boulet. “We did some sightseeing. My wife had never been to Washington.”

Boulet brought back a certificate from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which states in part that it was awarded “*in appreciation of exceptional contributions to the increase and diffusion of knowledge about cultures and traditions which enrich our nation and the world.*”

Since it was initiated in 1967, the festival has hosted presentations of cultural traditions with more than 16,000 musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, storytellers and others at the National Mall. They come to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and community-based traditions. It is the largest annual cultural event in the U.S. capital. New Hampshire’s presentation in 1999 included construction of a covered bridge and a stone wall, with all materials shipped to the site for authenticity.

The next big trip for the couple was to the rhythm bone festival Louisville, Ky., in July 2003.

## Playing 'dem bones . . . a Sidebar to the Shorty Boulet story

Watching Boulet clack the wooden pieces in time to music looks deceptively simple, especially when he says, “Anyone can learn to play them. The main thing is learning how to hold them.”

Once correctly positioned between the fingers of one hand or both, the trick is not to try to use the fingers to manipulate the sticks, but to use movement of the wrist and arm to generate the clacking sounds. It feels somewhat like trying to make sounds with oversize chopsticks.

When Boulet gets going, his whole body takes on the rhythm as he moves up and down, sideways, sways from side to side or continues with arms raised above his head. And he never misses a beat!

When he’s not busy performing, he handcrafts sets of rhythm bones from ebony, ironwood, even cow bones. When polished, the latter look like ivory. The curved pieces are seven inches long, an inch wide and one-quarter inch thick. Boulet gives lessons locally to those who buy sets from him.

“I still have the set I’ve had since the age of 10,” he says proudly. *Gina Hamilton*, The Courier,. Reprinted with permission.

## Youth Track in RBS?

Here is hoping some kind of a national (or international) children's wing can develop in the Rhythm Bones Society. The kids would love it. Could they have a kids price newsletter? (or e-newsletter)

Me, I am working on infiltrating the Junior Highs in my area. In each grade 6 class that graduates from my school, there are more and more competent bones players. I send referral lists over to the Junior High listing things like: (in addition to their band instrument and choral information) 2-handed bones player, bones soloist, one handed bones player, plays jaw harp, made his own bones, etc. If children are moving to another school, they often come by the music room to buy a pair of bones before they leave. In addition to kids figuring out how to make bones, we now have a parent who carved his son a beautiful curved spoon sort of bone out of bone, I think, to use with one of the wooden bones he had from his set he bought from Adam Klein.

Jonathan Danforth came to our Flag



Constance Cook, Adam Klein, Steve Brown and kids from Louis F. Angelo Elementary School

day (2003), and my students were marching with bones! Jonathan said he took pictures.

I taught a young man at the Smithsonian Folklife Fest (2003) how to play bones while standing in line for the porta-potties (one must amuse oneself). He loved it, and wants to buy heavy rib type cow bone bones. I referred him to [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) to see if there might be a regional group meeting in the Tacoma Park, MD area.

The interesting thing about having bones made by Adam Klein, Stephen Brown and the maker in the South (can't remember his name, but the one

who makes them for Mr. Bones-- Michael somebody) is that all these different styles give my students a way to compare sounds and styles and figure out what works best for them. Each student has a definite preference for a certain type of bones.

Upcoming: Rob Rudin will be visiting the Angelo School, for an afternoon, (March 2004) teaching washboard, bones, jawharp and other instruments of the jug band, and a student teacher's family hopes to donate quite a few more washboards to the school jugband program. Yours in boniness, *Constance Cook*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 3 2004

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## Executive Director's Column

With the remnants of another bones fest still clacking in my ears, I find my self with some mighty big shoes to fill. Everett Cowett wasn't just our Executive Director over the last five years, he was our visionary. The person who created and hosted the first Bones Fest, who brought us all together, and saw his dream of a bones player organization become a reality. Although he had the help and support of some important people like Fred Edmunds, Martha Cowett, Russ Myers and Steve Wixson, it was Everett's desire that made it a reality. I've been fortunate to have been with him during some of this time, and it is my hope that I can carry on

his tradition of enthusiasm for bones playing and bones players.

Bones Fest VIII certainly had its share of both. With amazing new players including Kenny Wolin, and Jeff Leffert, to old friends Bill Vitts, and Russ Myers (to name just a very few in both catagories), I find my self back home and sufficiently energized to continue to fuel my development as a player and your new Executive Director. Truly if there is one significant impact being a part of this bones playing community has had on me personally (and there are actually many) it can be seen in my playing, the result of

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Joe Birl

This article is a tribute to Joe Birl who was awarded the Meritorious Service Award at Bones Fest VIII for his contributions to bones playing. Joe is a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society and a special friend who let us use his 'Rhythm Bones' trademark in our Society's name. It is an honor to write this article about him.

While Joe is the oldest active RBS member, his enthusiasm, laughter and love of the bones makes him feel like one of our youngest. As we watched Joe play his new wood 'rhythm bones' at the last several Bones Fests, we all wanted to be that young and play that good..

Joe was born in Philadelphia on August 20, 1916. He went to school until the eighth grade and was set to go to high school when a job opened up. This was in 1931 in the midst of the depression so Joe took the job. His salary of \$7 a week went to his family.

Later he went to night school to get his high school diploma studying blueprint reading and things of that nature. At age 18 he started working in his father's machine shop learning how to work with different materials. He later worked for Proctor Electric who made irons and toasters. He wound up in the Allocation Department learning to work with distributors. All of these skills help him earn a living and also prepared him to patent his now famous

black plastic 'Rhythm Bones.'

Joe was playing the bones by the time he was ten. He said, "I taught himself— I just picked it up." Joe is left handed and played one handed. He had a neighbor by the name of Mr. Wrigley who was an older gentlemen by then who said, "

*(Continued on page 7)*



Joe Birl teaching the bones at Bones Fest V

# Editorial

Bones Fest VIII was another great event and the highlights will be included in the next issue of the newsletter. The minutes of both the Board and General Membership Meetings are included in this issue. Steve Brown is our new Executive Director and writes his first column on Page 1.

Our society's roots stem from two individuals, Ev Cowett and Fred Edmunds, each with a different style of bones playing. Ev plays traditional bones and Fred played percussive bones. Traditional bones playing has dominated previous fests with only a few of Fred's students keeping the percussive style alive. With Bill Vits and this year Kenny Wolin's percussive contributions we see more of a balance evident in Bones Fest I when Fred was alive.

I consider myself a traditional bones player and use the traditional techniques from Aaron Plunkett's instructional video but also the percussive techniques from Fred's instructional video. There are seven traditional bones instructional videos and one, Fred's, percussive instructional video. RBS owns the rights to Fred's video and Jonathan Danforth made a motion during the General Membership meeting that we do something with it. If you have ideas, please send them to me or any Board Member. Thanks.

I speculate there are tens of thousands of bones players in the world and to date we have found about 650. Most of the first group can trace their bones playing to the end of the minstrel era or from a relative who learned from a minstrel show. These people have gray hair and are getting old. In one or two decades they will be gone and the number of bones players will be small. The work of our society is clear - pass on bones playing to the next generation.

In this issue for the first time is a column edited by Constance Cook titled *The Young Bones Player*. She credits Adam Klein who was her initial inspiration and who has given very freely of his time and attention in many ways to foster bones playing in

a very poor inner-city school. She will use the experience she has gained at her school to lead us in teaching kids to play the bones. Give her your support. Tell her your stories about teaching kids. Use her experience to start teaching kids or organize programs like hers in your area.

Mel Mercier found the story of the young virtuoso bones player, John Forde. It fits in nicely with Constance Cook's new column.

Cherish the Ladies with Joanie Madden and her Irish whistles was in Chattanooga recently. After the free concert, Joanie walked down into the audience and started talking to people. I ask her why she did not have a bones player and she said "I love the bones, but there are so few good bones players." I emailed her about the Rhythm Bones Society but bones players take note and get good. She also asked me why I didn't come up and play with them. Of course, I wouldn't do that unless asked which makes me wish I had showed up early for the sound check to show her some 'good bones playing.' I wanted to

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Mr. Cowett,

I have been given your letter for my father, Cliff Wood, and sadly have to report that he died last September 2003, age 103.

He played his bones until almost the last few weeks before his death and gave great pleasure to his family and all around him.

He was very interested to know that there were bones still being played, especially in the US, and I know he would want to hope that they still will be played in years, decades and even centuries ahead.

May the Bones Fest VIII be a great event to all in August.

Sincerely, *Monica van den Berg*, daughter of Cliff Wood.

(Editor note: There was a story on Cliff in RBP Vol 3, No 3.)

Steve, I got your mail via the band website. Have you ever heard our CDs? They are sold at Civil War reenactments and battlefield parks like Gettysburg. We play all the time at Gettysburg, in all the taverns or you

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

can find us by doing a search on the *Camptown Shakers*. We do old time music and minstrel songs to the set up of a minstrel band with jawbone, fiddle banjo and I play bones and tambourine. I have a different style, something that I made up, sort of marching drum rhythm with bones. Didn't know how to do it, just played what came out. I play bones on about half the songs and tambourine on the other half. We are considered one of the most authentic (gut strings and all.) You might look at George Wonderlick's web page, "wonder banjos" as he makes all the instruments and a fine bones player too. We are so busy playing gigs (we will do the Philadelphia Folk Fest and such) and the dead heads love us. We would love to play live for you if possible one day, but we live way up here. I would love to hear 1000 bones played to our music. Get a CD from Tracy at serenade @delanet.com and check us out. I'm sure you will love playing along with us. *King Bennett*

(Continued from page 1)

being exposed to each and every one of you, beginner and expert alike.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Terry and Sally Carroll for taking on the difficult task of organizing Bones Fest VIII, something that I have done myself and recognize as overwhelming and deeply rewarding.

The future for our instrument and organization could not be brighter in my opinion. With young players like Sky Bartlett shining like Haley's Comet, and the fine work Constance Cook is doing with her school kids (see her new column in this issue), the fear of bones playing fading into oblivion is just a dark memory. And YOU, who think enough of the instrument and organization to make both a part of your life, for this I thank you.

And as we continue on with our favorite activity, please fill out the enclosed questionnaire and let us (the Board) know what you think. Please

Below is a photograph of the front cover of Yirdy Machar's CD. Yirdy is in front playing bones. From the left behind are Bjorne G. Schmidt, Malene D. Beck and Anders Trobjerg. Photograph by Henrik Bjorslev

## Recorded Bones Music

I received a copy of a CD from member Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar. Yirdy is a Scotsman who lives in Denmark. Not many of you have met Yirdy as he has had conflicts with recent Bones Fests. However, those who attended the 2002 NTCMA event in Iowa got to meet him and compete against him in the Bones and Spoons Contest. They lost, he won. And with good reason. He opened playing with four bones in each hand, then did a spoon number and finished with a two bone number. He is also a one man act playing the button accordian and other instruments and filled in for several scheduled performers who failed to show. His article on the Iowa event and his win is worth reading (RBP Vol 4, No 4).

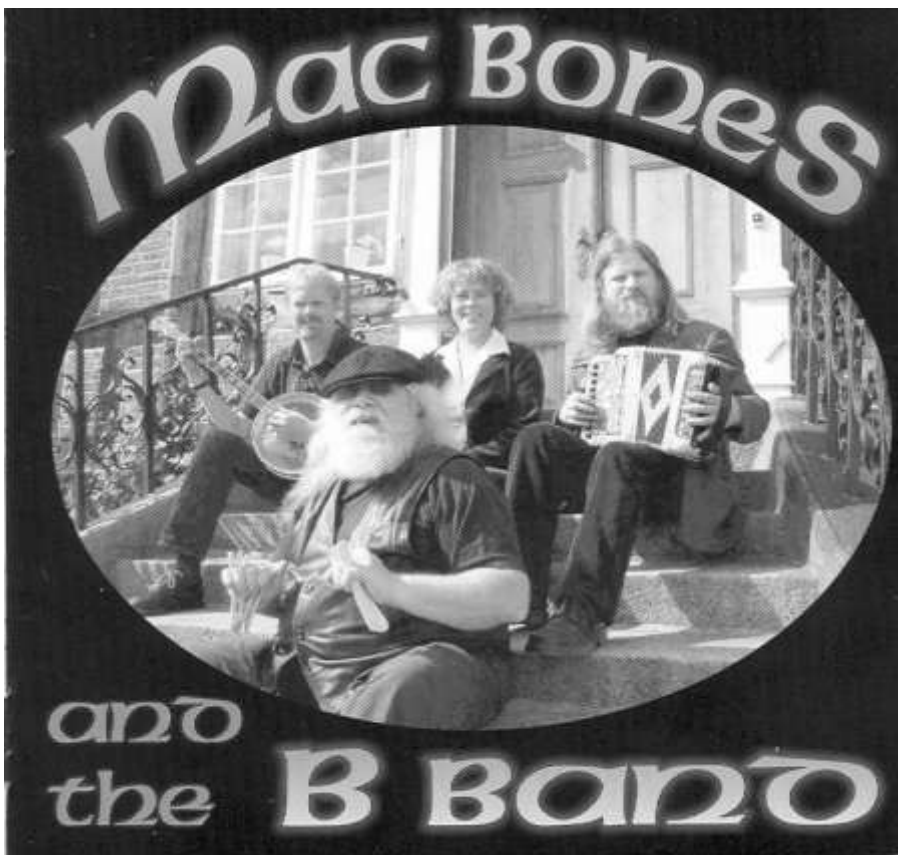
The CD is titled *Macbones and the B Band* and is one of those few CDs where almost all tracks contain bones (one track with spoons.) The songs are of Scottish origin accompanied with button accordian, banjo, bouzouki, darbouka, piano, etc with Yirdy singing lead vocals. To purchase, contact Steve Brown at 978-297-1104 or [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com).

## Introducing The Young Bones Player Column

The Young Bones Players Column is for and about young players so that they may know about each other and meet, and for those bones players who chose to pass on their art to young people. I would like this column to eventually to be taken over by the up and coming young bones players of today. (Or maybe morph one column to two columns; for the young who play, and those who teach the young.) Bones playing is absolutely NOT dying out in this country, due to people such as the Cahills, Adam Klein, Ev Cowett, Rob Rudin, Stephen Brown, Jonathan Danforth and others. I have been teaching the bones and jug band in public school for many years now with the material and technical support of Adam Klein, who wildly inspired my students in Brockton, MA by playing virtuoso bones for them while singing. Today, all my students (750) play, with varying degrees of skill -- some very well indeed. I am now in a new school system in Lexington, MA, so will be starting all over again.

I am excited to announce that I will be presenting a workshop on "Bones playing and jug band in an elementary school music program," to Massachusetts music educators at the annual MMEA conference in March, 2005. I hope to have children there to demonstrate and help teach the teachers. I also hope to have the aforementioned players, Adam, Stephen and Rob to help present and teach, in addition to making that important link between educators and traditional musicians. (Nothing like a little public pressure.)

If you are worried about bones playing dying out, read the following article, and go out and teach another child. Write in about your experiences teaching children. Young players, write in with your stories, and join other bones players at the National and Regional Conventions. (You can get info at [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com), of course, and also at the Rhythmbones group at yahoo.) If enough young people write in maybe a young players group will



## Fleadh Spawns Bones Boy Wonder

He's too young to be that talented, he couldn't possibly fake artistic temperament at such a tender, young age. However, it's all there in abundance and wrapped in a four-year-old ball of energy in the name of John William Forde (see photograph on Page 8).

In the course of compiling a report on the May Bank Holiday Fleadh by the Feale for an issue of *The Kerryman* last May I spoke to one of the organisers, Anne Marie Dennison. She told me how well things had gone for the committee and that they were already looking forward to next year.

Before we finished our conversation she told me to look out for a young bones player by the name of John Forde. She said the youngster had won the junior competition during the Fleadh. The words she used in fact were: "He'll be heard of yet."

It wasn't possible to contact the Forde household on Monday and with a deadline looming a meeting was eventually arranged for mid-week.

After his mother, Noeleen, promised him a treat in the nearby chip shop young John began rattling Dem Bones in earnest.

The child is gifted with a natural rhythm but it wasn't from the wind he got it. His uncle, David Murphy was the runner up in the All Ireland Bones Playing Championship - a competition and craft nurtured by the Abbeyfeale 'Fleadh' committee over the past couple of years there. After last year's competition David gave his little nephew a set of bones and the youngster hasn't left them out of his hands since. Up to then he was 'tipping away at the bodhrán' according to Noeleen.

"People can't get over how good he is at such a young age, he's normally a shy child and we can't get over how he went up on the stage to play in the competition. He hadn't a nerve in the world and played away as cool as anything," said the justifiably proud mom.

An only child, John lives in Ballaugh South in Abbeyfeale with his

parents. His dad, Pat comes from the music rich area of Templeglantine but mom, Noeleen puts the musical influences down to the great bones man of the area, Patrick 'Sport' Murphy - who was honoured at this year's Fleadh.

"The bones were played in China before 3000 BC, in Egypt around that date, and in ancient Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe.

Numerous examples of Egyptian bones made of ivory and wood have survived, they were used in religious rites. We know they have spread around the world and exist in some form in almost every culture. They were a featured instrument in the American Minstrel Show during the middle 1800's, and have been played in numerous forms of traditional music in North America including blues, blue grass, French Canadian music, and Cape Breton music from Nova Scotia," that's according to expert and reigning All Ireland Bones Playing Champion. Stephen Brown

"There is a rich connection between the bones and traditional Irish music and they may have first been taken to America by Irish Emigrants. Little is left us as to how they developed in Ireland, although Mel Mercier of University College Cork is currently involved in extensive research on the use of the bones in Ireland and America and we may have some insight into this when it is published.

Truly a pub instrument, played casually and passed on by word of mouth, they have been kept alive by little pockets of players, the best inspiring others to play. Ronnie McShane played them in Sean O'Riada's group Ceoltoiri Cualann, and in the Chieftains, they were played both by Peadar Mercier, and Ronnie McShane on the earlier albums and by Martin Faye later on.

Inspired by Peadar Mercier, many younger bodhrán players of the 70's also played bones such as Mel Mercier, and Johnny McDonagh, developing unique styles. As the drum developed through the 80's and 90's younger players showed less interest in them, although Cathy Jordan plays them regularly and well.

One of the areas in Ireland with a

healthy population of bones players is in West Limerick in and around the town of Abbeyfeale. This is almost entirely due to one exceptional bones player Patrick 'Sport' Murphy. Sport continues to use the same pair of bones he has played for over 60 years, and has made a name for himself as the best player in Ireland. In the early 90's, the town of Abbeyfeale began sponsoring a yearly Fleadh, and in an attempt to make it unique to their area, began sponsoring the All Ireland Bones Playing Championship as part of the Fleadh.

Sport Murphy has won the championship numerous times, although the area has other great players including Paddy Donovan of Ardagh, himself a two time champion, David Murphy of Abbeyfeale and Brian Hickey of Adare. Although the number of contestants has varied from year to year, 2003 saw the largest number of contestants including for the first time contestants from outside Ireland. The bones are two pieces of bone, generally cows ribs, or wood, they are curved slightly," according to Mr. Brown.

I was delighted at what I heard in Abbeyfeale on the Wednesday evening I met him and I asked John Forde to play a bar or two for my travelling companion. He shook his head in a blank refusal but I told him that she'd kill me on the way home if he didn't play for her. He consented and gave a few bars and, with a hint of a smile in my direction which implied that he'd just lifted a heavy sentence from my shoulders, he charged

## Website of the Quarter

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1919122>.

Notice of this NPR radio story titled *The Legacy of Blackface* was sent to us by member Norm Conrad. It reviews the origins of blackface and minstrelsy and tells how it still effects life today. While bones are not mentioned, bones are played at the beginning and end of Part 1. The bones player is Percy Danforth from the CD *The Early Minstrel Show*.

## How to Win the NTCMA Bones Contest

1. Start Practicing Now
2. Make Motel Reservations Early
3. Hook Up With Jerry Mescher
4. Find Backup Band (See #3 Above)
5. Choose Tunes In Different Time Signatures
6. Wear A Nice Costume
7. Smile When Performing
8. Clog Dance While Rattling
9. Enjoy Yourself

I was inspired to compete after hearing folks talk about the contest last year at Bones Fest VII in Louisville. But instead of heading off to Iowa after Bones Fest ended, I felt I should first take a year to get better prepared. And I'm glad I did. It wasn't so much that I needed to improve my bones playing (although I DID improve greatly from studying the Bones Fest VII video), but I wanted to settle in on an effective strategy.

The first thing I did when I got to the fair grounds was hook up with RBS member Jerry Mescher. He gave me a personal insider's tour of the fair grounds, introduced me to many nice folks, walked me over to the registration area and showed me the ropes.

I arrived Wednesday night because I wanted to enter the Band Scramble Contest. This is where you write your name and instrument on a slip of paper, drop it in a box, then the names are formed into groups. I thought it would be a lot of fun - and a great way to meet other musicians for a backup band. I was lucky enough to be grouped with a wonderful guitar player, Lyle Johnsen, and a dynamite banjo player named Lee Muller. We put together around half a dozen numbers and performed a set that smoked.

For the Bones Contest, I selected three tunes, "Jambalaya," (Cajun), "Waltz Across Texas," (waltz) and "Lay That Pistol Down" (reel). I played RBS member Parker Waite's aluminum bones on the Cajun tune, eight wood bones on the waltz, and also clogged a little on the last.

My goal for entering the contest was to at least place among the top

five winners. The main reason I went to the festival was in hopes that my placing in the national contest might elevate the status of bones playing among musicians where I live.

What I enjoyed more than anything else about the festival was discovering that everywhere I played bones (the Bluegrass Cafe, Callison's Circle Jam, the Band Scramble, Jem's Open Jam Tent, American Heritage Stage, Main Stage, Patio Church Stage, Irish session, Bluegrass Stage, the Bones Contest, and the square dance), my band mates and the crowd absolutely loved the sound. That alone made the trip well worth the effort.

## Tips & Techniques Back to the Basics

Let's return to basics - what are the fundamental movements in rhythm bones playing? For years I agreed with Russ Myers who says there are only two movements, the tap and the triplet. However, as I now play the duplet and the quadruplet, I realize that these are separate movements.

The duplet is not a double tap as some call it (though that name will likely continue to be used). The name double tap implies that two taps are created with forward motion of the hand for both sounds. The duplet is one sound with the hand going forward and one sound with the hand going backwards.

What distinguishes the duplet from the triplet is the arc of movement of the hand in space. The arc of motion for a triplet is a circle or an ellipse with a slight downward motion at the start of the backward arc (Barry Patton teaches a triplet variation with a figure eight arc.). The arc of movement for my duplet is a short circular arc movement that retraces itself on the backward motion. Steve Brown says his duplet (double tap) motion has the bones moving parallel, that is his arc is a straight line in space.

There is also some finger control required by the ring finger (while we teach beginners that the ring finger doesn't do much, as we advance we note that it is very involved.)

Music is created using the basic

*(Continued on page 8)*

## New England Regional Bones Fest

**October 30th, 2004**

**Red Apple Farm  
Phillipston, MA.**

### Preliminary Schedule

9AM-10AM-Coffee and Donuts  
10am-Noon Discussion and Presentations  
Noon-1pm Lunch  
1pm-2pm Informal Jamming  
2pm-5pm Public Performance (only registered participants will perform)  
Live Music provided by the Reiner Family Band

Cost To Rhythm Bones Society Members is \$10.00 per person and includes: Coffee/tea, donuts, Lunch-Choice of hamburger or hot dog, potato chips, desert, and use of the Farm.  
Bring a salad to share.

### Pre-register

Make checks payable to  
Red Apple Farm

Send to: Steve Brown  
36 Royalston Road North  
Winchendon, MA 01475

Questions: 978-297-1104  
Bones@crystal-mtn.com

## Bones Calendar

**October 30.** New England Regional Bones Fest. Contact Steve Brown  
**Summer 2005.** Bones Fest IX. Place and time to be determined. See next newsletter.  
**August 29-September 4, 2005.** NTCMA annual Festival with Bones and Spoons Context on September 3rd.

## Minutes of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Everett Cowett at approximately 7:30 pm on August 21, 2004 in the Community Center of St. Anne Plaza, Reston, VA.

The minutes of the last meeting were not read since they had been published in the newsletter. The Treasurer presented an interim report noting there are 117 paid members and there is about \$1700 in the bank. A motion was made and approved that the report be accepted.

There was an election of Officers and Board Members. Ev presented the recommendations of the Board (see minutes of Board). There were no nominations from the floor and a motion was made and approved that these people be elected by acclamation.

Ev Cowett presented the Meritorious Service awards to Mel Mercier and Joe Birl. Steve Wixson accepted for Joe and announced that the next newsletter would have an article on Joe.

There was a call for new business. It was moved by Jonathan Danforth, then seconded and approved that a committee be formed to figure out what to do with Fred Edmunds Bones Instructional videos that RBS now hold title to.

There being no more business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:50 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Steve

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors

The meeting was called to order by Everett Cowett on August 20 at 1:45 pm in the Art Gallery at St. Anne Plaza, Reston, VA, with all present except Jerry Mescher. Russ Myers and Mitch Boss were present as visitors.

Motions were made, seconded and approved to not read the minutes of the previous General Membership and Board meetings. The Treasurer present an interim report noting there is about \$1700 in the bank.

Sally Carroll reviewed the program

for Bones Fest VIII. Changes include workshops and the public performance on Sunday afternoon.

There was a discussion on the purpose of our Fests. A motion was made and seconded to setup a subcommittee to prepare and distribute a survey questionnaire to poll the membership as to their desires for future Fests. Steve Brown will chair.

The Board affirmed Meritorious Service Awards to Mel Mercier and Joe Birl. Ev will present these on Saturday night.

There is a need to clarify procedures for on-line motions and meetings. Steve Wixson will study and present an email motion for on-line discussion and approval.

Old Business: Sally Carroll, chair of the committee to study changes to the By-laws to increase the size of the Board, reported that two members did not favor any changes, so no further work was done. The motion was made, seconded and approved to re-activate the committee to considered term limits and other was to improved the structure of the Board.

Mary Lee Sweet discussed the possibility of Stephen Foster Culture State Park for Bones Fest IX. It is located some distance from the airport and transportation is a problem. The advantage is they would take care of most of the planning and execution. She will gather more information and submit a proposal. It was suggested to add a item to the survey as to how many people use air transportation to attend Fests. Steve Wixson noted that San Slomovits has also expressed interest in hosting Bones Fest IX. Steve Wixson will send him a copy of the preliminary Host Guide and see if he will submit a proposal to the Board within one month.

Ev Cowett announced that he was stepping down as Executive Director. The Board sitting as Nominating Committee made the following recommendations to be presented at the General Meeting; Steve Brown, Executive Director, Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer and Sally Carroll, Ev Cowett, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher for Board Members.

There was a discussion of

producing a video DVD of Bones Fest highlights for distribution to Public Television stations throughout the country. There was not sufficient time to discuss this idea.

The meeting was suspended at 4:20 pm to continue Sunday morning.

The meeting continued in the Gazebo of the Marriott Hotel at 1:00 pm with all present except Sally Carroll and Jerry Mescher. Visitors present were Sky Bartlett, Mitch Boss, Ernie Duffy and Bernie Worrell.

There was a discussion of BFVIII. The level of bones playing is up. The workshops are working, but should start early in the morning with no big break between Saturday morning and afternoon sessions. People want more jamming time. There is a desire for a place to meet after the day's activities are over (an afterglow). Several members wanted wine and beer served and the Board concurred. There is a need to study the relationship between the Host and the Board. We need to get proposals for the following year's Fest so they can be discussed during the Annual Board meeting. The Board requested that the Secretary send a letter of thanks to the Bookstore.

The committee to figure out what to do with the Fred Edmunds materials was organized with Mel Mercier, chair.

Gil Hibben noted the Board needs to define authority of motion making at the General Membership meeting. Gil will study and submit an email motion on the subject.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to fund an upgrade to the website to support audio and video.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to issue membership certificate in both 8 1/2 and business card sizes. This has been requested by several members.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to issue a Membership Directory with members specifying what information they would not like to have included.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:54 pm. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.



*(Joe BirI—Continued from page 1)*

Joe why don't you play with both hands." Joe says, "That was the only bones advice I ever got from anyone."

At 10th and Pine there was an old black man who played the bones and he would walk the streets with a guitar player who was blind. Early on, he was about the only bones player that Joe ever met.

He made his first bones from wood from a hardwood floor. Later he went to Zapf's Music store at 5th and Tabor Road (still in business today and selling bones) and bought his first pair of bones made out of pine painted black.

Joe never played with a group, but at that time the craze was amateur shows. There were many theaters in Philadelphia that had a stage. People improvised themselves as booking agents and hooked up with several theaters. A booking agent would assemble a group of 10 to 15 amateur performers and Joe was one of them. They would go to a theatre and a few of them would perform and get paid a few dollars. The others in the group who did not get to perform would get 50 cents. The theatres had a house band and Joe would play along with them. He would wear overalls with a plaid shirt and sometimes with a straw hat. Joe never won first prize, but did win second or third with a prize of \$2 or \$3. It was the depression and professional performers who were out of work performed as amateurs winning most of the events. He still has some postal cards notifying him of an upcoming event (most people did not have telephones in those days).

Joe's bones would slip out of his hands when he played them. Being a clever fellow and experienced in making things in the machine shop, he began to design a new type of bone made out of plastic

Joe calls himself "a dreamer." He was working in his father's machine shop and tried making bones out of some scraps, but they didn't sound very good. He received some plastic looking material call spaldite (still in use today) and shaped it into bones. The curve in the bones was copied from the wood bones he bought from Zapf Music Company. He cut out his

famous grooves by grinding and filing. Joe shortened his bones to reduce cost. The 'Rhythm Bones' were born.

At Bones Fest III, Joe told the fascinating and frustrating story of how he patented these bones. His patent attorney, Mr. Fairbanks, was very helpful in the process. Joe had already made a blueprint for his bones. He made his application, submitted it and was turned down three or four times. He then decided to visit the Patent Office. When he showed the Examiner the bones, he said "I didn't know it was like that." The Examiner changed a few words and approved the application. Joe received the papers with a nice seal on it several months later. He gave the Society copies of all of the documents to preserve.

It took a few years for Joe to get enough money to do anything with his patent. He searched for a molder, but all they wanted was his money. He finally found molding company headed by a Mr Strauss who made a few bones for him. He worked on ways to clean up the molding marks and finally had his method perfected.

During that time were hundreds of music distributors specializing in various instrument and Joe got together about 14 around the country. He sold bones in tooth paste like boxes containing a set of four inside. He had a display carton where twelve of the boxes would fit. Distributors would buy maybe a half a gross a year.

Joe says that he did not make much money selling the bones nor did he lose much either. Joe estimates he sold over 100,000 bones. I wonder how many of these bones are out there still being played.

Brother Bones made bones popular for a time and Joe got to meet him and give him some of his bones. Read that story in RBP Vol 4, No 3.

Many people know this story from Bones Fest III. Joe was in attendance when Mel Mercier came to the microphone to tell about his bones playing and then play for us. He told of playing with two pair of unmatched bones, one of real bone and the other a black plastic bone. Unfortunately over the years the plastic bones had broken

while carrying them in his back pocket. Little did Mel know that Joe who had made and patented these bones was sitting on the front row not four feet in front of him. Needless to say, Mel returned to Ireland with many pairs of Joe's famous bones.

Joe had a few plastic bones left when he arrived at Bones Fest III, but quickly sold them to attendees. I have contacted a few music stores over the past year trying to find these bones, but they are all gone. Steve Brown found a few for sale on Ebay and they sell for \$10-\$15.

Joe is still making bones, but now out of pine. They have the patented groove. He painted a few of them black, but prefers the natural color of the wood. Several RBS members have bought these wood bones. Joe is looking to sell his wood bones on the internet, so watch out Ebay!

This year Joe was a volunteer for the Philadelphia Folk Festival (one of the biggest in the country with 2,500 volunteers). In his spare time sold 38 pairs of his new wood bones.

Today, Joe is still teaching people how to play bones and has found a new way to teach. Over the years he has had trouble teaching some people the bones playing motion. He now has the student raise their hand straight into the air and rock the hand back and forth (notice how the elbow moves). Then the student lowers the hand into a normal playing level (where the elbow is more fixed), but keeps the same motion going. Joe tells them, "Now you've got the motion that is required." People can now get the feeling that they could never get before. Joe says he's thought about this teaching problem for years and just recently thought of this. I tried it as he described it on the telephone and it works. I will try it out on the next student I teach.

Joe still plays bones all the time and says "I get a big kick out of them. I enjoy them and it keeps me young. You work your bones and stay young."

My first bones were real bones made by my butcher father. Over the year, I had more than one pair of Joe's 'Rhythm Bones' and I bet many of you reading this did too. I paid \$4.50 a



Four-year-old Bones Playing Champion, John William Forde from Abbeyfeale pictured beside the famous Fr. Casey landmark in the Co. Limerick town's square. See story on Page 4. Photo: John Reidy / The



Mel, Mercier, AnnMaria Dennison, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy and Steve Brown following Mel's presentation to Sport of the RBS Meritorious Service Award. Steve Brown won 2004 Bones Competition

*(Tips & Techniques continued from page 5)*

movements described above plus the quadruplet (described in RBP Vol 6, Nos 1 and 2) plus silence. Variations are created by the intensity of play, the actual arcs inscribed by the hand in space (they don't have to be in a two dimensional plane), type, weight and

length of the bone itself, the number of bones played in one hand, and all of the subtleties that make music musical. The two handed player can play the same rhythm in both hands or play different rhythms in each hand.

There is a fifth basic for the two handed player, hitting two pair of

bones together. This movement in castanets is called the choque and for bones players it is taught by Fred Edmund in his bones instructional video.

If you play something other than taps, duplets, triplets, quadruplets and silence, send a Letter to the Editor and

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 4 2004

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## Executive Director's Column

We've had our first snow of December and very cold temperatures this week in New England. Winter is my time to practice for the Spring and daydream about Bones Fests, past, present, and future. Bones Fest IV was my first Bones Fest and what a remarkable time it was. Just traveling to Tennessee and seeing Steve and Janet's amazing house was a great experience. But clearly the highlight of the experience was the people. Meeting Jerry Mescher, Barry Patton and Steve Wixson for the first time, not to mention hanging out with Russ Myers and Ev Cowett, I was truly in heaven. I remember being in that little old building they called the Mountain Opry and seeing each bones player

getting up to introduce themselves and play a bit, it just knocked me out. But there was one performer who stood out amongst the others; it was Vivian Cox. She had so much enthusiasm and could she play. I had never seen a woman her age play bones, never mind how good she was. And the light in her face when she talked, played, and watched bones players! She was such a dear to talk with, open and accepting of everyone. At bones fest VI she told the hilarious story of going out to her usual performance at the Boggs-town Inn, after changing outfits between sets, and forgetting to put her skirt on, and standing there in her slip on stage! I will

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Midwinter Musings on Bones Fest VIII

In the middle of winter, at least in New England, we bones players don't go on picnics, we don't see parades, and we don't play Frisbee. Instead, we practice playing the bones!

When we're not actually playing, we spend time wistfully thinking about Bones Fests gone by and the people we get to see once a year. At least, this is how it seems to me, snowed into my New Bedford house by what is being called the worst snowfall in twenty years. Thinking about last summer's good times makes a winter of chilly isolation pass more quickly.

Last summer, as I'm sure you all remember, was Bones Fest VIII, and was hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll. The idea that we've been doing this (as a group) for eight years running is pretty impressive. Bones Fests really started off as a backyard barbeque, and we've made a point, through the years, of trying to keep them fairly informal and more in the nature of a family reunion than a "real" convention. Of course as the Rhythm Bones Society has grown over the intervening time (more than 100 members as of this writing), that family feeling has gotten harder and harder to balance with the challenge of simply dealing with that many people (and especially that many bones-

players!) at once.

I mention this just to emphasize how much of that family feeling I found at this past year's Bones Fest. From the start, I saw people helping to set things up, to make signs, and to help people find various places. Our venue was the Lake Anne Plaza in Reston, VA (not far from Washington, DC), a collection of shops built around a brick courtyard. I myself hung out at the registration desk, so that I could see all the friends arriving that I hadn't gotten to speak with

*(Continued on page 7)*



Bones Fest VIII hosts Terry and Sally Carroll

# Editorial

As is the custom, this issue has the highlights of Bones Fest VIII hosted by Sally Carroll and her husband, Terry. The article was written by Jonathan Danforth. Another great Fest with new and old faces present.

It is with great sadness that I report vivacious Vivian Cox has died. A short obituary, a letter from her husband and a few member letters mark her passing. Her obituary notes that she was a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. This saddens me more than deaths of some closer acquaintances. Though I knew her personally only through our Bones Fests, there was something about her that made me feel close. As Ev Cowett says, there is a family reunion atmosphere at our Bones Fests. I will miss her. Her story was told in Vol 4, No 1. In it she said, "You see, I have joined an ancient and proud fraternity that stretches all the way back to mankind's prehistoric beginnings." She has now met them and I bet she is taking them a lick or two.

I recently experienced the downside of competition. Competitions encourage people to practice and become great players. However, this contest was influenced by a very talented performer who over the years had great influence in accrediting judges for the event. He has a style and this style, however great it is, was unconsciously adopted by the judges. The result, today, is that all contestants have adopted this winning style and all sound great, but alike.

One of the best things about our Bones Fests is that there is no approved style and every bones player has something unique that we all enjoy listening to. If everyone sounded similar, I doubt that our

## Letters to the Editor

This is to let you know that my wife, Vivian Cox, passed away Sept 10th. She gave her retirement performance at the Boggsstown Inn and Cabaret July 7th and they had a big party for her. She was the happiest

when on stage rattling the bones and was looking forward to the festival this year.

I will continue a membership to the Society so let me know when dues are due. Keep sending the newsletter to me. Sincerely, *Edward Cox*

Vivian was the first woman I ever saw play the bones. The fact that she was a woman was quite beside the point, though. She was a terrific player. And more. She was an entertainer in the best sense of the word. When I saw her last year at Bones Fest, her charm lit up the stage. She made me smile. And afterward, in person and later by email, she was just as lively, energetic and good natured. I consider myself lucky to have known her, even so briefly and slightly. She was inspiring and I'll remember her fondly. *Sandor Slomovits*

I feel honored to have met her. She taught more than playing bones. Anyone that had the opportunity to talk with her and see her perform had the rare pleasure of entering another era, a bygone era of troupers. For her, the show was everything. Her legacy to us: the show goes on.... *Hank Tenenbaum*

Two reflections. She Encouraged Children. Vivian was sitting in the row ahead of us at Bones Fest VII in Louisville. My 7-year-old was excited by the bones show and rattled away behind her. I was afraid the clattering was a nuisance. Suddenly Vivian turned around, flashed a great big smile, and with a twinkle in her eye told the brand new bones player how wonderful he was.

Vivian Played My Bones. Vivian Cox was one of the first RBS members I met at Bones Fest VII in Louisville. We were chatting in the auditorium Friday night when I mentioned that I left my bones back at the hotel - and had just bought a couple sets of ox shin bones from Steve Brown. Of course she had to try them. *Scott Miller*

Free Spirit: A Joy Forever. Always a smile on her face; ever a twinkle in her eye, Vivian Cox was one of those people you felt you had known all your life the moment you first met her.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Her warmth and enthusiasm just spilled over; and she entertained with gusto!! My life was enriched just having known her. She was a first rate bones player, a real credit to the craft. I place her among the best who play bones. May her spirit carry on; may she continue to spread her joy in heaven. *Walt Watkins*

I reached Parker Waite yesterday. He recently returned from Belgium where he had a hip replacement done. He says he's able to do things he hasn't in a long time. He looks forward to a pain-free future and coming to the next bones fest. I wonder if this might make a nice letter to the editor with Parkers address if people want to send him a card? Just a thought. *Steve Brown* [Parker's address is in the new RBS Membership Directory.]

(Executive Director continued from page 1)

truly miss her, and wish I had more time to experience her enthusiasm.

I want to thank each of you who filled out a questionnaire and encourage those of you who haven't to do so and send it in. This is your organization and your Bones Fest. We want to make sure we hear your opinion as we make decisions and plan for the future. Watch this space for further discussion on the results.

In October, ten or so bones society members got together for a "Regional Bones Fest" (see article below). A great substitute for the yearly gathering, it was great to see old friends and enjoy each others playing. We would like to encourage each region to think about hosting their own. A great way to keep us together and playing bones. *Steve Brown*

## Second Regional Bones Fest

It was a rainy, and cool October day, as 10 or so Rhythm Bones Society members made the trip out to the Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, MA to share in that brother/sisterhood we call playing the bones. Present were Tim and Dee Tatro, Phil Brake, Norm and Emily Conrad, Jon and Melissa Danforth, Jon Hodgkin, Al Liemeux, Bill and Thomas Rose, Ed Roseman, Ernie Duffy, Shorty and Shirley Boulet, Jeremy Brown, and your humble reporter.

Undaunted by the weather and bolstered by the Reiner Family Band, each of us took our turns playing individually and in groups of two or three. Talk flowed like wine at an Italian wedding, as we caught up on bones activities, and shared tips and other information.

We tried a new activity, bones and juggling duets courtesy of Ed Roseman juggling and bones played by several folks. Al played washboard, and John dragged out the concertina, while shorty, Ernie, Dee, and many others clacked away on the bones.

Lunch was provided by the Farm, as well as salads to share by Dee Tatro, and Shirley Boulet. We feasted on fresh pheasant, grilled to perfection by Bill Rose.

Around 2 pm several members of the general public arrived, and watched while bones, piano, and fiddling could be heard around the barn.

Several members dropped in to the local King Phillip bar for a pint and spirited conversation afterward. All agreed it was a good tune up for the

## Vivian Cox Obituary

Vivian Cox, 83, of Blue Ridge, died Friday, September 10, 2004 at her home.

Born July 31, 1921, in Rush County, she was the daughter of Roy E. and Rena (Miller) McAhren. She married Edward Cox on February 28, 1942, and he survives.

Other survivors include three sons, three daughters, two brothers, two sisters, eight grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

She retired in 2004 after 19 years as an entertainer at Boggstown Inn Cabaret.

Mrs. Cox was a member of Blue Ridge Christian Union Church where she was a member of the Ladies Aid.

She was also a member of the Rhythm Bones Society.

## RBS Membership Directory

Bones players want to contact each other and RBS has received many requests for a Membership Directory. The Board at its BFVIII meeting voted to publish one. Since some members may not wish to have all of their personal information included, the Board directed that members be contacted and allowed to specify that certain information not be included. This contact information was included in the questionnaire sent with the dues renewal letter in the last newsletter.

The new directory is included as an insert in this newsletter. Since this is the first printing, there will be errors and an updated version will be distributed later. It is being sent only to current 2004-5 members though it includes 2003-4 members who may not yet have renewed their

## Recorded Bones Music

It's not often that we can review the works of one of our members.

Recently I received a CD from member Dave 'Black Bart' Boyles titled *Lisa Edgar & RazzMaTazz Live*. This is a Dixieland band that Dave has played with for years.

The liner notes state "They are a festive, funny, foot-stomping combo performing music from the Gay Nineties to the Roaring Twenties. This friendly, talented and exuberant band blends Ragtime, Dixieland and honky-tonk tunes giving their audiences plenty of opportunity to join in the singing and antics."

Dave plays rhythm bones on the CD. He has not attended the last few fests, but those of you who attended the early Fests will remember Dave's musical antics and his Bone-off with Spike Bones. There is rhythm bones playing on most every track of this very entertaining CD.

Again from the liner notes, "Dave learned bones from his West Virginia dad—the bones are beef ribs which are boiled, bleached, shaped and polished to a high shine. An old Irish tradition, playing the bones was later made popular by vaudeville performers. Dave plays standing up and dancing with the bones in both hands, a washboard (his trusty cymbal attached) a stick tambourine in his shoe and a shaker in his hop pocket. 'The Bone Man' has been with the band since 1985: he also plays with bluegrass and Celtic musicians—and even rock bands. Dave is a charter member of the Rhythm Bones Society and teaches at Milwaukee's Irish Fest where he is known as 'Professor Bones.'

Black Bart is the name that Dave sells his real bone bones. When you buy a set of Bart bones you receive a short pamphlet titled 'Responsibilities of a Bones Player.' It has good advice for the new bones player, but all of us can get something from it. Several people thought it should be read by more people and Dave gave us permission to reprint it (see Vol 4, No 4.)

To purchase a CD, contact [David Boyles, 7208 Andover Rd, Cedarburg, Wisconsin 53012. Price: \\$15 plus a](#)



## The Young Bones Player

As editor of the Young Bones Player column, I suggest to the Rhythm Bones Community that at the next National Festival that an effort is made to involve the children in the neighborhood. Experienced teachers of children could offer a workshop as part of the festival or concurrently, at a local library (or at another convenient site). With area press beforehand, children would attend.

If there is ever a Rhythm Bones Festival in New Bedford, MA, I would try to bring my students, and Jonathan Danforth is certainly starting to build a movement there. Others can certainly use Jonathan's project as a model for something in their own hometown: Something like what he did could happen earlier in the year at the next festival site. See his report below and a photograph on Page 8. While you are there, see my photograph also..

To the teachers of children, send your bones teaching events to Jonathan Danforth to be posted, so that all may know. And to the rest of you closet teachers of bones to children, send me your thoughts. If you know a child who plays bones, interview him or her today, and send me the results.

For the record, I have just started to teach my own students (450), and they are WOWED. Also, I am happy to confirm that a presentation of Bones and Jugband in Elementary School will be offered in March, 2005 in Boston, MA at the Massachusetts Music Educators Association Convention, and Adam Klein will be visiting my school in Lexington, MA in February to teach bones, opera and traditional music. Email me if you are interested in joining us at any event.

Enjoy Jonathan's story, a lone bones teacher among 60 or more. *Constance*

### Jonathan Danforth's Children's Workshop

I participated in my very first official bones-playing workshop for children this fall. The workshop was sponsored by the Acushnet Heights Neighborhood Improvement

Association, coinciding with the last Farmers' Market of the year in Clasky Common in New Bedford, MA. The workshop was the brainstorm of one of the farmers, Ed Silva, a friend of mine who enjoys folk music.

Pam Maloney, one of the people in charge of the Neighborhood Association, got a local lumber yard to donate a bunch of wood and cut it to shape; we ended up with 500 pairs of bones, which I then sanded down so the kids wouldn't get splinters. The bones were made of white pine, 3/4" by 1/4" by 6". This made for bones that were small enough for young hands to grasp easily, and cheap enough to be given away for free. They were straight rather than curved (which always makes bones harder to play for me), and were light enough to be a little harder to play (although this also made them soft enough to deal with in quantity).

I tested my teaching chops by giving lessons to kids at the Farmers' Market the week before the real thing. I found that determination was more of a factor in learning to play than either age or dexterity—but even those who didn't get the rattle in those first ten minutes (and many did!) still responded with enthusiasm. The workshop the following week (October 30) was rainy, but still fairly well-attended. The kids were all in costume for other Halloween-related parts of the day, so I and my wife Melissa got to teach bones to dragons, robots, princesses, and sumo wrestlers. After about an hour of teaching in batches of 5-10 kids, we all paraded around the park with bones and costumes. We had originally had a steam calliope scheduled to play with us, but that didn't work out, so we simply rattled along with the rhythm of our feet, and occasionally a round of a song like "Yankee Doodle" or "This Old Man" (which were all I could think of as marching music on the fly).

All in all, about 60 kids and Melissa and I had a great time making music in New Bedford. I left the celebration to attend the New England regional Bones Mini-Fest in northern Massachusetts hoping that I had made a difference-- and was proved right on

Halloween, when kids came up to my door and said

"Trick or — hey, you're the bones guy! I'm still practicing!" *Jonathan*

## Bones For Kids

The Young Bones Player column and the youth-oriented articles have a very great feel. I have a couple of kids who have seen me perform in church and are now my students. I have given them the last of my Joe Birl black plastic bones and need to find some small, inexpensive bones **that sound good** to give to really interested kids (I give a set of cut-in-half paint stirrers to most anyone. Most stores will give me a bundle when I tell them what they will be used for.)

I wonder if we could get someone to work up a special order of a thousand or maybe 10,000 sets of kid bones. We might write a grant or seek donations. Of course, it might take a bit of research to design the smaller bones correctly. If you have any thoughts, please talk to me or a Board Member. *Steve Wixson*

## Website of the Quarter

[www.motherearthnews.com/arc/905](http://www.motherearthnews.com/arc/905). This is *Mother Earth News'* website. Recently they updated their on-line archives and Jonathan Danforth discovered this old article from the March/April 1982 (#72) issue.

The article is titled *Playing the Bones* and was written by Pam Gross. There are photographs of member David Holt demonstrating how to hold and play the bones, so he must have been a contributor to the text.

There are instructions on how to make real bones, how to hold them, and how to produce the tap and the triplet. Then a few comments about playing to music.

This is not the most definitive description of rhythm bones playing, but not a bad place to send someone who wants a quick overview. *Steve Wixson*



## Ken Wolin Bones Fest Workshop Follow Up

Greetings fellow bones players!

I just finished my tour with "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band, and wanted to follow up on my Bones Fest Workshops with a brief recap of what we worked on before the holidays. After the New Year I'll be sure to summarize seven weeks on the road playing bones across the country.

My first workshop was snare drum rudiments applied to the bones and quad rolls. Teaching the rudiments would require a more hands-on approach, so I will focus this article on the quad roll (which is the basic technique I use to execute most of the standard rudiments of North American drumming.)

In the workshop we talked about breaking away from the triplet feel (tri-pe-let, 1-2-3, or PI-napple) in favor of the gallop feel ("RHY-thm bone" or "tippy-toe"). Begin by playing a 3-tap triplet with one hand. Now accent the first tap hard, then snap your wrist back and stop. I can't stress enough that this is not a continuous motion like the running triplets that has the tendency to become so ingrained. Make sure you speak loudly "RHY-thm bone" or "tippy-toe" while you practice this, it really helps.

[If any of you heard my improvisation of Ravel's Bolero rhythm, I play this exercise as a Latin groove by shifting the down beat to the upbeat and improvising with my opposite hand.]

Work on the for a while so you can freely go back and forth between the triplet feel 4 times in a row ("tri-pe-let, tri-pe-let, tri-pe-let, tri-pe-let" followed by the gallop feel 4xs ("RHY-thm bone, Rhy-thm bone, Rhy-thm bone, Rhy-thm bone")

The next stop begins with you opposite hand, which is your downbeat or foot-tap hand. Speak the word TA-ke-ti-na (thank you Greg), Wat-ter-mel-on (thank you Dutch) or 1-e-&-ah, 2-e-&-ah as you single tap each downbeat (tap on the word Ta, Wa, 1 or 2).

Next add you 3-tap hand, but for

now just single tap on the second part of the one word you find most comfortable to say (add a tap on the 2nd syllable, ke, ter or e);

Ta-ke-ti-na Wa-TER-melon 1-e-&-ah  
R L - - R-L - - R-L - -  
or

L R - - L-R - - L-R - -

The last step is filling in the rest of the pattern by changing the second tap to the 3-tap gallop stroke previously worked on until you have a roll, or running 32nd notes.

Another exercise is to drop-out your 3-tap hand every other word (ta-ke-ti-na, ta..., ta-ke-ti-na, ta...; or 1-e-&-ah, 2..., 1-e-&-ah, 2...)

Yes this did me a long time to work up, and no I can't play the roll as well with my opposite hand. However, this technique opened up so many new possibilities which I'd like to share with you in future installments.

Feel free to contact me with your feedback. Thanks, *Kenny Wolin* (9825 Lakeporte Drive, Burke, VA 22015, ekwol@verizon.net, 703-426-2743.

## Tips & Techniques The Rub

I just would like to "Rub Bones a Little" and reply to the wonderful *Tips & Techniques: Back to the Basics* article in RBP, Vol 6, No. 3, 2004.

I would like to introduce another movement for bone playing and yes it's the rub. I employ this rub by holding bones in conventional ways and with the ring finger, rub that bone with the stationary bone held by the index finger. It's quite effective when using rough surface bones and playing into a microphone. You will notice when you try the rub you also will get a snap initially, which gives a hollow sound.

To use this technique effectively try grooving vertical lines in the bones at the surfaces where they hit. I have also glued different materials and inlays of aluminum, brass etc. Just using a single obtrusion on each bone works well too. Great for Cajun and zydeco playing. This rub board, wash board effect and the initial rub snap are two new sounds you have in your arsenal now. *Dutch Kopp* Look me up

Mark Your Calendar  
And Plan to Attend

## Bones Fest IX

**We're Going Back to**  
Chattanooga and the  
Mountain Opry Building

July 8-10,  
2005

Three Days of,  
Fun, Food,  
Fellowship and  
the Best Bones  
Playing in the  
World

Preliminary  
Details in this  
and the Next

## Bones Calendar

**July 8-10, 2005.** Bones Fest IX. Chattanooga, TN hosted by Steve and Janet Wixson. Preliminary details in this newsletter.

**August 29-September 4, 2005.** NTCMA annual Festival with Bones and Spoons Context on September 3rd

.Don't forget our big 30th annual old-time music festival in Missouri Valley, Iowa. Over 600 performers on ten "sound" stages, including celebrities like Rex Allen Jr., Porter Wagoner, Cal Smith, Gordon Lightfoot, and many, many more. Visit our website: <http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com> *Bob*

# Results of Survey Questionnaire

Here are the results of Steve Brown's questionnaire sent with the last newsletter. Look for Steve's analysis in his next Editorial.

28 questionnaires were returned and the results are presented below:

1. Attended a previous Fest. Yes 85%, No 15%
2. Enjoyed the most. Informal jams 81%, individual performances 51%, public performances 55%, workshops 30% and family reunion environment 48%.
3. What type of music to perform with, live 79%, CD 44% (note some people checked both boxes)
4. How important is live music, very 29%, somewhat 48% and not very 25%.
5. What would make the Fest more enjoyable; if I could go to all of them (distance), get to know people better (name tags on Friday), good sound system, park car and walk to all activities, everything in one place in the same hotel, live band that can play many types of music suitable for bones playing, no major down time, local guided tour, scheduled organized jams (pass-offs, open jams), better food and food options, wine and beer, place to hang out afterwards, and late night jam sessions.
6. What previous activities to include in future Fests, all, most, more informal jamming, time to talk to people, historical display, bones marketplace.
7. What workshops? Beginners, beginner for spectators, intermediate, making bones, none, advanced-technical, from a video, rhythm percussion, how to perform with a band, and bone duets with other types of percussion
8. Bones market place. Yes 100%
9. Would you host a Bones Fest. Yes 32%, no 68%.

10. Where to hold Bones Fests. Within 700 miles, New England, Chattanooga, Las Vegas, Greensboro, close to Virginia, Louisville, Michigan, Florida, Ireland, Minnesota State Fair, east coast, mid-west, New Orleans, Washington, DC, and anywhere.
11. Best date for Bones Fest IX (see table below.)
12. Any known conflicts for this Fest. School starts late August.
13. Exclude from Membership Directory. Street address 7%, telephone number 11% and email 3%.
14. Newsletter ideas 25%
15. Other Comments for the Board 42%

Summary of Best Fest Dates in the format of yes/prefer/no in percent.

June 3-5, 81/7/11  
June 10-12, 85/7/7  
June 17-19, 84/4/7  
June 24-26, 84/6/4

July 8-10, 81/15/4  
July 15-17, 74/15/11  
July 22-24, 70/19/11  
July 29-31, 74/19/7

August 5-7, 78/11/11  
August 12-14, 81/11/7  
August 19-21, 74/11/15  
August 26-28, 70/11/19

## Preliminary Musings on Bones Fest IX

Several people have asked me to host Bones Fest IX and Janet and I accept. Since we hosted Bones Fest IV, we have some experience and hope to put on an even better Fest.

The results from the questionnaire are interesting and will be used by me and the Board to plan the event. One thing is obvious, people want more time to jam and hang out. Our preliminary thoughts are to again use our home for a Friday night reception, Saturday night dinner and Sunday morning brunch (with the brunch following the success of the Hibben's brunch at Bones Fest VII.) Sally

Carroll's workshops were so well received that they will be scheduled again. We will open up our house after scheduled events so people can relax, play more bones, play a little pool and cool off in our swimming pool. (Last one out please lock the door.)

Based in the questionnaire, the date favored was July 8-10, so that is the date for Bones Fest IX. This has the advantage of allowing people to combine with the 4th of July holiday long vacation.

We will return to the Mountain Opry Building with all of its old time charm and note that it is now air conditioned, a requirement for a July event.)

We are thinking about making a multi-channel recording the Fest with the possibility of releasing a Bones Fest Live CD. This will require lots of work and possibly copyright releases for the songs included. For a non-profit group producing a small number of CDs, copyright releases might not be that hard to obtain and reproduction fees might be reasonable. But who knows. It also might be time to professionally video the event with the intent of producing a DVD to release to Public Television Stations for broadcast.

Both live and recorded music will be used. At this time, I am thinking that we can provide our own live music as many members play another instrument. I might organize some locals for Saturday night.

Constance Cook would like to interest local youth to join us for some sort of a workshop on Saturday. If a few people show up early on Friday, we can visit a few close-by schools, play a few tunes and invite students to the Mountain Opry building. After their workshop, we can invite them up on the stage for their first performance.

There is plenty of space for a Bones Market Place and the requested historical display.

As with Bones Fest IV, we can invite the regular Friday night Mountain Opry audience and others from the Chattanooga area to join us for Saturday nights festivities.

Obviously this is all preliminary and if you have ideas to make the fest better, contact me by phone or email.

(Highlights—Continued from page 1)

in a year. As more and more members gathered, little groups of passers-by started forming to see what this strange noise was all about. I would estimate that a couple dozen ordinary people learned the basics of how to play the bones, before the Fest even began! Some of them, I believe, even bought sets of bones from members who had brought their wares to sell.

The Fest got going with some food and jamming over at the Reston Used Book Shop. We were graciously accommodated by the store owner, Bud Burwell, who took the noise and the chaos right in stride, even when a sudden downpour forced us all to squeeze everything into the smaller indoor space. As I heard more than one person say, you can't have a *real* picnic without a little rain, let alone a real festival. Well, we got our share of rain that day and the next, not all at once, but enough to keep us indoors much of the time.

The next highlight for me was the workshops. Workshops had been attempted before in an impromptu way, but this was the first time we had ever tried to get a bunch of real workshops organized, so that everyone could have something to learn or teach. Kenny Wolin deserves particular mention here since he taught workshops during all three days of the Fest (read Kenny's follow-up article on page 5.) Ev Cowett and Jim Lande also taught the beginners' and bones-making workshops, respectively. Response to the workshops in general was very positive, and I'm sure we'll be doing more of them in the future.

As with every Bones Fest, most of the time was spent listening to our members take a few minutes to show what they could do with the bones, no matter what their level of expertise, musical style, or performing experience. Rather than look at each member's performance, as has been done in this newsletter in the past, I'd like to give a few thoughts about the performances taken as a whole.

First of all, it must be said (and in fact was said by many) that each year at Bones Fest raises the bar on excellence and innovation in bones-playing. The mission of the Rhythm

Bones Society is to continue, promote and improve the playing of the rhythm bones, and we as a group of players are certainly doing just that, as anyone who attends these Fests can tell you. As usual, the variety of performance was impressive—who would think, with an instrument as obscure as ours is, that you'd hear so many styles of music, played in so many ways—some performers played with the Fest band (the Anthem Music band), some played to music they brought with them, some played with other members or even accompanied themselves. In some performances, the bones were backing up other music, and in others, the bones themselves had the spotlight.

The good humor of the performances stands out in my mind. Several of the acts were comedic, including Bill Vits' Spike Jones tribute, as well as Steve Brown and Steve Wixson's loving send-up of Jerry Mescher's and Bernie Worrell's amazing brother-and-sister act. In between numbers, we were usually laughing either at MC Al Cowett's introductions or at Mel Mercier's wit from the back of the room.

Every year, there's some pattern in the performances that stands out to me, and becomes what amounts to a theme for the year in my mind. At Bones Fest VII, in Louisville, that pattern was the number of family-related acts that were playing there. This year what struck me was the level of innovation in technique and the sharing of ideas and licks. We were gifted this past year with an increased number of percussionists. By this I mean people who have mastered a number of rhythm instruments in addition to playing the bones. Besides all the usual styles of playing (old-time, Irish, vaudeville tunes, and so on), I noticed that there was what amounted to a new style of playing, which incorporated elements and rudiments used in the playing of other instruments. Now, obviously, we've had plenty of fantastic percussionists in the gang up until now, but this year I have to say we reached some kind of critical mass, and there seemed to be a lot more "percussionism" (if you'll pardon the phrase) in general use.

Kenny's workshops certainly helped me notice this, but there were a lot of performances where you could see that people were thinking outside the traditional confines of bones playing. I would see people comparing variations in the hallway, or back at the hotel under the gazebo (where we also got to see Mel's incredible dexterity with pretzel sticks). That is extremely encouraging, in the sense that it means that we're talking not only about preserving a set of traditions, but also about growing and expanding into new ones.

Sunday's public performance in the back yard of the Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Herndon (next door to Reston) took everyone's efforts to pull off, but was terrific, precisely because of everyone's help. Steve Brown deserves special mention for MC'ing the show, and Steve Wixson for bringing out his CD player so that people could play their bones backup music after the band had finished. A fair number of folks showed up from the local area, and were rewarded for sticking it out to the end by sets of Joe Birl's patented Rhythm Bones, raffled off as prizes.

To me, this scene illustrated the Fest: after a number of performances, Steve's CD player, which had to be manually spin-started like an old airplane propeller, finally died completely—but no one stopped rattling! We ended the Fest with members playing bones along with a variety of instruments and singing, continuing the tune that had been playing, while dancing the (now traditional) conga line around the lawn. I remember thinking at the time that that moment was a perfect symbol of the Fest, or indeed of any Bones Fest: hard work, technical difficulty, good music, good fun, and most of all, good people. *Jonathan Danforth*



The power of peer teaching! First grade boy teaches a friend to play bones in Constance Cook's general music class in Lexington, MA. Photo by Constance.



Jonathan Danforth in a kid's workshop. See his article on Page 4.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 7, No. 1 2005

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## Executive Director's Column

I want to thank all of the respondents to the recent Member Questionnaire. As your Executive Director, I think it's important that the Board understand what you want and try to reflect that in our planning. Although only 27 members filled out the questionnaire, we were pleased that we received the response that we did. I am always interested in hearing from you, if you did not fill out the questionnaire please feel free to call or send in the questionnaire now.

We had some interesting responses with 22 of the 27 respondents having attended bones fests. Informal jamming received the most responses as preferred bones fest activity with workshops only receiving 7 responses. Workshops are new

to Bones Fests and we got many more favorable responses at the Fest, so I'm not sure this is an accurate representation of how most folks experienced the workshops. I will say we will have a number of new workshops at bones fest this year and encourage your input. We also hope to encourage jamming by creating more opportunities.

Live music versus recorded music has been a topic of discussion both at Bones Fests and in the planning of them. The expense of the music and legality of using pre-recorded music has prompted some serious discussion. Interesting to note that 15 of the 27 respondents preferred live

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Ronnie McShane

Few bones players can claim the accomplishments of Ronnie McShane. He was a member of the ground breaking group, Ceoltoiri Cualann in the sixties and performed on both radio and television extensively with them as well as recording a number of records. In addition he was a performer with the Chieftains, the most popular traditional Irish musical group of all times, recorded three records with them and toured both Europe and Australia. A personal friend of the musical icon Sean O'Riada, he lived with him a family in the West of Ireland where O'Riada recorded films and lectured at the Univ of Cork. He has performed both in mot pictures and on the World Stage, but for his performances and accomplishments remains relatively unknown outside of Traditional Music and bones playing circles. *The Companion To Irish Traditional Music* describes Ronnie's playing, "Ronnie McShane was the first bones player to perform with Ceoltoiri Cualann and O'Riada wove his and precise rhythms into the fabric of the sound with a fine sensibility to orchestral color."

When I mentioned his name to World renowned flute player Kevin Crawford recently after a concert by his group Lunasa,

he became transfixed for a moment and acknowledged him, "Ah yes, Ronnie McShane!"

But for me it was nearly 30 years ago that I became acquainted with the bones playing of Ronnie McShane. On a whim, I purchased my first Chieftains album, enchanted by the instruments on the cover, but never having heard them before. There was a pair of bones on the cover, and on the liner notes of the last track,

*(Continued on page 6)*



Ronnie McShane performing at the 2004 All-Ireland Bones Competition  
Photograph by Steve Johnson

## Editorial

Janet and I are really looking forward to hosting the upcoming Bones Fest. Over the past two years we have painted both the inside and the outside of our house and are reworking our 25 year old swimming pool. The people will be interesting and the food will be outstanding. There will be some new workshops. Details will be sent soon.

I must again report the death of a member, Will Kear. A short obituary is in this newsletter. Over the next couple of decades the world will lose a lot of bones players: people who learned to play at the end of the minstrel era which was the heyday of rhythm bones playing with thousands and thousands of people owning a set of bones. Our mission is clear; pass on the rhythm bones to the next generation. Thanks, Will, for doing part of this job.

Member Charlie Obert once mentioned bones and belly dancing together. I asked him about this and his reply is below.

New member Guy Gillette tells us about a cowboy bones player. He also sent me a CD and I made it the Recording of the Quarter. He and his performing brother, Pipp, are hoping to make it to Bones Fest IX.

And last but not least, thanks to Jonathan Danforth for his editorial assistance with the newsletter.

## Letter to the Editor

My wife Cindy and I attend Renfest, the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. We were part of a group doing a short act for the Feast of Fantasy, a 2+ hour sit down several course meal with entertainment. Cindy and I were part of the belly dance act - 3 dancers, a drummer, and myself alternating on bones and jumbush, a Turkish fretless banjo played like an oud. I played bones in a percussion only piece in the act

Our piece always ended with the brass quartet upstairs playing the theme from "I dream of Jeannie", and I got in the habit of running upstairs

and playing bones with them. It was amusing.

Cindy is a dancer so we have been involved in the belly dance community here for awhile

By email, I mentioned Stephen Brown about my playing bones with middle eastern music, and I got this reply back.

"I've been playing Doumbec long before I started playing bones, and sell through the mid east drum company, interestingly enough. I've sat in with a Turkish musician playing bones, it is interesting stuff. Also there is a very good doumbec player from New York, Raqi Dansiger who is also a very good bones player, so everything is connected I guess."

Take care, *Charlie Obert*

## Red Foley's Recording of Alabama Jubilee

One of the best songs for bones playing is *Alabama Jubilee* with its lyrics "Old Deacon Jones when he rattled his bones." It can be a challenge as it's normally played fast.

I have only one bones recording of it by Red Foley with Francis Craig on the bones. Craig was a band leader in Nashville and his most famous recording was *Near You*.

One day while passing through Nashville, I stopped by the Vanderbilt Heard Library. Teresa Gray, Public Services Archivist, found the following information.

"There's a biography of Craig called *Near You: Francis Craig, Dean of Southern Maestros* by Robert W. Ikard. In skimming through the book, I found a reference on page 8 that Craig was influenced by ragtime as a child and taught himself to play the bones using the remains of a beef roast. His main instrument was the piano, but he also played the violin.

"On page 112, it mentions that Craig had a "cameo" on Foley's *Alabama Jubilee* and shortly thereafter released *Play Them Bones* for Decca Records in 1952."

His rosewood bones are on display in the Vanderbilt Music Department.  
*Steve Wixson*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Bones Calendar

Here are a few items from the Calendar that webmaster Jonathan Danforth keeps on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**May 2.** All-Ireland Bone Playing Competition, part of the Abbeyfeale Fleadh. Contact Steve Brown or [www.fleadhbythefeale.com](http://www.fleadhbythefeale.com). The Junior Bone Playing Competition will be held on May 1.

**June 4.** Showing of documentary film on John "Mr. Bones" Burrill with food and mini Bones Fest in Lexington, MA. Contact. Steve Brown or [bhockett@music-for-robin.org](mailto:bhockett@music-for-robin.org) for details.

**July 8-10.** Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, TN hosted by Steve Wixson. Registration form will be mailed soon.

**August 29-September 4.** National Traditional Country Music Association Festival and Contests with Bones Contest on Saturday, September



## Cowboy Bones

Here is a bit of documenting 'bones playing cowboys.' We were playing in Cody, WY in the Summer of '03 and met 86 year old Montana rancher Marvin Bell. Mr. Bell was telling us about working on the Flying D Ranch in Montana in the 1930's with cowboy Paddy Ryan, who was born in the 1890's in Miles City, played the bones and taught Mr. Bell to play them. They had a "cowboy band" together and Mr. Bell was very excited about meeting a present day bones player.

An interesting aside, the Flying D today is owned by Ted Turner and he runs Bison on it.

To change the subject, I emailed Jonathan Danforth trying to find a dependable supplier of wholesale wooden bones and have not, as yet, heard back from him. Do you know of any ??? We sell "bone bones" that we make ourselves in our Camp St. Cafe & Store here in Crockett, but have a hard time keeping enough of them in stock. We would like to have wooden bones to sell as an alternative. *Guy Gillette*

## Recorded Bones Music

From the twang of the guitar on the first track to the duet on the last track, *Ridin' With Dayton* opens new music for bones playing for me. New member Guy Gillette and his brother Pipp, known as the Gillette Brothers, have produced an album that is neither old time or country, it is cowboy. The renditions are fresh and Guy's bones playing is clean and crisp. I've known for a while that rhythm bones were a cowboy instrument, be it back pocket or saddlebag, and this CD proves it. My only regret is there is bones playing on only two tracks, though track 4 is near a bones solo. However, I will be playing my bones to many tracks on this CD. Check out their website at [www.campstreetcafe.com/](http://www.campstreetcafe.com/) and click on Camp St. Store for ordering information on this and other CDs. Also check out the cow bones photos. *Steve Wixson*

## Camptown Shakers

Have you ever heard our CDs? They are sold at civil war reenactments and national battlefield parks like Gettysburg. We play all the time at Gettysburg, in all the taverns and civil war stuff, or just search for our web page, just do a search on the "Camptown Shakers."

We do old time music and minstrel songs to the set up of a minstrel band Jaw bone, fiddle banjo, and I play bones and tambourine. I have a different style something that I made up, sort of marching drum rhythm with bones, didn't know how to do it just played what came out, I play bones on about half the songs and tambourine on the other. We are considered one of the most authentic (gut strings and all.) You might look at George Wonderlick web page, "wonder banjos," as he makes all the instruments and a fine bone player too.

We are so busy playing gigs (we will do the Philly folk fest, and such, the dead heads love us, We would love to play live for you if possible one day, but we live up here. I would love to hear 1000 bones played to our music. Get a CD from 'Tracy at the Serenade' add, and check us out, I'm sure you will love playing along with us. *King Bennett*

## Tips & Techniques

Have you heard someone play a lick and wondered how they do it. Me too and I've found a way to figure it out.

I use my computer and a free program called *Cool Edit 96*. I hook my music system up to my computer's audio or sound card (simple and Radio Shack sells the required cable.)

I record and playback the lick using *Cool Edit*. Then I highlight a short section and loop it so it plays over and over (it takes a few tries to highlight the section so it starts on the right beat.) Then I select Edit and lower the sample rate for playback which slows down the lick.

You can expand the highlighted

section so you can see the bones clicks. In my experience, at slow speed you can hear the difference between the left and right hand bones and figure out what each is doing.

After you master the lick in slow time, you can increase the sample rate until you can play it at regular speed.

*Cool Edit 96* is freeware and I will have copies available at Bones Fest IX. I will also lead a workshop for anyone who would like to learn how to do this.

With this technique, you can turn most any kind of rhythm instrument pattern into a bones lick. *Steve Wixson*

## Website of the Quarter

**rhythm-bones.com**. Member Scott Miller won the 2004 NTCMA bones contest. He would like to be a professional bones player and decided to put up a website as an advertising tool. As you will see, he has put a lot of time into the website and there is lots of good information. (Note the hyphen in Scott's web address.)

You can also check out his press kit at [rhythm-bones.com/nav/presskit-ntcmabonescontest.html](http://rhythm-bones.com/nav/presskit-ntcmabonescontest.html). Scott says, "I should warn you that my website shamelessly promotes me as a bones player for hire." The key word here is not shamelessly, but promote. If he or we don't promote ourselves, no one else will. Folks interested in promoting themselves might note that the press kit needs sound clips and good reproduction-quality photos, which he will upload soon.

This website is a good place to start if you are thinking about putting up a website of your own.

I recently found this story on Scott on the internet. I bet it was generated from his news release. Maybe I should send out a press release! The website address is very long, [www.stltoday.com/stltoday/neighborhoods/stories.nsf/southwestcityjournal/news/story/7B65370B88E7C67E86256FC500021741?OpenDocument](http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/neighborhoods/stories.nsf/southwestcityjournal/news/story/7B65370B88E7C67E86256FC500021741?OpenDocument) Or do a Google search on Scott Miller *Steve*

*(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)*

music, with 8 preferring prerecorded music, and 4 respondents checking both. 8 respondents placed live music as very important, while 13 reported live music as being somewhat important, and five feeling it was not important, and one did not respond. It is clear to me that both live and pre-recorded music have a place at Bones Fests. I think it is important to include both in the planning. The legality of pre-recorded music should not be an issue as long as we are a non-profit organization using this music for educational purposes. I have some idea's about how we can provide live music for the fests and will discuss this in the Director's Column.

Providing a bones market place at bones fests has been a personal interest of mine, and I was interested to see 25 respondents answering yes to this. I think its a good idea to encourage bones making among our members and provide a place for members to sell their wares, give our members a place to sell their personal products like recordings or instructional materials, and provide a service to the members to make products available to them. In addition I would like to see table space and advertising offered to vendors at minimal fees to help support Bones Fests.

The topic of the location of Bones Fest is an interesting one, most people want it close to their home, but don't want to sponsor it. 6 of those brave souls offered to sponsor a Bones Fest with 2 of them already having done so. I would propose to send a Bones Fest Host Guide to each of those responding who have not hosted (its not too late if you would like a Host Guide yourself, see Steve Wixson) Of the respondents offering to sponsor a fest, one is in Dublin, Ireland! Some of the suggestions for location include 7 requesting the East coast or New England, 4 Chattanooga or Tennessee 3 Michigan or the Mid West, 2 for Florida, one each for Las Vegas, Guilford College, Greensboro, NC, Louisville, KY. and New Orleans, and five were left blank. Other suggestions including, "driving distance from Washington DC" "700 miles from Quebec" and "Close to the state of

Virginia". It's clear to me that accessibility is very important, which means having a major airport close. Also I think member sponsorship is a must, that being sponsored by a member of the organization who lives in the locality.

We asked for comments about what would make bones fest more enjoyable and the most frequent reply was more jamming. I, too, noticed the lack of jamming as opposed to Bones Fest VII. Perhaps missing our unofficial Jam Master Walt Watkins had an impact on that.

Lets keep the lines of communication open. Call, write or email any of the Board with your comments. Having done it, I will say it is a monumental task to host a Bones Fest. I would like to see fests presented by Regional Committees where committee members can share in some of the responsibility. In this

## When Two Members Get Together on Stage

My brother Laz and I, as the duo Gemini, played a concert for children and families with the Grand Rapids Symphony in February of 2005. They are a fabulous Symphony and the concert was in the spectacular DeVos Hall in Grand Rapids Michigan. It was a blustery winter day, with weather advisories galore, but still well over a thousand enthusiastic kids and their families were in the audience. Perfect, right? What could be better?

Well, to be able to share the stage with fellow RBS member and bones player extraordinaire, Bill Vits. Bill is the principal percussionist of the Grand Rapids Symphony and, like me, learned to play the bones from Percy Danforth in the mid 1970's.

My brother and I always include a bones number in our concerts, but on this occasion we added another tune and invited Bill out from the back of the orchestra where he usually stands, surrounded by his wide array of percussion instruments, and he and I played a bones duet, with Laz accompanying us on fiddle. We snapped, rattled and rolled the bones, we traded phrases back and forth, we

piannissimoed, we fortissimoed, and the audience loved it all and rewarded us with a huge ovation. *Sandor*

## The Young Bones Player

Enjoy the story on the next page of the principal who teaches bones to his school, students and faculty included, submitted by Sandor Slomovits.

Meanwhile, 12 of my students and my principal from the Hastings School in Lexington, MA as well as a parent and traditional artists Jonathan Danforth (you all know him) and Paul Sedgewick, a bones player and banjo scholar (roped in by Rob Rudin and myself, and new to the Rhythm Bones Society) presented at the Massachusetts Music Educators Association Conference. Meet Paul at Mr. Bones Day in Lexington, MA on June 4, 2005. Be there!

Plans grow for a beginning and advanced beginner's workshop for children at 4pm on that day. I am hoping to have a jaw harp workshop too for children. (Any volunteers?). I have to relate, that thought the bones are well-loved at the Hastings, it is clear to me that the jaw harp is IT at my school. With bones a close second, of course.

Hastings students stunned the Massachusetts Music Educators Association conference in Boston at the Park Plaza Hotel this year. Students from grades 1-5 arrived at the hotel and marched through it playing bones all the while, till they arrived at the Jugband workshop. They played and demonstrated for music teachers, and helped me teach the music teachers how to play bones, as well as demonstrating jaw harp and washtub bass as well. Teachers left, some exclaiming it was the best workshop they had been too, and vowed to teach their children how to play the bones. One colleague just emailed me for music (Cotton Mill Girls, by Hedy West), and informed me that she has gotten her school custodian to build 4 stand-up washtub basses! She asked me for my bones source, and I referred her to Mike Passerotti.

Meanwhile, I am strongly

*(Continued on page 5)*

(Young Bones Player—Continued from page 4)

considering flying down to the Mountain Opry (BFI) to get help children's workshops off the ground at the national festival. Email me if you are interested in helping, but be warned, my email service is erratic right now!

Stay tuned (we hope) for a report from Adam Klein on his visit to the Hastings School in February, and perhaps a report from Rob Rudin or Paul Sedgwick or me on their visit to the Hastings School one Friday. Also, Rob promised to write a review of Stephen Brown's presentation on the history of the bones at the Revels Salon in Watertown, MA in February, 2005. What does this have to do with youth? One of my students was there

## When the Principal Plays Bones

I taught my friend Bill Loyd to play the bones in 1979. He was a third grade teacher at Paddock Elementary in Milan, Michigan at the time. Already an accomplished musician on flute and trumpet, he quickly mastered the basics of the bones and soon became a good two handed player. Then, gifted and dedicated teacher that he was, he began teaching the bones to his students. He bought a box of tongue depressors at a pharmacy and gave a pair to each child. Once the children got the hang of the tap and roll, Bill gave them all a set of Percy Danforth bones, made by Ray Schairer. By the end of the school year, every child in his class could play the bones and the school found it necessary to institute "bones hours" — times when the bones were allowed to be played!

Today, Loyd is principal at the same school, still plays the bones and continues to teach his students to play them. Often, his graduation present to his graduating fifth graders is a set of bones.

This year, Loyd upped the ante. As an early holiday present to his entire staff of forty eight, he distributed bones at a November all school assembly concert. While my brother, Laz, played a fiddle tune, Bill and I

played dueling bones. Then he invited several teachers who were already proficient on the bones to join us on stage and we all jammed. Finally, we gave a brief tutorial to all the rest of the teachers and staff and they all joined us in a rousing snap-and-roll-along. Over fifty pairs of bones clacking away simultaneously is probably not worthy of inclusion in the Guinness Book of World Records, but it is noteworthy, and the kids in the audience will certainly remember it.

And Loyd is not done yet. He has informed all his staff, with tongue firmly in cheek, that their yearly professional evaluations will now include testing for proficiency on the

## Update on Barry Patton

Barry Patton is another bones player who gets a lot of stage time performing with the Byron Berline Band. They just returned from a shoot on the HBO set for the series finale of the 1870 western show called *Deadwood* (see your program guide for times.) The shoot took four days, and he doesn't know how much air time they will get.

In April, they will be in China for a 10 city tour that includes Beijing and Shanghai playing bluegrass and western swing for Chinese audiences.

Since the first rhythm bones artifacts were found in China, maybe Barry will find some native Chinese bones players.

The band recently opened for an Amy Grant concert in Texas and will play in Oklahoma City with country stars Toby Keith, Vince Gill and newcomer Katrina Elam. I am jealous.

[www.barrybonespatton.com/](http://www.barrybonespatton.com/) is Barry's website and email him at [barry@barrybonespatton.com/](mailto:barry@barrybonespatton.com) He sells bones made from osage orange wood and a bones instructional video.

If you would like to hear the Byron Berline Band, go to [doublestop.com/](http://doublestop.com/), click Catalog, then CDs & MP3s. Then enjoy and play along on your bones (but note that Barry is one of the fastest bones players around and Byron plays some songs very fast.)  
*Steve Wixson*

# Mark Your Calendar And Plan to Attend Bones Fest IX

**We're Going Back to**  
Chattanooga and the  
Mountain Opry Building

July 8-10,  
2005

Three Days of,  
Fun, Food,  
Fellowship and  
the Best Bones  
Playing in the  
World

Program and  
Registration  
Form will be in

## Obituary for Will Kear

Member William M. Kear died on March 13, 2005 at age 82. Will joined RBS in 2000 and attended most of our Bones Fests. He learned to play the bones in 1937 from a boy from Kentucky. He loved to play to country, bluegrass and bluegrass gospel music and performed the latter in his church. In his membership application he added "I love to play them."

He was recruited into RBS by member John Davis who passed on the news of his death. His obituary from the newspaper stated "he enjoyed gardening, playing the spoons/bones and maintained a lifelong ambition to

(Ronnie McShane—Continued from page 1)

*Kerry Slides*, it said, "For the finale of the record the Chieftains had a great wild time and were joined by an old friend, and bone man, Ronnie McShane (he was met in the street). It became a joyous reunion and a fine, ensemble piece of calculated abandon to finish off the day." The tune proved some raucous abandon, and has followed me around since that time, having had a strong influence on my playing.

But who was Ronnie McShane, this almost mythical bones player, I often asked myself. The answer would come from Ireland, when in 2003 I had the great pleasure of meeting the man in person at the All Ireland Bones Playing Competition in Abbeyfeale, West Limerick. Eventually it leads to this article you have before you.

Ronnie was reached at his home in Dublin where he lives with his wife Vera. After a round of, "Top of the morning's, Steve Wixson asked Ronnie, "Where were you born?"

"Well I was born in Dublin into a theater family. Most of my people worked in the theater, my father worked in the theater, his father worked in the theater, my mother worked in the theater, my brother and myself of course. I come from a large family five brothers and three sisters. My father played the mandolin and he taught me the mandolin. I used to play on spoons, but not the traditional way on spoons. I used to play tea spoons, and held them like bones in my hand, to accompany my father.

"The only time I ever saw the bones was in the theater, and that was when the theater used to do variety. They done the minstrel show, the black and white minstrel show, it was famous in those days. You couldn't do it now — you'd be shot. That was the first place I heard the bones, but then I used to listen to an old English or American bone player playing the bones on the radio. I used to play two slates and stuff like that, bits of slates when I was coming home from school and rattling them."

Ronnie graduated from the National School and needed to go to work, but work at that time was hard to come by

in Ireland, which left him with a dilemma.

"I didn't particularly want to go in to the theater when everyone was in the theater. I was the second eldest, and I done various little jobs around Dublin and it wasn't easy getting work. I eventually went into the Irish Army and I stayed in the Army for five years. In the Army, I used to do barrack variety, entertain with a small group around various places, in the hospitals and institutions. Stuff like that because I not only play the bones, but I'm also a banjo mandolin player. I used to have the old mandolin in the jeep when I was riding around some where, camping some where or where ever we'd be with the Army, I'd play a few tunes, stuff like that.

I never really got into the bones until I left the Army and went into the Abbey theater. Now it was the Queens theater at the time, because the Abbey Theater, the National Theater, had burned down. The Abbey Theater ensemble had moved over to the Queens and I was working in the Queens at the time. The musical director of the Abbey Theater was Sean O'Riada."

John Reidy, who changed his name to Sean O'Riada in the 1950's, was one of the most influential people in Irish music. Musician, Composer, Director, Radio and Television personality, he is credited with bringing traditional Irish music into the ensemble setting by creating the group Ceoltoiri Cualann. In addition it was he who brought the Bodhran (Irish drum) into acceptance as a musical instrument from a once a year anomaly on St. Stephens Day. Ronnie began a long standing friendship with him which started at the Abbey Theater in Dublin.

"Now there was a play coming on. The Abbey done all the National plays, *O'Casey* and all the rest. This particular play by the Kerry playwright called Brian McMahon, *The Honey Spike*, had this scene on stage of the travelers like the gypsies in Ireland. There's a tradition in Ireland, that they have a dance and they call it the wren boys. All the males dress up, straw covered their heads and everything and they'd dance

around. They normally had music and they got musicians together from around Dublin. They got Paddy Maloney (Irish Pipes), Sean Potts (Tin Whistle), John Kelly (fiddle) who has passed away now, Sonny Brogan (accordion), all the members of the original Ceoltoiri Cualann."

Ronnie was working around the theater, but was not playing music with the group at this point.

"Now at that time I was doing property master and sound effects at the Abbey. Brian Mc Mahon, who's also dead now, said, "we need a bone player. You have to have a bone player with the wren boys." So Sean O'Riada says "we'll have to have a look around."

Ronnie was listening to this at the back of the stage and relayed his experiences rattling slates and tea spoons. He soon had his first job as professional bones player.

Ronnie began performing as a regular part of the group at the performances of the Honey Spike. Soon it was to lead to more than that. Sean O'Riada was very impressed with the sound he got from the group on the stage and later on he said "lads we'll go for a pint, and we'll have a chat about it." He suggested we form a group and they eventually called the group Ceoltoiri Cualann.

"Now the amount of stuff Ceoltoiri Cualann did in those years, I was with them for nearly 14 years, was colossal, but they didn't do a lot of touring, it was all radio work we done. We had a radio program, *Fleadh Cheoil an Raidio*; we also had a television program *Reachaireacht an Riadaigh*."

Ronnie would play the bones as directed by Sean O'Riada, who would arrange and direct each member of the group.

"Now for instance, we done the back ground music for (the movie version of) the *Playboy of the Western World* with Siobhan McKenna. There's one particular character, Old Martin, and he used to have a particular rattling and sound on the bones when he came in. For instance, it took a little while to learn it, but he used to have to bump bump bump bump rrrrrummmppp bump every

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(Continued from page 6)

time he walked in, it was bump bump bump bump rrrrrmmmmpppp bump, so it was single clicks and then into a twirl, and back again into a little singles. There was another guy who had a different sound, so each member of the cast had a different sound of the bones, and I had to learn all this. All this kind of stuff Sean always taught me, taught me a lot of this."

Around this time Sean moved his family down to the *Gaeltacht* in West Cork, an all Irish speaking area. Eventually he convinced Ronnie to come down with them to make films of Irish life for the television programs. Although it was an amazing experience speaking Irish everyday, it was very difficult commuting the 200 miles one way back to Dublin to see his family. When the film business began to dry up, Ronnie moved back to Dublin, but did not want to return to the theater. He and his family decided to emigrate to London to get a job in the Hotel business.

"Now when I was in London, I used to get calls, come over and do a concert. I kept in touch with a lot of the Ceoltoiri and a lot of traditional people. I played, little bits of traditional concerts and stuff.

"Now I was working in a hotel in the west end of London. I was on nights and was the head night concierge. I finished work and was going down to get me a bus or whatever. I'm walking down street and people are just starting to come out. I bumped into Paddy Maloney and said what are you doing here. He said we're just over to do a recording in the studios. He said, "You know I'd love to have you, are you available?" That was the first record I done with the Chieftains." (Paddy Maloney is a former member of Ceoltoiri Cualann, and the leader of the Chieftains, world renowned Irish traditional group)

"After meeting Paddy and doing the record with them, Paddy contacted me again, from Ireland. "Would I like to do a tour with the Chieftains?" I said all right. This was at the time that Peadar Mercier passed away and they were down one man, obviously.

"Now the problem was they wanted a Bodhran player as well. I had to start

really learning the bodhran. I had Sean O'Riada's bodhran, which gave me a lift in it's self, having his bodhran, if you know what I mean.

"The first gig that I went to with the Chieftains was in London, the Crystal Palace. There was at least 4000 people there and on the bill was people like Eric Clapton, and stuff like that. So it was very interesting, I needn't tell you."

After touring, the Chieftains were scheduled to go back into the studio for one of their most ambitious recordings of the time. It was a recording based on *Napoleon Bonaparte*, featuring the Irish singer Dolores Keane and bodhran player Kevin Coneff. Ronnie can be heard through out the record from the opening of the *Chattering Magpie* and through the title track its self.

Playing with Paddy Maloney was a lot like playing with Sean O'Riada, Ronnie says. "Oh yeah, Paddy was very like Sean and he learned a lot from Sean. They had a very good relationship in relation to how to arrange music, and that was the secret of Ceoltoiri Cualann. They wasn't just a diddley diddley dee, Irish group, they played in the form of orchestration. Each individual had his turn, if you like, and Sean was out to bring this out."

"Then after that, Paddy said "We're off to Australia, do you fancy going?" I said I'll have a word with my boss, who lucky enough was an Irishman in London, and he said, "Yeah Ronnie, go ahead." So I went off for two weeks.

The first thing we done was the Sydney Opera House, which was absolutely amazing. We were on television. On these type of things you spend more than you make, but I really enjoyed it cause I always wanted to see Australia. Ah then, another tour come up, and we done Copenhagen, Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich. That was something really great."

It was around this time that Ronnie received a call from an old friend, Vincent Dowling, who was an Actor and Director from the Abbey Theater. Vincent was involved in a production of the *Playboy of the Western World*

on the World Stage in London.

Vincent asked Ronnie if he would be interested in doing the music for the production. It was Vincent's idea to do the entire show with just percussion, with Ronnie playing the parts as he had in the movie version. "And it came off very well, very well," Ronnie remembers.

Although Ronnie enjoyed his time with the Chieftains, he was after all, employed full time in a prestigious position at a London Hotel and could not continue to take time off as the Chieftains began to tour almost constantly.

"I done one other thing with them, their first concert on the Albert Hall in London. The strange thing about it was about a year later I was invited to go to it, and I was sitting in the audience with my wife. Paddy Maloney called me up on stage to play with them. On the stage at the time there were people like Sinead O'Connor and a lot of the Irish artists. But it was very funny me leaving the seats in the Gallery, and trying to.. The Albert hall's a big place, and trying to find the stage door and trying to get in, and eventually when I did get in past the security I walked straight in, playing the bones in me hand That was a nice entrance, you know."

Ronnie continued to work and live in London for many years, but kept in touch with the members of Ceoltoiri Cualann, although Sean O'Riada passed away in 1971. Once a year they would gather as a tribute to the man who brought them together.

"I go down every year to Cuil Aodha. Sean O'Riada's family have a little get together to remember him. We actually go into the grave yard, the members of Ceoltoiri Cualann like Eamon de Buitlear and Sean Keane. We play tunes for him at the grave. He's buried in St. Dominic's graveyard in Cuil Aodha.

"Some funny things have happened. Martin Faye has a very black sense of humor. I'm playing down there and I dropped a bone in the crowded little grave yard. Every head stone is done in Gaelic, a crowded little graveyard. I dropped a bone, "Pick it up," he said,

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"but look around, you might find a better one."

Ronnie retired from the Hotel business several years ago and has since moved back to Dublin. He makes his own bones from rib bones he gets at the butcher, although he still has the original pair given to him by Brian McMahon during the production of the *Honey Spike*. He continues to play in local sessions, and for local charities and nursing homes.

"I'm playing this evening, St.Patricks Day, a small concert at one of the Irish clubs. We have lots of GAA, Gaelic Athletic Association Clubs, in Ireland, sponsored mostly by the government, and the Gaelic Football and the rest of it. At one of these clubs, I'm playing with a bodhran player, box player, whistle player, flute player, banjo player. Then I play every Wednesday. I also do quite a few charity things around, you know the usual. I'm not forced into it I just love it." There's no doubt about it, you can see it in his bones! *Steve Brown*

**Recordings featuring Ronnie McShane:** Ronnie is on one cut from *Chieftains 5, Kerry Slides* at the end of side 2. He can be heard through out *Bonneparts Retreat, Chieftains 6*. Both of these recording should be available from one of the large on line companies like Amazon.com. Although Ceoltoiri Cualann made a number of recordings, few seem to be available. The Gael Linn web listed a couple. Ossian USA has in stock *O'Riada Sa Gaiety Ceoltoiri Cualann 00282-CD*. They can be reached at [www.ossianusa.com](http://www.ossianusa.com) or at Ossian USA, 118 Beck Road, Loudon, N.H. 03307.



How often does a principal play bones for his school kids. Principal Bill Loyd (left) and Sandor Slomovits are shown here doing just that.



Hastings first graders teach Springfield, MA teacher to play bones. The teacher is starting her own program. Photo by Jessie Steigerwald.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 7, No. 2 2005

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## Executive Director's Column

I had a really great experience the other day: I lost the All Ireland Bones Playing Championship. As strange as that may seem it's quite true. It was especially great because a bones player who has placed 2nd or 3rd over the last six years came in first. Dave Murphy is not only a super guy, he is a great player and teacher of the bones and someone who truly deserved to win. He has put a tremendous effort into practicing and his playing shows it. Seeing he and his family celebrating after the contest was a great joy to me, perhaps more than if I had won myself. It was also great for me personally because it gives me something to aspire to, to work towards, and it refocuses my attention on

the Irish style of bones playing which I greatly admire, from Dave Murphy, to Paddy Donovan, to Paddy Sport himself, it truly is a marriage of bones playing and music which is inspirational to listen and watch. Losing the championship also helped me to realize that the greatest experience for me is not winning but being around other players, learning from them, and enjoying their company and friendship.

Which brings me to another topic. It is almost one month away from what promises to be another spectacular Bones Fest, perhaps the best yet. With the extremely friendly city of Chattanooga as our background and players from

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Bones Around the World: *Klepperle* and *Chlefeli*

At our annual Bones Fests, we usually hear bones played in an astounding variety of musical cultural contexts. Even in North America, bones are regularly played in minstrel music and other music from the mid-1800's, vaudeville, jazz, blues, Appalachian traditional music, bluegrass, Irish, Scottish, and English traditional music, Québécois music, music from the maritime provinces of Canada, and many more styles (including a variety of new 'traditions'). However, bones and bones-like instruments are played even more widely, and this occasional column is meant to open our eyes to traditions around the world that we might otherwise miss knowing about.

To start with, I would like to introduce to you the traditions of Switzerland and southern Germany, where an instrument almost identical to the bones is played. The Germans call them *Klepperle* (or *Kläpperle*, or *Klepperli*), and the German-speaking Swiss call them *Chlefeli* (or *Chlefele* or *Chlefelä* or *Chlätterli*).

Physically, the *Klepperle/Chlefeli* differ from the bones we're used to seeing in the English-speaking world in the following ways:

1. In general, only hardwoods are used, not bone (or pine or other soft wood, as far as I can gather).

2. The pieces are shorter than American bones typically are: generally under five inches in length.

3. The pieces are also wider than the bones and slightly thicker, up to about 2 inches wide and nearly a half-inch thick.

4. The extra width and thickness are offset by having a notch cut into the upper part of the edge of the piece; so the part that is actually gripped by the hand is really only about half that size.

5. The pieces are not curved.

However, what makes the *Klepperle/Chlefeli* close kin to the bones is the way they are held and the way they are played. In particular, they share with the bones the elements of the "tap" or single stroke, the 'duple' sometimes heard especially with Irish music, and the 'rattle' or 'triplet.' The *Klepperle/Chlefeli* are held two in each hand (either one hand or two hands may be used), held edgewise to the hand (as opposed to flat in the hand like castanets), and are held between the fingers, just as the bones are.

The *Klepperle* and *Chlefeli* are both associated with particular events in the calendar of the Catholic Church. In Germany (mainly in three towns near the Swiss border: Radolfzell, Haslach, and Gengenbach), they are played as part of the festivities of *Fasnacht* (known in the

*(Continued on page 7)*

## Editorial

Jonathan Danforth wrote the lead article for this issue on Swiss/German style of bones playing. We need more international articles and you are invited to share any Bones Around the World knowledge. It will be appreciated.

By the time you read this, Bones Fest IX will almost be upon us. This issue presents more details about this Bones Fest. Janet and I are busy with the preparations and are looking forward to a fun and memorable weekend.

The letter from Lem Bann is interesting. He is from Australia as is fellow member John Hill. Why not send Lem an email introducing yourself. His email address is lembann@winshop.com.au.

I attended a concert recently in Chattanooga where member San Slomovits and his brother Laz performed as the group Gemini. We heard San at Bones Fest VII and he has written a couple of articles for the newsletter. San played only two bones numbers—I would have enjoyed a few more. He did introduce me and the Rhythm Bones Society to his audience. Go and see them if they come to your area. Their concert is pure family musical fun.

Member Randy Seppala has done something interesting—started a new bones making company. He is donating bones for the kids' workshop at this year's Fest and I wrote a brief article on his efforts.

## Letters to the Editor

GDAY. Sorry to say I won't renew my membership. I enjoy reading the newsletter, but can't relate to the people in it. The newsletter has super articles. I don't understand the technical instructions, but I appreciate the efforts. If I miss it, I will email you. Is that ok?

If you are talking to [RBS member] Gil Hibben will you let him know I throw his knives. I have 3 large knives plus an axe. I could not go to Melbourne when he was there.

On 24 November 2004, I had my

first paying GIG. We had over 380 people pay to watch the show. To put on a better act, I made a new set of bones three weeks before the event and taught myself to play them in my left hand. The number I played to was March of the Bob Cats by Bob Crosby. I danced in the middle, and played the 4 bones for a BIG finish. My second number was Baby Face, whistled with bones in one hand, danced and whistled with bones in both hands on second verse—left nothing on the stage. Wish I was 27 instead of 67!!!!

Sorry to read about the death of Vivian Cox. She looked like a DOLL and we need more people like her.

*Lem Bann*

P.S., the new Bones I adapted are 55 years old. An old mate sent them to me—he can't play any more.

[To learn more about Lem and see and hear him play, go to [www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s916160.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s916160.htm).]

Reluctantly, I can't do Bones Fest this year. However, I will be doing a bones workshop in October as well as some classes. Is it ok to photocopy articles from the newsletters for this as long as I credit them? *Carla Cantor*

[We do not have a policy on this, but copies of articles and newsletters for educational purposes are certainly 'fair use' under the copyright law. And yes, credit is appropriate. *Carla*

## Bones Calendar

As always, check out the rather complete Bones Calendar section of the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**July 8-10.** Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, TN hosted by Steve Wixson. If you would like to come and have not registered, contact Steve now at 423-886-1744 or [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net).

**August 29-September 4.** 30th annual National Traditional Country Music Association Festival and Contests with Bones Contest on Saturday, September 3rd. Contact

[www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com) or Jerry Mescher for information. This is a great opportunity to perform for a

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Recorded Bones Music

Member Randy Seppala sent me a CD titled *Finnish Medley and More, Volume 1* by Wilpela & Friends Band. Randy plays bones on most of the nineteen tracks. This CD is a really enjoyable album with accordion, banjo, bass guitar, mandolin, drums, bones and spoons and a few tracks with vocals in Finnish. If you have a Finnish background, this is a must have CD. The CD will be played at the upcoming Bones Fest. To order, contact Will Kilpela at 1603 Mildred Ave, Marquette, MI 49855 or call 906-226-3685 or see Randy at the Fest.

(Exec Director's Column-continued from page 1)

California to Denmark expected to attend, the scene is set for an interesting and inspiring weekend. Building on last years workshops with several new and exciting topics, this is a rare opportunity for us to learn from some very accomplished players, both old and new. Experience both beginning and advanced playing workshops, as well as scrimshaw and Taketina, a polyrhythmic teaching technique which incorporates bones playing. Steve and Janet Wixson will open their beautiful home for a virtual feast of bones playing and literal feast of exceptional food, where jamming will abound. We'll have a chance to show the general public what bones playing is all about during our Saturday night performance at the Mountain Opry stage, with more jamming at the Wixson's until the wee hours. And don't forget the Sunday brunch with continued fun and jamming. I particularly want to encourage those of you who play instruments besides the bones to bring them along and help provide music for the week end. I can't begin to express what bones fest has meant to me personally and the effect it has had on my playing. Meeting and playing with Jerry Mescher, Donnie Decamp, Russ Myers, Mel Mercier, and all the bones players has enriched both my playing and my life. I hope to see each and

## Bones at Common Ground on the Hill

Sparky and Rhonda Rucker have performed throughout the U.S., singing songs and telling stories from the American tradition. Sparky Rucker has been performing over forty years and is internationally recognized as a leading folklorist, musician, historian, storyteller, and author.(check out [www.sparkyandrhonda.com](http://www.sparkyandrhonda.com).)

Here is an item from Sparky and Rhonda's newsletter.

"We'll be teaching the music & history of the American Civil War with our old friend, Bob Zentz and exploring the history of Old-Time Black Stringband Music. Folks who

play the traditional instruments of banjo, mandolin, guitar, and bones are urged to attend. *Class slots are still available.* Common Ground on the Hill, July 2-8, Westminster, MD, 410-857-2771 or [www.commongroundonthehill.org](http://www.commongroundonthehill.org)."

Sparky said, "Mike Baytop will be our resident bones player! [Mike attended Friday night at Bones Fest VIII last year.] He's been in our Black Stringband since its inception a couple of years ago. So we'd love to have anybody who wants to play bones to some great music. Mike is also teaching bones at Common Ground

## Corrections

The article on Ronnie McShane in last quarter's newsletter (Vol 7, No1) has a couple of errors. The caption to the photo should state he was performing at the 2003 All Ireland Bones Competition. Actually in 2004 he was the judge for the contest.

The list of records at the end of the article is not correct. Ronnie is not on the *Sa Gaiety* album.

## Bones Obituaries

RBS member Dan Dywer of the Celtic band *The Tinker's Own* died in a motorcycle accident on October 14, 2003. A tribute by the former band members is at [www.tinkersown.com](http://www.tinkersown.com).

Rhythm bones player Carlton D. Bohanan died on July 25, 2003. Carlton was not a RBS member. I met him at my first NTCMA Bones Contest in Iowa. His funeral home obituary says Carlton enjoyed dancing, singing, traveling, camping, attending country festivals, and playing the bones. *Steve Wixson*

## Rhythm Bones in Movies or TV

Let's do some research together. Let's make a list of all of the movies on screen or TV that included rhythm bones playing. I know of those listed below (with input from myself, Greg Burrows, Ev Cowett, Barry Patton and Aaron Plunkett.) If you know of others, please let me know and include details about the bones playing and the bones player if known. Thanks, *Steve Wixson*

1. *Riding High* (1950). Bing Crosby plays kitchen knives not bones. His instructor was Brother Bones.
2. *Mary Poppins*. Animated band with bones player backs up Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke.
3. *Chocolat*. Very briefly as the main characters board the boat.
4. *Gone with the Wind*. In a street scene with several bones players.
5. *Titanic*. Aaron Plunkett plays bones, spoons and bodhran with Celtic band in the background as main characters go below deck for love scene.
6. *Shaughnessy*. Aaron Plunkett plays bones, spoons and bodhran for the sound track of Louie Lamour's country western story made into a feature film for T.V..
7. *All My Friends Are Cowboys*.. Aaron Plunkett plays bones, spoons, and bodhran for the TV special feature film celebrating the American cowboy with Wilford Brimley, Johnny & June Carter Cash, Joe Diffie, Don Edwards, Ty England, Waddie Mitchell, Kristen Zang and Roy Rogers.
8. "Yes Sir, Mr Bones" a 1951 movie that does a great job reminiscing about the minstrel era. Although there is a lot of white men in blackface, the bone player is a black man, Brother Bones, dressed in white tux and top hat. ..
9. *Two For Texas*. A Ted Turner film.
10. *Pot O' Gold* which starred Jimmie Stewart.
11. *Deadwood*. 2005 Season finale for this HBO series with Barry Patton playing with Byron Berline Band.

## Bones Fest IX is Almost Here

### *There is Rhythm in Them Bones*

Bones Fest IX plans are about complete and we are ready for an exciting weekend in Chattanooga. The food and amenities will be memorable. Registrations received already include both old and new faces.

Workshops, similar to those at Bones Fest VIII, are scheduled (see below) and new is a Kid Workshop at the conclusion of which the kids will take over the Mountain Opry stage and perform for all of us.

Music for this year will be provided by tapes and CDs. We have also invited attendees to bring their other musical instruments and so far we have the expected fiddle to the unexpected xylophone. So expect some interesting rhythm bones/other instrument combinations.

Here is the program:

### **Friday**

Noon Board Meeting  
2:30pm—5:00 Workshops  
5:30—until Reception and jamming at Wixson house. Buffet dinner

8:30-8:45 A few players play at the Mountain Opry to advertise Saturday night

### **Saturday**

All Day Bones Market Place  
8:00am—9:30 Workshops  
10:00—Noon Individual

performances at Mountain Opry building

Noon—1:30 Lunch on Mountain Opry grounds  
1:30pm—3:00 Kid/Youth workshop  
1:30—4:30 Individual

performances continue.

4:30—5:30 General Membership Meeting at Mountain Opry

6:00—7:30 Italian dinner cooked at Wixson home plus jamming time

8:00—11:00 Fun performances (like last year) open to public at Mountain Opry

11:00—until Relaxing and jamming around the pool at Wixson home

### **Sunday**

8:00am—until Brunch at Wixson's

house plus more jamming

Here is a summary of the workshops:

**Kids/Youth** (Saturday 1:30 pm) This is mostly for locals, but attendee kids are welcomed. Young Bones Player Editor, Constance Cook, and friends will lead this workshop.

**Beginner/Intermediate** (Friday 2:30 pm) This workshop will teach the basics for new bones players or those who want to improve their skills. Former Executive Director Ev Cowett will lead this workshop.

**Advanced** (Saturday 8:30 am) Ken Wolin will continue his successful workshop begun at Bones Fest VIII.

**Real Bone Making** (Friday 2:30 pm) Would you like to make your own real bones? This workshop will give you all of the techniques including selection, preparation, polishing and aging your bones. Follow it with the Scrimshaw workshop.

**Scrimshaw** (Friday 3:45 pm) Tim Reilly will teach you how to decorate your bones with scrimshaw carvings. This is scheduled so that you can also take the Real Bone Making workshop.

**Taketina/Bones** (Friday 3:45 pm). Here is a special treat by member Greg Burrows who is a certified 'Advanced' Taketina teacher (see [www.taketina.com](http://www.taketina.com).) He plans an exciting and dynamic workshop in this style applied to bones playing. It uses voice, stepping, handclaps and bones to build simple polyrhythms from the ground up.

If you haven't already decided to attend Bones Fest IX, you are not too late. A Registration Form can be printed from the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Dave Murphy wins All Ireland Bones Contest

Steve Brown reports that Dave Murphy won the 2005 All-Ireland Bones Competition. Paddy Donovan came in second and Steve Brown came in third. The event was judged by Tommy Hayes.

While in Abbeyfeale, Steve judged the Junior Bones Competition and reports that John Ford came in first (see RBP Vol 6, No 3 for a story and photograph from last year's competition) with Brian Coen second and Laura Dillon third.

## Story From Abbeyfeale

I had an interesting experience while attending the All Ireland Bones Playing Championship in Abbeyfeale, Limerick, Ireland recently. Some unlucky friends of mine had inadvertently locked their keys in the trunk of their car just outside of Murphy's Pub on the main street. Within minutes they had 30 or so well wishers giving their best advice as to how to get the keys out, all convinced they knew the best way. One such do-gooder approached me convinced that the answer was in removing the tail light and getting into the trunk. After thanking him, I changed the subject by asking if he were in town for the music. "Yes, it's brilliant!" he replied. "Are you going to the bones contest tonight?" I further enquired. "No" he said adamantly. Puzzled, I asked why not. "I think all bones players should be cremated!" he exclaimed. Not wanting to inflame him further, I changed the subject, and of course he had no idea he was talking to, at that time, the current All Ireland Champion Bones Player.

Later in the evening I was finishing up with my performance at the contest when I looked into the crowd, and who did I see but the cremator! After coming off stage, I couldn't resist.

## Board Seeks Proposals for BFX

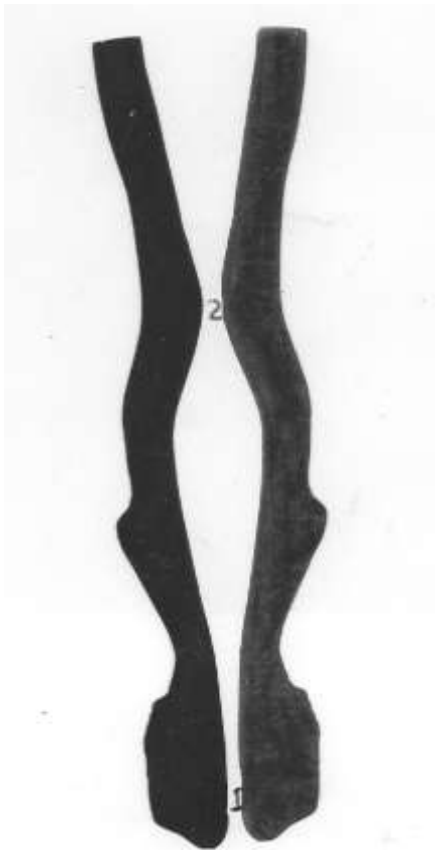
The Board is seeking proposals for hosting Bones Fest X. They hope to make a decision and announce the location during the upcoming Bones Fest IX.

Hosting a Fest takes some work, but is a most rewarding experience. A draft Host Guide is available that lays out the task and can be obtained from Steve Wixson ([wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net).) Or contact any previous host.

There is no defined format, but the proposal needs to be in writing if it cannot be presented in person at the Board Meeting that is scheduled for Noon, Friday, July 8.

## Tips & Techniques The Double Hit

They say a picture is worth a thousand words and sex sells. This can apply to the shape of bones too. I have invented another technique in playing bones and I call it a DOUBLE HIT which is when the bones concurrently hit at two spots at the same time (see



1 & 2 on the Figure.) The combination will give you three sound options of playing the bones. The single hit, hitting at spots 1 or 2 or alternating by hitting the two spots 1 and 2 on the bones at the same time giving a softer and sometimes jazzier sound

The bones I developed (again see the Figure) are just the right shape for this playing. A little adjustment in holding the bones using the conventional holding and playing techniques will give the desired results.

These collectable bones are exotic, rare hardwood and are hand carved into a girly shape. You play by holding the legs with back to back and

heads down for normal bone position playing. Place your hand up or down just a little until both spots 1 and 2 hit at the same time while you are playing. You should also be able to hit spots 1 or 2 or you can hit spots 1 and 2 at the same time or you can hit spot 1 and push off by hitting 2 getting all these alternate sounds.

It's all in the grip placement and holding bones a little loose and altering your grip tightness during playing. The way I do it is to change the pressure in my hand (fingers) and be able to hit 1 or 2 or hit spots 1 and 2 at the same time at my will. I notice that I shift the outside bone (bone facing out) to the left a little to get the 2 shot alone.

You should be able to hit all these shots without moving bones up or down except initially when you make your initial adjustment when you first put your bones in your hand. During this initial adjustment, I adjust the bones up and down until I can hit 1 and 2 together then I can hit 1 or 2 at will just by pressure in my fingers or by shifting outside bone to the left just a little for the 2 shot.

Don't try these shots on any bones as they only work on my bones. To obtain these bones or if you have any questions email me on my website [KeepQuiet.com](http://KeepQuiet.com). *Dutch Kopp*.

## Johnny Muise Dies

Did I tell you Johnny Muise died? Johnny was the bones connection to Nova Scotia. He grew up there and learned to play at an early age. I believe his Aunt played in the Inverness Seranaders during the 40's and 50's and they had a bones player, Huey something. Johnny came to several of my Neffa workshops but never to bones fest or regional meetings. He is on record playing with Joe Cormier, an old cape breton fiddler who lives in the Boston area. He came to Neffa the year Russ and Ev came. His daughter Rose also plays. *Steve Brown*

## Mr. Bones Day

Just back from Mr. Bones Day, a tribute to the late John Burrill. He was a street musician and performer who was welcomed on any stage in Boston and many across the country (See RBP Vol 3, No 1 for a feature story on John.) It was sponsored by Billie Hockett and held at her house.

A lot of fun but not a lot of people. We had a great time anyway. About 20-25 folks turned out including Jon and Melissa Danforth, Rob Rudin, Constance Cook, Paul Sedgwick, Phil Brake, Dave, Eric, and Andy Reiner, Jon Finger, Al Gregoire, and a number of other folks including some of Constance Cook's students (See photograph on Page 8.)

A long time musical partner of Mr. Bones, Mike (don't know his last name) was there and played along. He had numerous Mr. Bones stories as he traveled with Mr. Bones to New Orleans. Several local radio personalities from public radio including Naomi Arenberg of WGBH and Andy Nagy of WBRS were also present and very interested in the bones.

The music was great, we had a bones workshop and fun jamming. The Mr. Bones video, a documentary of Mr. Bones filmed shortly before his death and ending with a memorial to him, was played and was on sale as a DVD which I bought a copy. Jan Cornish, long time friend and associate of Mr. Bones, was there, and she was the main force behind the documentary.

All in all a fun day, I'm sure John

## Website of the Quarter

[www.davidholt.com](http://www.davidholt.com) Member David Holt has been performing with legendary folk musician Doc Watson and in their show, *Hills of Home*, he plays a bones piece with Doc on the harmonica. The crowds always love it. And wouldn't most any of us like to have an opportunity to play with Doc. Tour dates can be found at his website.

## Notes from Australia

Bob Bolton is an Aussie and a bones player. I found him several years ago while searching the internet and we have corresponded via email off and on over the years. He is not a member of RBS but is a friend having let us use the drawing of the hand holding a rhythm bones that appeared in the upper left hand corner of early newsletters. The following is his reply to one of my emails. Paragraphs shown in quotes were taken from the email I sent him.

"I have some Tasmanian blackwood bones. ..."

That highlights another aspect of 'bones sound'. I started off concentrating on the very heavy woods ... initially *lignum vitae*, because I had an old vaudeville bones player on the bill at a Bush Music Festival in the late '80s. He played, in each hand, a set of old, very worn, 'bones' made of *lignum vitae* and did wonderful monologues about trains, &c, with counter rhythms from the two sets of bones. He complained that he needed to make some new sets, but could not get the *lignum vitae* ... a tropical timber of very interesting characteristics ... never common and now rare ... and protected under legislation.

I said I could help and, through an acquaintance who worked for a dockyard, I located a supply of off-cuts from the use of *lignum vitae* as the packing in 'stuffing boxes', the glanding through which the propeller shaft passes. This uses *lignum vitae* because it is hard, tough, waterproof and self-lubricating. My contact played what he prosaically called his 'woods' ... straight pieces of *lignum vitae*, approx. 200 mm x 35 mm x 10 mm (with a shallow chamfer ... about 5 mm deep x 30 mm long ... at the tips, where they struck each other).

I passed on a supply of suitable blanks to the old vaudevillian and used some of the remainder to make 'bones' to designs that had been playing around the further reaches of my mind. These has a shallow and asymmetrical 'S' shape ... a large, fat 'belly' where they struck each other

and a fairly sharp recurve immediately above (and defining) the finger grip. They worked quite well and made a satisfyingly deep 'clonk' ... and worked well at slower rhythms, minimizing the tendency for players of lighter 'bones' to drive the tempo up.

This got the 'bones' making out of my system for a few years, until I was reading descriptions of bones in articles and reminiscences of old players interviewed by the folklorists of the 1950s Australian "folk revival". Quite a number said they could not get a good weight and sound from butchers shop bone, and so they made 'bones' from wood ... usually very heavy, hard local (dry inland) timbers ... typically nearly twice the weight of oak, or similar "Old World" timbers. Dad had made dozens of sets for the Bush Music Club musicians and for Boy Scouts (who he taught at Jamborees) and he had used 'Brush Box' (*tristania conferta*), an Australian hardwood of specific gravity (~) 1.09 (about 1½ x the density of oak) and renowned for its toughness in applications such as factory flooring.

This triggered a spell of tracking down as many of the timbers mentioned (some where only available around the home town of the informant!) and making up sets to study. The net spread to a 'wish list' of other notably heavy timbers and I ended up with something more than 70 sets of wooden 'bones', made from 30 or so different timbers ... including some not particularly heavy. Tasmanian Blackwood (*acacia melanoxylon*) is one of the less heavy ... a tad lighter than oak? ... and quite light for an Australian acacia ... but it produces a very pleasant 'bones' sound. It is not as penetrating as the super hard types, nor as 'full' as the *lignum vitae*, but is a good, all round, sound ... and the timber is relatively easy to get!

"... My father, the butcher, tells me that old ox have very hard bones ... I found an old buffalo carcass and gave the rib bones to our Executive Director, Ev Cowett. Now they are his favorite bones. ..."

As I often say, the old players reckoned the best bones were the ribs

of a working bullock that died of old age and bleached dry in the sun. trouble is, there are not many bullock teams today! "Cracker cows" and "Scrub Bulls" may be the only sources of hard, heavy rib bones today ... more research needed!

"... Nick Driver ... gave me a set of his shaped shin bone bones while at Bones Fest V. They have a good sound, but Nick prefers the politically incorrect whale bone bones. ..."

My shin bones are used only in very large gatherings, to compete with loud accordions (fortunately I don't have to compete with me playing accordion ... or they might be used more!). Their sound would be great in music halls - packed with noisy customers and no amplification. I have a friend who has a set of (old) whale bones, but they are fairly small and I have to concentrate in order to play them (but she is doing well, with her smaller hands). I saw, in a musical instrument museum (now in Nowra, south of Sydney) some bones that had been sold by Sydney music shops just before or after WW II - and they looked as if they may have been sawn from whalebone ... once again, a bit small for my tastes.

"... just got back ... Rocky Mountains in Colorado ... met a young man from Turkey who knew about them. Not only from Turkey, but from Mesopotamia where history says bones were played ... That could be most interesting ..."

Indeed!

"An article about the Australian bones players could be interesting ..."

I guess that I would know more than a dozen bones players without thinking very hard about it. Unfortunately, they won't all be at the National, this Easter, since several will be playing (lots of other instruments, I should quickly add) at gigs over that weekend. I will look at the sessions with a view to grabbing a few shots of bones players. Regards, *Bob Bolton*



(*Chlefeli/Klepperle*—Continued from page 1)

U. S. as Shrove Tuesday or *Mardi Gras*). Over a large part of Switzerland, however, the tradition is associated with the end of Lent, with playing often focusing on the Friday or Saturday before Palm Sunday (which is a week before Easter). Both of these can be viewed as a part of larger religious observances having to do with clappers and other noisemakers.

The replacement of church bells with other kinds of rattles or clappers during Holy Thursday and Good Friday is widespread in Christian tradition (to emphasize the solemnity of the time), and in some areas was practiced during the whole period of Lent (this practice fell out of official favor after the Second Vatican Council, but is still found in many parts of Europe). As for the *Fasnacht* tradition, the use of wooden noisemakers and loud music of every kind during *Fasnacht/Mardi Gras/Carneval* is also a very old and widespread practice all over Europe, and can usefully be compared to pre-Christian ceremonies celebrating the end of winter.

References to both *Fasnacht* and Holy Week playing of *Klepperle/Chlefeli* can be traced to the Renaissance with certainty (in documents and images from the 1500's and 1600's), and could possibly be much older. In the 1800's, however, the traditions changed somewhat and at the same time became popular emblems of regional distinction and pride. The 1800's traditions were nearly extinct until the 1960's and 1970's when they experienced a revival in both Germany and Switzerland. The Swiss Holy Week tradition is now generally focused on contests (called *Priis Chlefeli*) of schoolchildren. In addition, the *Chlefeli* are played throughout the year as part of *Ländlermusik*, a traditional folk music of the Alps, along with instruments such as accordion, clarinet, and double bass. More recently, they have been replaced in the *Ländlermusik* to some extent by the spoons, which are considered to be easier to learn and play. *Chlefeli* are also played by

Swiss children as a toy instrument.

The Germans also have competitions for children (*Preiskleppern*), as well as general playing of *Klepperle* during the *Fasnacht* festivities, which also involve drinking, parades, and large costumed “fools” representing folk cultural figures—in some towns there is a “*Klepperle-Narro*,” a figure whose costume is entirely covered with *Klepperle*!

I am indebted to a number of sources (almost all online) for this learning. When I first heard about the *Klepperle* and *Chlefeli* about a year ago, it was through a web site dedicated to the instrument and the *Preiskleppern* in Radolfzell, Germany, at <http://www.klepperle.de>. The site is very large and complete (maybe as big as our [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)!), and includes history, a tutorial, sound/video clips, and much more. Although it is (naturally) in German, the site will be educational to any English-speaking learner who is willing to use one of the many online translation tools available. I would also like to thank Dr. Joachim Schumacher (webmaster of [klepperle.de](http://klepperle.de)) and Fabian Dieterle (who coaches the children who play and compete in the Radolfzell *Preiskleppern*) for their gracious and informative emails.

The largest web site concerning the Swiss tradition is probably <http://www.rhythmic.ch/clappers.html> (also in German and Swiss-German) which contains pictures, an example of notation, and links to a number of Swiss sites, including those where *Chlefeli* are for sale as well as those of the children's *Priis Chlefeli* competitions in schools, some of which include video clips. Here, too, I'd like to thank Dr. Dieter Ringli, who works at the Ethnomusicology Archive in the University of Zurich and was very helpful to me with information on the *Chlefeli*.

The curious will, of course, find much more on the web by careful use of search engines. I'll be posting more links on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) web page shortly, as well.

I hope, as you watch the well-rehearsed playing of the Swiss and

## Dem Bones Donates Bones for Workshop

Member Randy Seppala of the new company *Dem Bones* is donating rhythm bones for the Bones Fest IX Kids' Workshop. He is working on a special design using his co-founder's seven year old daughter. The kids who attend the workshop will be able to keep their rhythm bones.

Randy and professional master wood carver Jim Lohmann formed this new company that is located in Covington, Michigan on the Upper Peninsula on the south shore of Lake Superior. They have combined their talents to bring out a quality line of wood rhythm bones manufactured on a computerized wood milling machine (now ain't that grand.).

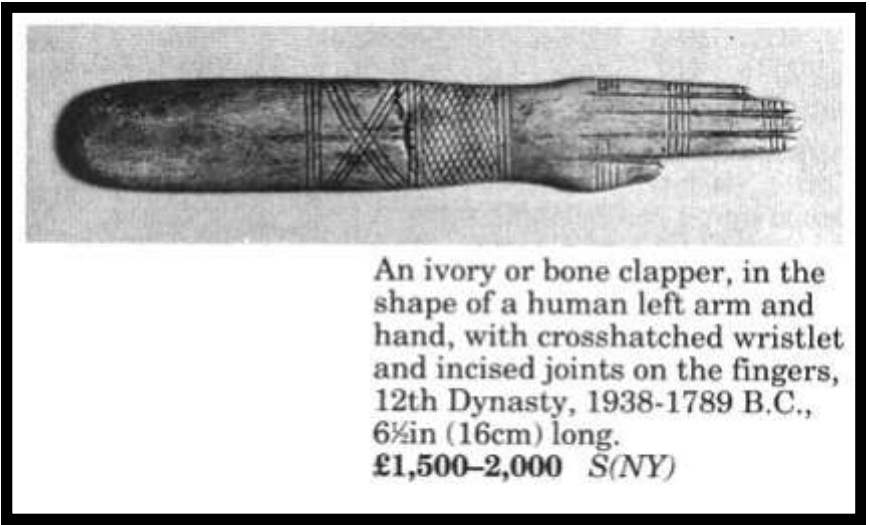
Randy says they have spent the last year working the bugs out of their production system and are producing bones.

One feature that I thought our members would like is they can offer people their own personal signature line of rhythm bones made to their specifications. Randy says they can reproduce, in quantity, any style or shape required from a single bone to use as a pattern. “We can set up a computer program to mill your own style of bones and offer a complete sanded, finished and packaged set or we can mill your unsanded, unfinished bones blanks and you can complete them yourself.” He said laser printing will also be available.

Randy says they are working on a website that will be called [playdembones.com](http://playdembones.com) and it will feature their complete line of wooden bones and instructions on how to play them. For more information contact them at 906-355-2459 or [info@playdembones.com](mailto:info@playdembones.com). Or better yet come to Bones Fest IX as they will both be there. Thanks Randy and Jim for donating bones for



Photograph of a couple of really happy kids learning bones at the recent Mr. Bones Day. Photo by Mary Roeder.



Nick Driver found this ancient bone for sale and one of our members needs to buy it for our library.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 7, No. 3 2005

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## Executive Director's Column

I am sitting here enjoying the after glow of another bones fest. Although not quite as well attended as previous fests, Bones Fest IX epitomized the cliché "Quality not Quantity." And quality in all things it was, incredible playing, abundant and delicious food, great jamming, and the kind of camaraderie we have become accustomed to at Bones Fests. Steve and Janet Wixson deserve every accolade we can bestow upon them for their hard work and organization of Bones Fest IX.

Some of my personal highlights: conversing, playing and hanging with the old masters Donnie DeCamp, Jerry Mescher, and

Johnny Perona to name a few. Seeing the continuing rise of the level of play amongst our members, and the joy it gives them to play. Watching Yirdy Machar enjoying his first (but not his last) bones fest. Watching Tim Reilly and Kenny Wolin fast becoming the dynamic duo of bones fests. Watching Olivia Lohmann glow while playing the bones. Talking with each and every one of the bones players there, Seeing the look on Everett Cowett's face when he was recognized for his hard work and inspiration, and holding ice on Walt Watkin's bump on the head while he played bones with both hands sitting in Steve Wixson's easy chair! You just can't keep a

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Highlights of Bones Fest IX

It's Sunday afternoon and Bones Fest IX is just over. Teri Davies left for the airport with Steve Brown and Jonathan Danforth. Ken Wolin and Tim Reilly drove off a few minutes earlier. It's 3:43 pm and I am bushed—a good feeling as it was an almost perfect weekend.

The Fest started on a bad note with a call from Russ Myers and an email from Mel Mercier saying that they could not make it. Then Greg Burrows had to cancel and he was scheduled to lead the Taketina/Bones Workshop. Constance Cook also had to cancel and she was to lead a new workshop for Kids. I still did not have a leader for the Real Bones Making Workshop. And it had been raining for the past couple of weeks and part of the Fest was to be outside.

The sun came out on Thursday afternoon and only now has rain returned with hurricane Dennis. Can you believe that!

Sally Carroll changed Fests with the introduction of workshops, and I continued them beginning also at 2:30 pm Friday. What I did not realize was for some people to attend meant they had to arrive on Thursday, and arrive they did—nine bones players who held a impromptu jam session in our back yard that lasted until 1:45 in the morning. This is a happening that should continue in the future.

One of the early birds was Scotsman Yirdy

Machar who lives in Denmark. He had wanted to attend a Fest but the timing was always wrong. You may remember he attended the NTCMA

*(Continued on page 7)*



Gift to Ev Cowett after stepping down as Executive Director. Bones made and scrimshawed by Tim Reilly

## Editorial

I am breaking from my tradition of printing the highlights of our annual Bones Rest in issue No. 4 and print it in this issue, No. 3. We have changed the date of our Fests from September to summertime and having the highlights in this late summer issue will tell the story while it is fresh in our minds.

There was one problem encountered at the Bones Market Place. Several bones were taken and not paid for. I find it hard to believe that they were taken by any of our members. I suspect that since Randy Seppala and Jim Lohmann had given bones for the Kid's Workshop and some to the Board, that someone did not realize the bones on the Bones Market tables were for sale. If you wound up with such bones, contact me and I will make sure things get corrected. And thanks.

Joe Birl could not make it to BFIX, but he did send me a story on how he helped the American Repertory Ballet Company. Joe plans on attending Bones Fest X. See you there, Joe.

There are three short obituaries of bones players in this issue, one many of us knew and the other two only known by their bones playing. I will continue to publish obituaries of any known bones players as one way of honoring them and the art of bones playing.

This issue is too full of me as editor, BFIX host and writer of an article on my trip to Ireland. Great vacation.

I also attended the NTCMA Festival and Contests and must report that a spoon player won the contest. No members competed and former member Harriett Anderson came in 2nd. This is an open bones competition and you might have won it if you attended. The next NTCMA

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Members, I wish to all of you a big success for Bones Fest IX. It is at a place that is even a greater distance than last year and very little chance that I can make it. But one of these years, I hope I'll be able to make

it again to one of the Bones Fests.

To Everett Cowett, to follow up your late phone call about other people I know who play bones. I have been presented to a real bones player. He is also a singer and a dancer. He used to belong to a singing group named *La Bottine-Souriante* (the meaning in English *The Smiling Boot*). It might be possible he could come with me to one of your Bones Fests.

From a Quebecois who is with you in mind at each of your Bones Fests.  
*Gerard Arseneault*

[Gerard is a member and attended Bones Fest V in MA. He, too, is a real bones player and I thoroughly enjoyed his playing at the Fest. My brother found him for us after hearing him play while dining at a restaurant in Quebec City. Hopefully Gerard will be able to attend BFX in New Bedford.]

Bones Fest IX was without question the best Fest held so far. Since Val and I are the only two folks left who have attended all or them, that makes it unanimous. Steve and Janet Wixson are to be commended for being such great hosts. I also want to extend a great deal of thanks to the RBS Board of Directors, the RBS membership and above all member Tim Rielly, for the wonderful pair of bison rhythm bones with very appropriate scrimshaw which were presented to me at the Fest (see

*(Continued on page 5)*

## Bones Calendar

Check out the calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest X.** July 28-30, 2006. Hosted by Melissa and Jonathan Danforth. Details in future newsletters.

**Virginia Regional Bones Fest.** November 11, 2005. This is a tentative date and a separate mailing will be sent to people in and around Virginia if it happens. Mark your calendar.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 28-September 3, 2006. 31st Annual Festival and Contests. Bones Contest on Saturday or Sunday of that week. Contact Jerry Mescher for details.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Website of the Quarter

**[www.sankofastrings.com](http://www.sankofastrings.com).** Hello, Bones players! This is Sule Greg Wilson, fellow bones man, just letting you know of a new string band, *Sankofa Strings*, that plays Old Time, Blues, Hokum, Jug, Rags and more. Check us out. Let me know what you think ([suleness@cox.net](mailto:suleness@cox.net)). Thanks! *SGWilson* [I've been hoping Sule would make it to a Bones Fest, but alas, he lives in Arizona. Note that the photos on his website were taken by Bones Fest IX attendee John Maeder.]

## Recorded Bones Music

It is getting more and more difficult to find recorded bones music and I was unable to find anything for this quarter.

If you have recordings that should be included in this column, please contact me. Thanks, Steve Wixson

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

bones player down!

I want to thank each and every participant, and those who wanted to come but couldn't, it's your desire which will fuel future fests.

Speaking of future fests, I am already getting excited about the prospect of Bones Fest X coming to New Bedford, Massachusetts next summer. Jonathan and Melissa Danforth came through with an inspiring and exciting proposal which should be a model of how to propose a Bones Fest. The ideas they put forth and the prospect of Tim Reilly, our resident sea expert bones player, collaborating with them should be a bones fest worthy of our 10th anniversary. Stay tuned for the tantalizing details as they become available.

On another note, the Board has established two committees which will examine some important issues. Distribution of bones to educational facilities, and adding instructional materials to our web site. I want to call on the membership for volunteers to join these committees and ensure their work is fruitful. Please contact me if

## The Young Bones Player

Jonathan's bones teaching report is very exciting, and I want to publicly thank him for taking on the children's workshop at Bones Fest IX for me.

Thanks and applause also go to the Board for establishing a committee to look into the creating a design that is appropriate and affordable for child-size bones. I have some prototypes I will be testing at my school. The children will let you know!

I hope you all got to see the DVD I sent with Jonathan of my 2 girls (students) playing 2 against 3 in Adam Klein's arrangement of "Rio Grande" for elementary chorus. They were absolutely terrific, and practiced outside the school every morning (while singing).

News from my school! (Teachers and others, please write in with your news about children and the bones...) In June, students of mine were joined by parent and community musicians (mandolin, guitar, etc., accordion) as

well as Rob Rudin and myself, appearing as The New England Children's Community Jug band (NECCJ) to great acclaim at the pre-show at the Cambridge Revels Mid-Summer show at the Boston Children's Museum. We hope to be invited back next year!

During one of the shows, a huge storm came up, forcing everyone to run inside the museum. NECCJ was undaunted, and immediately set up and played to a "captive" audience indoors, that joined the jug band in song. Our youngest player was a four year old younger sister of a jug band member who grabbed a washboard and joined in. I would send a pictures, but have not yet secured parent permission.

This year with a new principal, in my school, the jug band is attempting to expand, with the help of terrific parent volunteers Jessie Steigerwald and Kelly Tzannes, community music volunteers such as Phil Brake, who has great experience teaching young children bones, (and donated a number of sets he made to the program) and others. Rob Rudin and I will co-teach, and hope to present again at the Massachusetts Music Educators in March. Rob is commandeering didley bows for the children. A friend who is very interested in the project is making them from his design.

The success of jug band at my school is such that there is even talk of offering some kind of jug band program during recess when the weather gets bad!!!!

If you are worried that the bones will be submerged, never fear! I have serious soloists troubling the school halls during every school transition.

Join us at Bones X, where I hope to bring the NEJJC to play and teach in

## Tips and Techniques Bones Teaching

Before I went down to Bones Fest in July, I picked Constance's brain for teaching tips (knowing I was supposed to take her place teaching the children's workshop). One of the things that she suggested that really stuck in my head is that there are some

aspects of playing bones that are easier to teach when the student is not holding bones in their hand.

For example, one common mistake that new learners make (both adults and kids) is to twist the bones so that the "front" of the bones faces toward them and away from them alternately, rather than to rotate the hand "like turning a doorknob." Part of this is because of a natural desire to *see* what is going on in the hand, of course, but it still makes playing the bones a lot harder. Constance showed me that you can get a student to focus on the motion (and not the instrument) by having them practice the motion *without holding the bones*. In practice, I found that this worked very well in certain situations, and was maybe less appropriate in others. I'm guessing that's probably true of any teaching technique.

At Bones Fest, I taught six youngsters, one of whom was fairly advanced, three of whom had never played before, and two of whom played a little, but with a grip and in a style they had come up with on their own. These lessons were sort of spread out in time, so I was never really teaching more than three kids at a time. The playing-without-bones trick didn't really go over, but I did get some results from actually holding the students' hand in mine and actually moving their hand in the motion I was teaching.

I did get better results when I was giving a workshop at a library in Kew Gardens (Queens, NYC, more or less), which was part of a larger workshop on homemade instruments. Here there were about thirty kids, all of whom were kind of antsy. Individual attention wasn't possible, so I tried the bonesless bones-playing, and got them all moving in the way I wanted (mostly) before we even passed out the bones. I have no way to tell whether it sped up the learning, but at least it didn't seem to hurt, and I'm fairly sure it cut down on the amount of aimless clacking between passing out the bones and getting on with the teaching. I have since had several experiences teaching adults one-on-one, where the lesson was going nowhere until I had them put the

(Continued on page 4)

(Tips & Techniques—Continued from page 3)

bones down and try the motion without the bones. I would definitely suggest this technique to bones teachers who have the chance to try it. *Jonathan Danforth* [See a photograph from the BFIX Kids' Workshop

## Steve Wixson's Bicycle Trip to Ireland

My wife and I have taken bicycling vacations to Europe for several years. This year's trip was to Ireland.

We started a few days early with an auto trip to the Dingle Peninsula followed by a night in Abbeyfeale, the home of the All Ireland Bones Competition.

Dave Murphy was this year's winner and he and his family were my hosts. He had a charity gig in a church and invited me along. In addition to him playing with a group from Abbeyfeale, there were Irish step dancers, a great men's choral group from Limerick, and a couple of other performers. A most entertaining evening and Dave Murphy is one great Irish bones player. After the event we returned to his home and played bones together and sipped Irish whiskey until the wee hours.

I wasn't able to meet Paddy Sport Murphy, the bones legend of Abbeyfeale (see Vol 2, No 3), but I did talk to him on the telephone. He described his style of bones playing—a style played by his student, Dave Murphy. Basically they echo every note in the melody (not something all traditional bones players do.) If I wanted to learn that style, I could get the sheet music and figure out how to order the taps, duples and triplets to match the melody. I might just give that a try.

Janet and I met up with our biking buddies and biked through County Clare. Such fields of green and quite a few hills to climb on our bikes.

Each evening I looked for a pub with traditional Irish music. I was a bit worried since I am a two-handed, non-traditional bones player with a bag full of strange bones that I play a bit eccentric. I approached the players in each session and asked if I could play. Maybe they were intrigued by the many different kinds of bones I showed them, but every group invited me to play.

I knew I was welcomed when on the first night I was asked if I could stay fifteen more minutes.

Our last two days were spent in Ennis. I found music in Brandon's Pub playing in a session lead by Eoin O'Neal. When I got up to leave, he asked if I would join them at Brogan's the next night. When I arrived to my great surprise, my name was included on the list of performers.

I talked with a lot of musicians during our bike tour. I wanted to meet bones players, but I found none in the towns that we visited. Several people came up and could play my bones, but none were performers. Many times I heard "there are so few good ones."

We biked the loop at Kilkee, Milltown Malbay, the Cliffs of Moher, Doolin, Ballyvaughn and the Burren, Galloway and Ennis. Ireland is a most beautiful country and is very rich with a booming economy. But it's the people that make the trip memorable and we were very close to them on

EARLY PLANNER

SAVE THE DATE

Bones Fest X

July 28 - 30,  
2006

New Bedford,  
Massachusetts

Details To Come

Questions?  
email  
[bonesfest10@gmail.com](mailto:bonesfest10@gmail.com)



Photograph of part of Jonathan Danforth's Kid Workshop at Bones Fest IX. From left to right, Jonathan, AJ Hanson, Lianna Rodrigues and Abbie Hanson.



Photograph of Dave Murphy (right) and his Abbeyfeale friends at the Church gig mentioned in the article above.



## Joe Birl Teaches Bones To Ballet Company

This past February I received a telephone call from a Graham Lustig, Artistic Director of the American Repertory Ballet. He wanted to know if I could instruct one of his ballet groups to play the bones. Several months ago, Mr. Lustig came across a painting the "The Bone Player" by W. S. Mount dated 1856. He knew nothing of the painting or the artist. Graham was working on a ballet project *Beauty and the Beast, a Gothic Romance*, and wanted to have bones playing in the wedding scene.

I told him that I would be happy to teach his group (8 male and 8 female, ages 18 to 28.) However, there was a transportation problem. I am limited in my driving and could not drive to New Brunswick, NY. He said that would be no problem—someone would drive down to Philadelphia and return me home.

After spending some time with the croup, six members started to make progress which made Mr. Lustig very happy.

Graham show me the picture of the "The Bones Player." I told him I would try and get information about the picture and the artist. *Joe Birl*

[The following is from the program notes for the ballet:]

"My research for characters from the story and for the costuming of the period led me to look at the early American portraits from the Naïve movement. One in particular caught my eye that happened to be of a "Bones Player." Bones playing, an ancient form of percussion was used as a primitive accompaniment for informal dancing. And I thought, where there is a Beast, there probably would be bones and I was fortunate to be put in touch with Joe Birl of Philadelphia, 89 years young. Mr. Birl came to New Brunswick to give the dancers a workshop in the art of bones playing and their newly discovered musical talents appear in the wedding scene as others are dancing authentic clogging steps." *Graham Lustig, Artistic Director, American Repertory Ballet. and ARB's*

## Carl Cromer Hedrick Obituary

Carl Cromer (Red) Hedrick, 77, of Fincastle, VA passed away Friday August 19, 2005 at Lewis-Gale Hospital in Salem, Va. from a heart attack. Carl was a gentleman's gentleman, a true renaissance man, story teller, humorist, and above all a Rhythm Bones Player. Carl was a Charter Member of the Rhythm Bones Society and attended Bone Fest I with his grandson Carl and several others after that.

According to his wife Virginia, "Carl never met a person he did not like" and everyone loved him. He loved sports literature and music. He could play any musical instrument he touched with his favorites being mandolin and the rhythm bones. He was recently featured on a CD of local artists rattling the bones.

Carl was a lifelong resident of Fincastle and active in many capacities.

He served as Town Councilman, Boy Scout leader, member of the Catawba Masonic Lodge, United Methodist Church, the Fincastle Ruritans, and Mayor of Fincastle. He was proclaimed an honorary Historic

## Bud Bartram Obituary

Bud Bartram, 98, of Stoneham, CO died Friday, Dec 24, 2004. He was a story teller and one of the few cowboy bones players in our database.

He was a member of Cattlemen's Association, the NRA, and was a deputy sheriff and justice of the peace.

He was a cowboy poet and entertainer and also played harmonica. RBS has a recording of him talking and playing harmonica and bones.

There was a Tips & Techniques article in the Vol 4, No. 3 newsletter on how he made his real bone bones.

## George Lillard Obituary

George Lilliard died on January 5, 2005. He was one of many in our database that we did not know personally, but we knew he played bones. His niece, Betty Turner of

Chattanooga, had these comments.

"George learned to play the bones from someone in the playground of Avenue School in Chattanooga. He said the more he played them, the more he liked them. He always had them in his suitcase when he visited. He liked to play to old time jazz music and did a little dance when he played."



Photograph of Carl Cromer Hedrick from Fincastle & Botetourt County Newspaper

(*Letters to the Editor*—Continued from page 2) picture above). I understand that it took Tim more than 22 hours to do the art work on these one-of-a-kind bones. What a gift and pleasant surprise. They are not only a real work of art but have "Cowett quality" sound. Thank you all. You made my day, my year and May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett.*

Al, Martha and I believe that this fest offered some of the best quality playing as of yet. All the players have seemed to improve so much - not a lot of technological advancement as in Bones fest VIII (w/ contributions from Wixson, Wolin and Vits) but just a lot of happy, good quality, bones playing. Most notably improved would be Tim Reilly and Mitch Boss. I guess you realize that Al and I are the only 2 people that actually sit through the entire event and listen to each and every player from start to finish - we may be obnoxious bastards - but our opinions may be worth something (not sure about that yet). That's my take on it anyway. We all had a great time. *Dan Cowett*

# Minutes of Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 12:24 pm in the hospitality room of the Days Inn/Rivergate motel. Those present included Steve Brown, Ev Cowett, Jerry Mescher, Gill Hibben and Steve Wixson. A large number of members were also present.

Steve Wixson quickly reviewed the minutes of the last Board meeting that were printed in the newsletter. A motion was made, seconded and approved to adopt the minutes as printed. It was noted that motions from the last meeting had not been implemented.

Steve Wixson as host of BFIX had not had time to prepare a Treasurer's report, but said there was money in the treasury. He will submit an email report to the Board as soon as possible.

Steve Wixson gave a brief outline of the Bones Fest IX program.

Jonathan Danforth handed out and then presented his proposal to host Bones Fest X in New Bedford, MA. Motion was made, seconded and approved to accept Jonathan's proposal. The Board commended him on the high quality of the proposal and would like to include it as a sample in the Bones Fest Host Guide.

The Board serving as a Nominating Committee made the following slate for presentation at the General Membership meeting; Steve Brown, Executive Director, Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer and Board Members, Ev Cowett, Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to authorize \$300 to Dem Bones for kids' bones and to form a committee to determine the best design and how to distribute them. Steve Brown appointed himself chairman and Gil Hibben a member.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to authorize up to \$150 to upgrade the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website to include a forum, audio and video. Webmaster Jonathan Danforth

will implement.

A motion was made, seconded and approved on a format for motions presented to the Board via email. A copy of this format will be attached to the original minutes.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to form a committee to study how to add Bones Instruction to our website. One source of video instruction is the Fred Edmund's Instructional Video that is deteriorating and needs to be preserved. Steve Brown appointed Steve Wixson, Chair, Jonathan Danforth, Randy Seppala and Jim Lohmann.

A discussion was held on having a Regional Bones Fest soon in or around Brightwood, VA. Steve Brown will research .

Gil Hibben brought up a useful change to our By-laws that specifies how motions get presented at General Membership meetings. He will study how other groups handle this and recommend specific wording for our

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 4:15 pm in the Mountain Opry building.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to adopt the minutes as printed in the newsletter.

Steve Wixson presented the nominees of the Board that served as the nominating committee. Nomination were opened to the floor. A motion was made, seconded and approved to close nomination and elect by acclamation.

There was no old or new business.

There were several announcements. Bones Fest X will be hosted by Jonathan Danforth in New Bedford, MA. Jonathan gave a brief summary of the excellent written proposal he submitted to the Board. He then took a survey to find a possible date for the Fest.

It was announced that the Board has authorized an order of \$300 to Dem Bones company for kid's bones and that a committee had been organized to determine how best to design kids' bones and distribute them.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:38. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*,

## Committee Progress Reports

**Kids' Bones Committee.** The Committee to design and dispense bones to children has been formed with some good comments and suggestions being made. The committee consists of Teri Davies, Gil Hibben, Adam Klein, Dutch Kopp, Scott Miller, Mary Lee Sweet, Kenny Wolin and Steve Brown, Chair.

Dutch Kopp has graciously allowed the society to use his design, 'Dutch Penny Bones' which is a very cheap and effective design. 'Dem Bones' has donated several pairs of wooden bones with different designs to test on children. Plans and discussion will be underway shortly to gather information directly from children to determine their preference. Constance Cook has volunteered to be one of the testing sites, as well as Teri Davies. Both are music teachers who can bring their expertise to a ready made database of children. *Steve Brown*

**Bones Instruction on the Web Committee.** The committee consists of Michael Ballard, Jonathan Danforth, Gil Hibben, Jeff Leffert, Jim Lohmann, Randy Seppala, Walt Watkins, Ken Wolin and Steve Wixson, Chair. The first order of business was to define our goals and we are now in discussions on how to select instructors, what specific content to include, etc.. Expect results on the web before Bones Fest X. *Steve Wixson*

**Bones Fest Demo DVD.** The quality of bones playing has improved to the point that we need to find a way to share it with a national audience. Since broadcast video recording costs money, we need to submit grant applications for funding.. One way to convince people that may never have heard of rhythm bones is to include a short bones DVD. Several people shot video at BFIX and have given me copies to edit. These include Mary Barnet who did some interesting interviews, John Meadar with a big camcorder, Mary Lee Sweet and Kenny Wolin. The DVD may begin

(Highlights—Continued from page 1)

festival and won the Bones Contest (see Vol 4, No 4.) He graciously volunteered to take over Greg's time slot with a workshop on playing four bones in one or both hands. There is more to it than I ever imagined. He also used his calligraphy skills to personalize many BFIX ball caps given in place of t-shirts. Thanks, Yirby.

Then Tim Reilly volunteered to lead the Real Bones Making workshop that preceded his superb Scrimshaw workshop. More on his scrimshawing later on. I'm feeling pretty good now.

Constance had cancelled but she recruited Jonathan Danforth to lead the Kid's Workshop. That included a two hour drive to his home where she imparted her wealth of knowledge on how to conduct the workshop. Man alive—we're going to have a Fest.

The reception at our house began after the workshops and I must thank my wife, Janet, not only for the fine cooking, but for keeping me focused on what I needed to be doing. Funny as it may sound until you have done something like host a Fest, a big part of the fun is planning the event. We spent many an hour talking about what would make the Fest better. Lots of plans went by the wayside, but lots of those plans were implemented. Thanks to my dear wife.

Then out came the slow-cooked beef brisket, the slow-cooked corn beef brisket and the honey baked ham along with plenty of fixings.

I set up three areas around the house for people to jam and where did they go—jammed around the pool table. Did they play pool. No, there were maybe 10 bodhráns laid out on the pool table plus guitar, accordions, whistles, and Ken Wolin's xylophone around the room. What did I know.

It was a great night of jamming with Donny DeCamp and his banjo leading on our lower deck, Celtic/Irish around the pool table and a mixture in our music room.

As the night progressed and people started to leave, we moved out back and that continued until 1:15 am interrupted when a few neighbors came over to find out what all the noise was about and then listened to

us. The final minutes were all live and quiet and quite special. Tim Reilly noted that the cicada insect rhythms seem to synchronize with our music (or was it the other way around.) A second late night for me!

Saturday morning and I'm at the Mountain Opry building turning on the air conditioning and waiting on Dan Cowett to set up the sound system (can we ever thank Dan enough for setting up and running the sound for our Fests.) By the clock he is late, but compared to everyone else he is early. We didn't get started until 11 am and the schedule said 10. I figured it was the result of a very successful and late night of jamming. Ken Wolin's Advanced Workshop also went a little long which meant it was working.

Another round of kudos for Al Cowett who has served as Master of Ceremonies for many of our Fests. He is smart, quick, funny and rules with an iron hand. Al, you make it work!

I thought that Saturday at Bones Fest VIII could not be beat, and while I'm not trying to be competitive, the performances on Saturday at Bones Fest IX were wonderful. As a result of the Society and the Fests, we have a reason to improve and improve we have. A tribute to ourselves

After lunch the individual performances inside the Opry building continued and the new Kid's Workshop on the grounds of the Opry began. Jonathan Danforth has a Tips & Techniques on bones teaching in this issue.

The Bones Market place seemed to work well. Tables were setup around the edge of the room and bones-related materials were spread out for people to see. I heard many people talking about the bones they had bought. Randy Seppala and Jim Lohmann had a big spread for their new *Dem Bones* effort. Thanks to them for donating bones for the Kids' Workshop.

After everyone who wanted to perform did so, we held our annual business meeting (see the minutes in this newsletter.) Then we went back to our house for a delicious Italian dinner prepared at our house by the chef of our local Pasteria Restaurant.

After dinner we gathered outside for a group photograph (see page 8)

and a brief gathering. Steve Brown read the names of our members who have recently departed, Will Kear, Vivian Cox and Ted Goon and other bones players, Johnny Muise, Len Davies and John Burrell. As each name was read, Tim Reilly dropped a flower into the swimming pool.

Steve then called Ev Cowett forward and presented him with a mahogany box lined with red satin. That was kind of a strange gift until Tim Reilly placed two scrimshawed bones into the box. The first read *Everett Cowett, Executive Director, RBS, 1999-2004* and the second *May your bones be with you* (see photograph on Page 1.) The bones are buffalo, one of Ev's favorites and they will soon be mounted on brackets that allow them to be removed from the box and played. Many thanks to Tim for the excellent scrimshaw carving.

A bit more jamming and then back to the Opry for another round of performances with the public invited. A gold limousine driven by our next door neighbor, Dr Frank Knight and wife Sue, took Ev and Val Cowett and a few others to the Opry building. Quite a few people showed up to watch us have fun.

It's so unfair to highlight individual performances as they were all so good (I felt pretty good about my performance.) But I must say that when Ken Wolin came out wearing a long black wig and red lipstick and bare footed and dancing and playing bones to a booming CD, the house fell apart with laughter.

I also want to thank Randy Walker and Julie Kurtz-Kunesh who attended the Fest and Robby Hilliard, part of their Chattanooga based Celtic group, Olta, for performing on Saturday night. Randy attended Friday night of Bones Fest IV and he surprised me when he said he had learned to play bones from those he met and what he learned on that Friday night. Wow!

Back to our house for some fresh peach shortcake and more jamming. One of the items that came out in Steve Brown's recent questionnaire was the desire for lots of jamming. I hope those who attended were satisfied. I got to bed again at 1:20 am.

(Continued on page 8)



Bones Fest IX attendees. Photograph by Kevin Schrupf, our chef for Saturday night's wonderful Italian dinner

*(Highlights—Continued from page 7)*

The Sunday brunch drew a smaller crowd as many people had to hit the road early. Lots of talking and sharing information. There were many touching moments of good-byes. Ev Cowett has encourage Fests to be like family reunions and this one sure was

that.

And now it is 9:24 pm and I am back to where I started. The Fest is over and I am writing down my memories before I get a junior moment and forget them.

I'm pumped up as you can tell and have a couple of song ideas for next

year, one African, one classical.

I again thank all of the bones players who stepped up to make this one heck of a Fest. But then we've come to expect this from bones players.

I look forward to Bones Fest X and hope that Melissa and Jonathan

---

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 7, No. 4 2005

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## Executive Director's Column

In my recent conversation with Benoit Bourque, he mentioned a bones player he had met at a festival in Vancouver, British Columbia, named Boris Sichon. Within a few hours I was visiting Boris' amazing web site and actually watching him play the bones. Boris is a Russian immigrant living in Canada who plays an amazing array of percussion instruments. A few days later I spent a half hour or so speaking with Boris, whose enthusiasm for the bones and the RBS was truly uplifting.

Last week I received a call from a new RBS member, Melvin Harvey, 70 years young last Tuesday, who has been playing the bones for over 50 years, and is quite excited about coming to

Bones Fest next Summer. On a regular basis we see new members of the Rhythm Bones Discussion group, and although not connected to the RBS, we encourage the discussion group to visit the site, become members and attend Bones Fests.

The amazing thing to me is that we have so many more bones players out there who are discovering us, and we discovering them, for the first time. Like unmined gold they are a resource which represents potential, the potential for each one of us to be inspired by their stories and playing and grow as individuals and players. We've seen this cycle before with people like

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Benoit Bourque - French Canadian Master

You can't help but smile when you're in the presence of Benoit Bourque. Although he is a master musician and dancer, it's his genuineness and enthusiasm for traditional music that is most impressive. Over the 30 or so years he has been performing he has been a musician, performer, dancer, teacher, and organizer of traditional dance. As part of the groups Matapat and Le Vent Du Nord, he has won both the Juno (Canada's equivalent of the Grammy award) and most recently the Canadian Folk Music Association's album of the year 2005 for Le Vent Du Nord's *Les Amants Du Saint-Laurent*. He has been an avid bones player for many years, and regularly performs bones in performance and on recordings.

I spoke with him on the phone from his home just outside of Montreal.

"So, tell me when and where you were born, and how you came to the bones?"

"I was born in Montreal, but I never really felt that I was a Montrealer because we moved when I was 6. I lived around the suburbs, mostly, and really spent all my young time north of Montreal which is the beginning of La Nodien—the most dynamic area in Quebec for traditional music.

"I came from a musical family. We played many instruments and we sang. When I turned 13, I started to do step dancing and folk dancing—to meet girls in fact. After two years I met a guy who was close to the dance troupe. He brought bones

with him, and that was the first time I saw them. I took his bones and carried them home. He had showed me the basics and I wanted to impress my dad who was a musician—not full time, but he was playing music for fun. I said, "Look at this Dad. I want to show you something very

*(Continued on page 6)*



Benoit Bourque avec les os (with the bones.)



## Editorial

I've learned something from Steve Brown's article on Benoit Bourque. I've tried his combination of cow ribs and cow shin bones and like it a lot.

I bought several CDs lately that have great music for bones playing. In fact as I write this I am compelled to stop and go practice to them. I am back and that was fun. I try to practice every day, but don't always do it.

Our Virginia Regional Bones Fest did not work out and we will try and schedule it sometime this spring. Look for a planning email before the next newsletter.

Dutch Kopp is full of ideas and this issue presents his *Dutch Penny Bones*. Thanks Dutch and keep up the good work.

I want to thank everyone who performed on Saturday evening at Bones Fest IX. In the audience was a lady from the Chattanooga arts community and one from our small local newspaper. The first hired me for the Tennessee Folklife Festival (with my biggest paycheck ever) and that led to another gig. I am now a bone-ified professional musician. The second wrote a very nice article about me. They were both quite impressed by our performances that evening.

## Letters to the Editor

I enjoy the newsletter very much. I play with an old-timers band at Prosser, WA every Tuesday. We practice in the morning and play at nursing homes, etc in the afternoon. We have from ten to fourteen in our band.

I just bought a CD recorder and will send you one of our band if I can learn how to run this modern equipment.

I'm only 90 and played the bones since I made them out of black walnut in high school in 1929. They are just about worn out. I will keep in touch. Shook, Rattle & Roll. *Robert Ver Steeg*.

[Emails about bones in movies and TV.] *The Irish R.M* was made for Irish TV by James Mitchell production for channel four in association with Rediffusoin Films, Ulster Television

and Radio Telefis Eireann. Bones by De Danann. I believe this was a TV series. I have the record.

*Into The West* was an Irish movie about a horse. I think it had bones in it. It was quite popular here a few years ago. If you have not seen it, get it. *Dutch Kopp*

I have a forgotten oldie on DVD, *Pot O' Gold*, which starred Jimmie Stewart. Brother Bones does a brief cameo with two tap dancers, rattling a pair of silver knives as Bing Crosby did in *Riding High*.

On a side note, it was voted as one of the worst movies of all time, I guess from a film critics' standpoint, and granted the screenplay is pretty weak. However, I find the picture very entertaining with that bubbly overacted 40s style and some stunning scenes of the ensemble cast playing wine glasses, singing rich acapella harmonies. Also a great cast singing in Brother Bones' jailhouse scene (he's a prison staffer, maybe a cook? I forget).

By the way, I found it on eBay and paid a whopping \$4 for it. I recommend checking eBay—a great movie source. *Greg Burrows*

*Somersby* with Gere and Foster. A little black kid does a poor bone synching job to appear to back up Joe Ayer's playing. *Gods & Generals* Bonist Bob Beeman performs *The Bonnie Blue Flag* in this one, but I don't recall if he does it on tambourine or bones. *John Dwyer*

Just as a point of reference, the "Celtic band" in *Titanic* is actually a real Celtic band that was in the right place at the right time and was asked if they'd be 'willing' to play in the movie. Needless to say they were not the least bit hesitant. The band is called Gaelic Storm. For more info about them and what they've done, see: [www.gaelicstorm.com](http://www.gaelicstorm.com). *Michael Ballard* [Aaron Plunkett joined them

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Appalshop Bones Workshop.** March 4, 2006. See article in this newsletter.

**Le Vent du Nord.** April 3-8, 2006. With bones-player Benoit Bourque.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Performing in schools in Washington, DC area with a concert on the 8th. See [www.leventdunord.com/](http://www.leventdunord.com/)  
**All-Ireland Bones Competition.** May 1, 2006. Abbeyfeale, Ireland. For information see [homepage.tinet.ie/~fleadhbytheafeale](http://homepage.tinet.ie/~fleadhbytheafeale).

(Continued on page 5)

## Recorded Bones Music

With the title of *Rags and Bones*, I had to review this CD. It is by blues guitarist Ernie Hawkins (see [www.erniehawkins.com](http://www.erniehawkins.com).) Since his bio says he plays the bones, I assumed he would be the bones player, but instead it is member Guy Gillette. Unfortunately there is only one track (3) with bones. I talked to Ernie about bones and he said, "Haven't played in a long time. Learned from a guy named Pete who worked on my uncle's farm in Ruff Creek, PA. He was great, could play both hands and buck dance. Still got a pair of "goon bones." Order the CD through his website. *Steve*



(Executive Director—continued from page 1)

Kenny Wolin and Mitch Boss, who come to Bones Fests, are excited and in turn inspire us to be excited and improve our playing. We can only continue this rejuvenation by continuing to share our experiences and playing with folks and hope those untapped resources, like Boris, make their way into our bones playing world. Happy New Year and may the coming year bring us, and those unknown members, closer together to share our bones playing experiences

## NTCMA Spoons and Bones Contest Winners

This article presents the winners of the World Spoon and Bones Contest hosted by the National Traditional Country Music Association. The World title might be inappropriate now that the Irish hold the All-Ireland Bones Championship in Abbeyfeale, but for many years it was the only known bones contest. Articles on both of these events can be found in previous issues of this newsletter.

Bob Everhart is the founder of NTCMA and editor of its journal, *Tradition*, where the winners' names are published, normally in the September-October issue. I ask Bob how the contest began and here is his reply.

"Well, we established our contest format building around every possible entertainment and musical instrument the pioneer who settled Middle America might have used. Bones was an early rhythm instrument, so it was a natural to add it to the competitions. Spoon playing came along later, but the methods are similar so it was also included. Over our 30-year history of hosting this international competition, we have certainly witnessed some incredibly gifted performers on the bones—so we just hope they keep on comin'."

There are several libraries that house the *Tradition* magazine. I visited the Country Music Hall of Fame Library in Nashville and found winners from 1988 to the present.

Three additional years were filled in by the New York Library for the Performing Arts. I was unable to locate winners from the early years, so there is some research left undone.

Winners are listed in order of finishing (some years listed only first place.) RBS current or former member names are followed by an asterisk. The type of instrument played by each performer, spoons and/or bones, was not listed in the journal and is therefore unknown. *Steve Wixson*

**1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984.** Unknown.

**1985** Rick Davidson, Niya, MO  
Shawn Pittman, Springfield, MO, Bob Strayer, Lincoln, NE, Elmer F. Privia, Luray, MO, Max Cooley, Jr., Louisville, NE.

**1986.** Unknown

**1987** Jerry Mescher thinks it was Don DeCamp\*

**1988** Don DeCamp\*, Adel, IA, Jerry Mescher, Halbur, IA, Don Hill, Oklahoma City, OK, Bill Rexroad\*, Hutchinson, KS, Jimay Krew, Grandville, MI

**1989** Jerry Mescher\*, Halbur, IA, Bud Mielke, IA, Don Hill Oklahoma, City, OK, Harriette Anderson\*, Underwood, IA, Pat Le Clair, IA

**1990** Don DeCamp\*, Adel, IA, Larry Peterson, Omaha, NE, Paul Loy, Murray, IA, Margretry Herrington, Woodbine, IA, Forest Archer, Walnut, IA

**1991** Jack Lear, Lincoln, NE, Larry Peterson, Omaha, NE, Norvin Thomas, Mondamin, IA, Gwen Meister, Lincoln, NE, Pam Bergnam, Manely, NE

**1992** Erik Smith, Hastings, NE, Norvin Thomas, Mondamin, IA, Harriette Anderson\*, Underwood, IA, John Clayton, Brayyville, IA, Don E. Hill, Oklahoma City, OK

**1993** Norvin Thomas, Mondamin, IA

**1994** Matt Duncan, IA

**1995** Don DeCamp\*, Adel, IA

**1996** Don Hill, Oklahoma City, OK, Jim Curley, Shawnee, KS, Jean Mehaffey, Holiday, FL

**1997** Jerry Barnett\*, West Des Moines, IA, Jim Curley, Shawnee, KS, Bill Shewey, Cortland, NE, Janet Burgess, Hines, OR, Dorothy

Frenning

**1998** Jim Curley, Shawnee, KS, Don DeCamp\*, Redfield, IA, Harriette Anderson\*, ?????, Carl Bonahan, Omaha, NE, Mikki Schneider, Belton, TX

**1999** Bernie Worrell\*, Miami, FL, Don Decamp\*, Redfield, IA, Randy Minor, ????, GA

**2000** Don Decamp\*, Redfield, IA

**2001** Russ Myers\*, Brightwood, VA, Walt Watkins\*, Arlington, TX, Steve Wixson\*, Signal Mtn, TN

**2002** Yirdy Machar\*, Denmark, John Perona\*, Calumet, MI, Jim Curley, Shawnee, KS, Steve Wixson\*, Signal Mtn, TN, Steve Brown\*, Winchendon, MA

**2003** Steve Wixson\*, Signal Mtn, TN, Sadie Elliott, Lineville, IA, Carroll Gunter\*, Wichita, KS, Jean Mahaffey, Holiday, FL and Bill Shewey, Cortland, NE

**2004** Scott Miller\*, St. Louis, MO,

**2005** Bob Roscoe (spoons), Omaha, NE, Harriette Anderson\*,

## Website of the Quarter

Steve Brown (with his brother's help) found this interesting book titled *America's Instrument: the banjo in 19th Century America* by Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman. It can be accessed on-line and has a number of bones player pictures from that era.

First Google part of the title such as "America's Instrument: The Banjo." That brought me to an Amazon.com entry which I clicked. Click on the second line under the picture which says "Search Inside this book." At the top of the next webpage is a Search box with the option of "inside this book." Enter 'bones' in the search box and click Go.

This gave me a two page list of book pages of photographs and text items to examine.

## Joe Birl Correction

The story on Joe Birl in the last issue, Vol 7, No 3, had a reference to Brunswick, NY. It should have said Brunswick, NJ. Joe plans on attending Bones Fest X in New Bedford, MA.

## Young Bones Player

Jugband played to Great Acclaim at the Lexington Educational Foundation (LEF) Trivia Bee.

The jugband was invited by the LEF Trivia BEE group (no secret jug band partisans in the committee) to open for the LEF BEE which raises funds for special educational projects in the public schools in Lexington, MA. Co-director Rob Rudin was unable to 'bee' with us, but we managed. We treated it as a seison, and played more as background music as the contestants filed into the Town Hall. When they realized MUSIC was being played, they quieted down and the jug band broke into *Midnight Special*, *Take this Hammer*, and *Stealin'*. The audience sang and clapped along. The applause was thunderous, and a picture of the band appeared in the local Minuteman weekly paper.

The jug band then went off to wow the folks of distant Boston the following weekend in Jamaica Plain (my home town) at an open house with a mayoral visitation by trolley. Initially very few people came, but suddenly, bunches of children and parents came, and we sat down and played another set. Boston school teacher Paul Sedgwick who was last seen making bones at Billie Hockett's party featuring the Mr. Bones documentary, joined us with his children and played along.

Other news is that I hope one of my great young bones players will be playing 'castanets' in a Carmen opera scene being produced by my school's new 'opera company', which dramatizes conflict and resolution within the school. The merging of opera and bones at the child level is a moment for which I am sure bones player and opera tenor Adam Klein has been waiting.

Finally, read and enjoy Jennifer Ranger's article on her experiences teaching children bones playing.

[The Young Bones Player welcomes contributions of photos and articles from teachers of our Young Bones Players and the Young Bones Players themselves. Please include photo credit and caption, and a brief

biography of yourself (and maybe where you first learned to play bones). Make sure you have publication permission for the photo. Thank You, *Constance Cook*, Editor, Young Bones

## Carrying On the Tradition: Teaching Kids To Play the

As a music teacher, one of the best things ever is seeing my students, both young and old, succeed with their instrument of choice. It's especially sweet, however, to have the privilege of seeing children improving day by day with something that's not easy for them to master. Learning to play the bones can be this way for young kids whose co-ordination is still developing, but when there is much fun to be had along the way, the rewards can be really great.

Keeping a sense of humor is helpful in the initial phases of teaching bones to young children. I can't tell you how many times my own nine year old grandson (see photo on Page 8) has lost his grip and accidentally let his bones go flying across the room, much to our mutual surprise! Instead of getting too discouraged we both have a good laugh and then keep right on practicing; working to keep the bones under control, trying to keep the movements loose yet smaller and more precise than his developing co-ordination seems capable of at the time. Just when both teacher and pupil begin to wonder if this is going to work out, the big payoff comes with a quiet rolling little 'rat-a-tat-a-tat', and suddenly we're laughing again! Of course finally getting the coveted bones roll is only the beginning, and at this point bones still go flying out of small hands, but not as often, and not quite as far; progress!

Adults can learn a lot by teaching the youngsters in their life to play the bones. It's good to remember what it feels like to start from 'square one', and how impossible it all seems.

The thing is, if you can hold a kid's attention and keep him smiling through the process, success is just around the corner. Nobody that I

know, including myself, has ever picked up the bones and started rattlin' and rollin' right away, and every adult I ever taught bones to has looked really skeptical at first that they'd ever learn to play, but learn they have!

Some have even gone on to show the technique to others and then experience the process from the teacher's side, and the circle is complete as they help carry on the age-old tradition of playing the bones. *Jennifer Ranger* The Music Studio. [www.SoKattywompus.com](http://www.SoKattywompus.com). 877-365-

## Bones Workshop at Appalshop

Appalshop is an arts education center in Whitesburg, KY in the heart of the Appalachian coal fields. They produced films and audio recordings and have both a theatre company and a radio station. They have been around for more than 36 years. Check them out at [www.appalshop.org](http://www.appalshop.org)

Their Traditional Music Project is hosting a *Recycled Rhythm* workshop on March 4th. They are doing a series of workshops on making music with recycled objects. This includes bones, spoons, bucket drums, etc. Also included is a percussive dancing workshop.

They are targeting teenagers and young adults who have not been exposed to traditional music. The event is scheduled from 10 am to 6 pm. Following the workshops, the leaders will give live performances.

Suzanne Savell, Traditional Music Coordinator at Appalshop, is the organizer of the event. For information contact her at [ssavell@appalshop.org](mailto:ssavell@appalshop.org) or 606-633-0108.

Member John Maeder discovered this event and had this to say.

"Appalshop is one of the finest organizations I've had the pleasure of associating with. I have played my bones at a few Appalshop dances in the past few months and Suzanne is very enthused about 'acoustic percussion.' I feel it is important for the RBS to be well-represented." Contact John at 276-669-3054.

## Tips and Techniques

I just came back from a successful Bones & Spoons demonstration and teaching and playing for 10 days at the Kutztown German Fest. in PA. The fair is about learning and having fun.

I was a paid performer on bones and spoons and taught in the Bones and Spoons tent. I sold bones, spoons and jaw harps. I ran out of bones and spoons (gave away over 400 pairs of bones) in the first two days and jaw harps on the last day.

I wore my Rhythm Bones Society shirt and got many requests on how folks can join (see photograph on Page 8.) I hope I am better prepared next year.

Out of 300 plus students, I successfully taught ALL how to play bones using my technique on the 'Dutch Penny Bones (see below.)'

I taught blind, deaf and amputees including people that only had a few digits. I have a special way of playing and teaching bones using spoons for those who have missing digits and need modification to playing bones due to any hand or finger differences. I hope to publish more information in the future concerning these issues for the Rhythm Bones Player. *Dutch Kopp*

## Dutch Penny Bones

In answer to the RBS quest to develop a low cost, mass produced pair of bones to either give away to kids (and adults) or make available to them to encourage bones playing, I have submitted the following design. Pictured to the right are my *Dutch Penny Bones* that are the most robust design, easy to make, inexpensive, and have all the features of ease to hold and play for children and adults. I have tried many designs and even given away and sold real bones including wooden bones that cost a thousand percent more and this design has the psychological pulling power to interest kids and adults alike.

As of this writing and the publication of this article in the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, I give up all my rights to this simple

proven design which includes copyright and any patent rights. As of this writing, *Dutch Penny Bones* are now in the public domain for anyone to copy, use, make or sell for any use. I give the RBS all rights and any information in my files that contain first use of *Dutch Penny Bones* so the design cannot be contested. I only ask that any reference to these bones be referred to as *Dutch Penny Bones*.

What I have proposed is: two tongue depressors (sticks) with a penny glued on one end of each stick whereby the penny side are clicked against each other playing the bones in normal bones playing position. Using knock outs from an electrical box in place of the pennies was the idea of Echoing Heart Productions band who only uses recyclables. I use the tongue depressors from any craft store called Forster Jumbo Sticks 300 count 6"x 3/4" x 1/16" and glue one penny on each stick at the end using Gorilla Glue available from Home Depot. Follow the directions exactly. Total price for one pair of *Dutch Penny Bones* is 8 cents.



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A Reminder...

## BONES FEST

X

will be held in

New Bedford, MA  
July 28-30, 2006

Book your hotel reservation  
early at  
Days Inn New Bedford  
508-997-1231

Be sure to ask for the  
"Bones Fest"  
special rate of \$89/night.

Don't forget to check the  
rhythmbones.com web site  
for details and updates,  
and watch for the  
registration form and  
further info in the next  
newsletter!

Questions?  
Ask hosts Jonathan and  
Melissa Danforth, via  
phone (508-999-3225) or email  
(bonesfest10@gmail.com)

"Let us shake bones together!"

(Calendar continued from page 2)

**Bones Fest X.** July 28-30, 2006.

Hosted by Melissa and Jonathan Danforth. Details in the next newsletter, but see above for hotel information.

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest.**

August 28-September 3, 2006. 31st Annual Festival and Contests. Spoons and Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday of that week. For details go to [www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com)

(Benoit Bourque—Continued from page 1)

unusual.” I start showing him the bones and he said let me try it. He took the bones and started playing, and I was amazed. I said “How come you play the bones— you never told me.” He said, “You never asked me.”

“So my own Dad was playing bones and I didn’t know because he didn’t have any in the home. His own Dad too played bones, but he died when I was young.”

“Do you know where his tradition came from?”

“No, I don’t know. When my dad was young, from what I understood, bones playing was not that much considered a musical instrument. It was a musical instrument, but like the spoons or the yoyo or the bolo— simple games you play when you’re kids. He remembered when he was a kid playing them. His friend had a pair, but was playing one handed.

“Later I started to see a few bones players here. One was Leo Boudreau. He was not very well known for the general public—he was more known from people who were doing traditional music. He was playing with a band called *Le Bousatain* and he was a two hands bones player. He impressed me the way he was playing. Later I met other players, and then I finally figured my own way to use the bones with two hands. In fact, I don’t use it as much with the left hand as the right. I do all the basics with my right hand and all the accents with my left hand.

“I thought that was the way Leo Boudreau was playing, but when finally I saw him after a year of practicing that way, he had a quite different way to play.

“The basics can be quite similar, but there are so many ways to use them. I don’t know how you play, but you know most of the players, and almost everyone of them use the basic roll of three sounds tak a da, tak a da, or taka da taka da depending if you make the pause or not. Its pretty much the basic of every bones player. Do the roll, like when you do the windshield wiper movement.

I met once a guy, I don’t know where he lived, but he’s probably in the Vancouver area. When I met him he was living in the North West

territory. His name with a nick name is ‘Grizzly’ Frank Metcalf. He’s a big, big, big guy, like a big lumberjack. His way to play is very unusual, because in one movement he starts down to up. He does four sounds in one movement, down to up: one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four. He’s the only one I’ve seen that way.

“I remember meeting Percy Danforth. He was doing the same basic thing I was doing, the three sounds, and the two sounds of the clap.

I’ve never seen anyone playing the four sound in one movement. Its typical to ‘Grizzly’ Frank Metcalf. But to do this, it’s a very hard movement. Very low to very high to his chest, it was really four sounds movement, its very interesting movement. I tried a few times and I got it sometimes, but I never really worked seriously on it.

“My experience in the bones is really the jig—tak a da, tak a da. This way to play that “Grizzly” Frank Metcalf was doing is nice because you can do reels. The are four sounds for that, tak a dee dee, tak a dee dee, and you don’t work too much because you don’t shake that much the hand. In one movement, one bar, its great.

“Most players I’ve seen play with one hand. Probably it was because Leo Boudreau had inspired me that I really started to seriously play more with two hands. I like also to introduce jazzy rhythms. I say jazzy, but also like world rhythms: three, three, two with the accent, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, one, two, three, one, two, three. It’s a very common thing we’ll use, you know, some times with the back up music. It’s a very interesting thing, quite easy to do when you do the accent with the other hand. Just mark the accent like a bass drum.

“I like to listen to a lot of international traditional music. I just try to understand more the polyrhythms, and I just try to integrate them in my playing. I don’t say that I’m a extremely inspired from that because my tradition is really Quebec music. I like very much Irish and other music too, but really my main music is the Quebec traditional music.”

“Are you aware of many older players in Quebec in the Montreal

area?”

“There’s not that many. I get maybe once a year, a call from a old man. They will find my name or somebody gave my name to them, and they want to play bones. It’s crazy because I have also a wife and four children, and I spend a lot of time on the road. I wish I would have more time just to jam with people, but instead I try to give them to local groups where they can play with fiddles and accordions.

In the Québec City area, Normand Legault is another very good bones player. Henri Paul Benard from the group *Suroit* is really one of the best player I met. Gilles Lapierre, who use to play in a group called *Clapotis* from Lesile de la Madeleine, QC, is with Henri Paul who comes from the same area—the best player I met in Québec.

“I don’t know how many bones players are in Montreal, but if you want to know more on that there’s a association here that has a directory about old musicians, dancers, story tellers in Quebec. I think they must have in it many bones players, and you can be in touch with them. I never tried to count how many of them play bones. The name of the organization is MNEMO, (website address [mnemo.qc.ca](http://mnemo.qc.ca)) The director of MNEMO is also a very good bones player, step dancer, and caller—his name is Pierre Jaqtran. So you can be in touch with him. He’s a very nice guy, so he knows a lot of things. He knows mostly about the dance aspect, but you may be surprised as he knows a few things about bones playing too.”

“How did bones playing come to the French Canadian music?”

“Well definitely part of it is the Irish immigrants because they inspired a lot of our music. The first years I was doing music and dance, I thought it was a lot of influence came from the Irish, and with time I found its still a big influence, but the Scots they were a big influence, too. They were among the first settlers here— they came for the fur trade. The English people have been also a big influence.

“But also the French culture has for so many years. They have in certain areas in France, what they call ‘Claque Bois.’ Its like clacking wood, a straight piece of wood about the same size as a beef rib, but straight, not

(Benoit Bourque—Continued from page 6)

curved. The bottom of it burned to make a softer sound, and they use the same tactic as the bones. On each side of the middle finger one is fixed and they use that. It's definitely in the French culture too, probably also with the Breton—people from Brittany, but also people from other places in France.

"I've seen also bones playing in Spain. I know in the North of Spain they have Celtic music where they use castanets, and they use also the bones, both of them. I saw them in Sweden, Switzerland, as well as France and all the British Islands too. It's used so many, many places.

"Ever seen the movie, *Latcho Drom*? It's a French movie on Gypsies. It's a very good movie. It's a documentary, in fact. The music is so interesting, and there's so much music in it. I think in fact it would be a very good addition for the Bones Society because the very first images in the movie, I don't remember which country it was because the movie goes in different countries, but you have in the desert people walking beside the caravan and you see this young boy about 12, 13 years old, and he's singing. He walks with the caravan and he's playing the bones. It's something to see. It's a very nice movie, and you will see 3 or 4 times bones in the movie."

"You said the Irish probably brought the bones to Canada do you know what time period that was?"

"Well during the big famine in Ireland, in the 19th century, I think it was like 1840's, during those years. Most of them settled on the east coast in Canada. They've been a very big influence."

"Tell us about the kind of bones that you play, Benoit. Do you make your own bones?"

"Well, I do, but I use real bones, that's really my favorite sound. I do have also the wood, different kind of wood, but I really like the real bone. I use cow bones mostly. This other guy I was talking to you about, "Grizzly" Frank Metcalf uses mostly caribou bones and moose bones because they were flatter, and he was living in the north too, where it was easier for him

to get them. But I live in Montreal so getting caribou here is not the easiest thing. So I use really beef ribs.

Since a few years, I really found my favorite sound. What I do is I mix beef ribs with cow shins. The cow shins you can find in a few stores, and they don't have marrow and because the cow shin is bigger you can shape it really more the way you want. What I use is a cow shin shaped like a rib in each hand and one beef rib in each hand. The cow shin is the stationary one. I would go the other way, but when I listened I did not like the sound. The rounder bones, the beef ribs, are the movable bones. It is a sound I really love because the cow shin is a higher sound while the beef rib is a lower sound. The mix of it, I just love."

"When did you start playing professionally Benoit, was it with Eritage?"

"Yes that was my first band, I started playing with them in 79'. When I was 19. So I started playing with them mostly bones, step dancer and caller. I played about 6 years with them and then I retired because my kids were young and it was hard to have a family and always being on the road. I came back about, oh, maybe 8 years later. I always kept doing music but not full time.

My first band was really Eritage and you know I'm still very close to Raynard Ouelett, who was the accordion player. He is a tremendous player, and he's also part of the committee organizing the Canadian Folk Music Awards. He runs also a great accordion festival and he's a great accordion maker. So I'm still close with him."

"So you did do some records with Eritage?"

"Well in fact we did 3 records for the Montreal school board, but those weren't really for sale to the general audience.

"The real one was *La Ronde des Voyageurs* ([www.angelfire.com/folk/singeractor/laronde.html](http://www.angelfire.com/folk/singeractor/laronde.html).) It's still a very good recording. I'm still enjoying it, you know, and that was a very, very good band. I really enjoyed being in that band, as it was the learning experience for me. I developed my

bones playing while I was with them.

"I quit them in 85' because of the family. And you know I'm looking here at a record that shows a very young looking Benoit Bourque holding some bones. It is *Homage le Alfred Montmarkette*.

"I made that record when I came back with Vielle. I played on the side with that group as it was not a full time band. We did the mini show's but not outside of Quebec.

"Alfred Montmarkette was a very good accordion player from the 40's, and we put the show on for the Accordion festival. There was a CD producer in the audience, who liked the show, and said he would like to produce an album. That was many years ago—it would be about that 95 or 96.

"Yes that one has more bones playing because I was really the percussion player in it. A couple of tunes with spoons, but mostly the bones. Step dancing for some tracks too, but mostly bones."

"So did Matapat come after that?"

"Yeah, Gaston Bernard was playing with me and Vielle. He and I quit Avielle and we started with Simon LePage, the bass player, and made our first album. We were called Bourque, Bernard and LePage. When the first album came out, which was called *Matapat*, people were starting to call us Matapat—so we became Matapat. We did another album after that, *Petit Fou*, and the two of them were nominated also for the Juno."

"And then, of course, you've been in *Le Vent Du Nord*?"

"Yeah, I quit Matapat in 2002. I started playing with *Le Vent Du Nord*, and I'm still playing with them."

"Seems like this has really been a great experience for you?"

"Yeah, its been crazy. Well just to tell you, sometime we say in French "you live under a special aura." I don't know if you have a similar expression in English, but it's being in the right place in the right time.

You know, I played about 6 years with Gaston and Simon in Matapat. At the end we were going in different directions like many bands. I was home in May 2002 and told my wife that that we are going to disband soon.



Max is 9 years old, a good age to learn how to play bones (see story by Ranger on Page 4.)

*(Benoit Bourque—Continued from page 7)*

I met two guys from the Montreal area touring in the Vancouver area. They were playing there with their own band and we showed up at a party. We jammed together and I really had a good time playing with them. I said to myself, “if Matapat ever breaks up, I wish to play with those two guys.” You know it was

only a wish because they were already in a band.

“Two hours after I said that I got a call from the fiddler—what do you think of that? It was really amazing you know. They called me to ask me a question, regarding a festival—a really weird call because there was no reason really why they should call me. They just said let’s call Benoit Bourque to see what he thinks about that.

“When they called me at the end of summer of 2002 they were quitting their band and they wanted to start a new project. The two of them were moving to a small village which happened to be my home town—they didn’t know that I was living there. They moved to the same street, in fact, about 2 miles away from my house.

“We started playing together in September 2002, and we recorded the first CD in December. Very soon the CD came out, and we won the Juno (Canadian equivalent of the Grammy) award a few months later. So quick and crazy. Definitely this band has a very special aura—it works very well.”

“If our members want to get recordings of you playing the bones,



Dutch Kopp (see story on Page 5)

do you have any suggestions? Do you play on the most recent Le Vent Du Nord album?”

“We have two albums with LeVent Du Nord, and the best thing would be to go to [www.leventdunord.com](http://www.leventdunord.com). The first CD, released in 2003, has 14 tracks and I’m playing bones on 4. I’m playing bones on four tracks also on the second one. I’m on the old Heritage records and the two Matapat

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 8, No. 1 2006

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## Executive Director's Column

What role do the bones have in music? Where does our little instrument fit in and become the missing piece in the musical puzzle? Or just the right spice added to the musical gumbo?

You might say that that depends on the music, on the nature of the music, or on the musical environment. You can play bones to almost any kind of music, and there are players who pride themselves in "being able" to play rock, Balkan, Jazz, or African Ju Ju music. Percy Danforth played with a string quartet, on occasion, and my good friend, John "Mr.Bones"Burrill, would play to cabaret music in the smoky bars of Cambridge, MA.

But where do they belong and how do they

enhance the music to bring the music to another level?

I think that depends on two things: the player and the listener. It's the players' sensitivity, approach, and skills that allow them to fit into the music, to give the music just the right musical lift. But it's the listener's perception of that, that makes it successful.

There's been a lot of talk on the rhythm bones discussion group about the role of bones playing in traditional Irish sessions, and how bone playing in general is viewed. Some have suggested that in any culture a newer instrument is accepted after a process of developing a true

*(Continued on page 6)*

## Everett Cowett—Our Founding Father

Everett "Ev" Cowett was born March 6, 1935. He was raised on a potato farm in northern Maine, an area known as "the county". The climate is frequently described as having 9 months of winter followed by 3 months of poor sledding. Winter sports activities kept everyone going in those days. Ev excelled in all major skiing events, downhill, slalom, jumping and x-country during high school and college at the University of Maine. After receiving a BS degree in Agronomy from Maine he attended Rutgers University where he was

awarded a PhD degree. His first professional assignment was professor of Agronomy at the University of New Hampshire. Life was good but when you live in ski country and cannot afford to ski a change is in order. He joined Geigy Chemical Company, a firm older than the USA and enjoyed 30 years doing Agricultural research and infrequent opportunities to play the bones.

Ev's first encounter with Rhythm Bones took

*(Continued on page 7)*



Everett Cowett and his buffalo bones. Photograph by Joseph Rodriguez of Greensboro News & Record. Used with permission.

## Editorial

I asked the Cowett kids to write the story of their dad and Dan Cowett wound up with the job. Ev is our founding father though some credit goes to Fred Edmunds (see Vol 5, No 3.) Ev served as our first Executive Director and retired from that job in 2004. He still serves on the Board. At Bones Fest IX, he was presented with a pair of real bones made by Tim Reilly, one scrimshawed with *Everett Cowett, Executive Director, R.B.S., 1999-2004* and the other with Ev's motto *May your bones be with you* (see Vol 7, No 3 for a photograph.) On behalf of our members, I say thanks, Ev.

Thanks to Russ Myers for the interesting article on the 1927 World Rattlebone Champion. I've researched the Seattle Bones Contest a bit, but have not found anything so far. Any one want to help?

Thanks also to member Robert McDowell who told us about the New Zealand photograph on page 5.

Jonathan Danforth has a preview of Bones Fest X along with the registration form for the event. Please complete and mail this form as soon as you can to help in the planning.

It is hard to believe that we are celebrating Bones Fest X. We have several new members who hopefully will attend and see this event for the first time. Won't they be amazed at the talent they will see and the fun they will have.

I am working on a short video to use to seek funding to professionally video this historic Fest. It would be great to see ourselves on national television. I wonder how many bones players we would find who thought they were the only bones players left.

Last but not least, thanks to Teri Davies for her thoughts on teaching bones to kids. Teri was one of those first time Bones Fest attendees last year and she has great praise for what she learned. Pass it on, members!

## Letters to the Editor

Thanks for your kind comments and for your interest in my recordings.

The bones that I use when I record

with *Las Rubias Del Norte* and other artists are a two pair of rib bones; one is a rather heavy, short set of steer bones that I ordered from Lark In The Morning out in California, made by somebody in Texas. I tend to use those in the right hand. When played at a certain angle, they sound like wood blocks and have the most amazing tone. I'm not sure if that translated onto the recording, though we did have really good old microphones at our disposal, Neumann's with original tube power supply, I believe.

I do play wood bones, and many others. That fellow from Kansas, Tom James, whom you connected me with, sent me recently a pair of buffalo rib bones that he made himself. So you know how it goes, it's an endless quest for new sounds. *Greg Burrows* (See Greg's CD review on Page 3.)

Thanks Steve. Great to hear you're enjoying playing along with the CD. I love it! *Alasdair Fraser* [Note: I've often wondered how artists feel about bones players playing to their music. I played to Fraser and Haas' *Caliope Meets Frank* at Bones Fest IX, and afterwards told him about it in an email. This was his response. *Steve Wixson*]

I have not written an article on bones playing and I only cover it briefly in my book on improv as one of numerous topics to be covered with regard to minstrel show music.

When I was a child, spoon and sometimes bones playing was still featured in home entertainment, but I have not even seen spoon playing at parties since then, only in street busking. Aluminum is an interesting sound generator, we had a set of aluminum stroke roods or 'Moo' in the Experimental Music Studies Lab at La Trobe Uni where I taught until its closure.

Best wishes. *John Whitehead*  
[John is from Australia. I asked him to write an article on 'Bones Down

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**All-Ireland Bones Competition.**  
May 1, 2006. See [homepage.tinet.ie/](http://homepage.tinet.ie/)

## Rhythm Bones Player

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

[~fleadbythefeale/index.htm](http://~fleadbythefeale/index.htm)

**Bones Fest X.** July 28-30, 2006.

Hosted by Melissa and Jonathan Danforth. Details in the this newsletter, and see Page 3 for hotel information.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 28-September 3, 2006. 31st Annual Festival and Contests. Bones Contest on Saturday or Sunday of that week. For details go to

## Website of the Quarter

[www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/inscache.aspx](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/inscache.aspx). Smithsonian Global Sound website where you can search for a variety of music. For rhythm bones music select Idiophones, then clappers, then bones. You will get a list of songs from which you can listen to a sample or buy the music. Most of the entries are of old time blues artists Sonny Terry with his nephew, JC Burris, playing the bones. See Greg Burrows review on Page 3.

## Review of the CD *Ain't Got Me No Home*

On a recent Google search, as part of my ongoing (i.e., lifelong) research project dedicated to finding more bones playing in recordings, film, and out on the street, I happened across the work of a master of the instrument whom I hadn't heard of before (though probably many RBS members know about this late, great bones player). Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas (1922-2002) was grew up in the Washington, DC area and remained there most of his life, and was part of a blues music scene centered around Archie's Barbershop, a place where Saturday afternoon jam sessions continue to this day (see [www.acousticblues.com](http://www.acousticblues.com)).

This CD was originally released in 1993. The artist is Michael Roach with bones player Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas and harmonica player Mike Baytop.

*Ain't Got Me No Home* features classic acoustic blues, solidly rooted in the African American tradition of the South and elsewhere. Michael Roach, a fine guitarist, songwriter and vocalist, harkens back to the classic sound of Brownie McGee and other folk blues masters. Mike Baytop deepens that link to tradition with his chugging and wailing sound on blues harmonica, weaving in and out of the guitar rhythm and enhancing the sound of Roach's guitar and voice.

Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas is featured on 3 of the record's 13 songs: Take Me Back Blues, San Francisco Bay Blues, and appropriately, Backbone. On all three songs, he achieves a shuffle groove that baffled me when I grabbed my bones and attempted to play along. Mixing a shuffle timekeeping foundation (think of the basic beat on, say, the song 'Just A Gigolo') with triplet roll fill-ins thrown in as part of a loose, improvisational style, Thomas makes it all sound so relaxed and easy. He provided great accompaniment that both propels the music and adds a spice, if you will—if you could isolate the bones 'track' it would be

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Bones Fest X A Sneak Preview

We're very excited at the prospect of seeing you all at Bones Fest X here in New Bedford, Mass. New Bedford is a multicultural seaside city with lots of things to do and see if you're spending any extra time in the region. Once considered the "whaling capital of the world," New Bedford's rich maritime history is one obvious connection with bones-playing. Another less obvious but no less important bones connection is found in the musical traditions of the Irish and French-Canadian immigrants who worked the textile mills here after whaling died out. Finally, bones could once be heard in the minstrel and vaudeville shows that played regularly at the Zeiterion Theater, just a few blocks down the hill from our Fest location.

The Fest this year will be held at Gallery X, a cooperative art gallery in a restored Universalist church building. Both floors of the building are handicapped accessible, and the main room has a stage at one end. We think you'll like it, and anticipate a great time as usual, and much fun and bones-playing! Here are a few things to look forward to:

**Live music!** We'll have musicians from several bones-friendly traditions at the fest, including Irish, American Old-Time, and New England music.

**Recorded music!** We'll also have the means to play recorded music for those of you who've been practicing to a particular piece on tape or CD.

**Workshops!** While the exact list of workshops still needs to be finalized, some of the possibilities include bones-playing techniques, beginning bones playing, bones-making, scrimshaw, children's workshops, how to teach bones, bones history, playing bones with other musicians. Workshops begin at 3 pm on Friday afternoon.

**Performances!** As in past years, much of our time will be dedicated to letting us show each other our bones-playing on stage, and we'll be having a show open to the public on Saturday evening.

The registration form is enclosed

with this newsletter! (It is also available on the web site, [www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com)). Please take a few minutes to fill it out and send it to us: *Melissa and Jonathan Danforth*, 43 Dewolf St., New Bedford, MA 02740 Hope to see you there!

## BONES FEST X

New Bedford, MA  
July 28-30, 2006

Book your hotel reservation early at Days Inn New Bedford  
508-997-1231  
Be sure to ask for the "BonesFest" special rate of \$89/night.

Don't forget to check the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) web site for details and updates.

Registration form enclosed

Questions?  
Ask hosts Jonathan and Melissa Danforth, via phone (508-999-3225) or email ([bonesfest10@gmail.com](mailto:bonesfest10@gmail.com))

"Let us shake bones together!"  
*Moby Dick*

# Bones A Great Instrument A Great Lesson Plan

The first week in September ushered in a new school year for students and teachers alike. I suspect that both of these groups of individuals experience the same sense of reluctance after the Labor Day holiday is over. Students are forced to rise earlier than they would like, hand over their care-free summer days as well as their late-night hours. As for their educators, earlier morning hours and daily schedules to follow are generally no more attractive to them than they are for those placed in their care for 6 hours per day.

As a grammar school teacher, I had experienced a heightened sense of expectancy during those fading summer days. I wondered (worried?) about what changes may have occurred in my students over the course of 10 short weeks. Just like any teacher, I had many loose ends to tie up before the new school year began - I had the dreaded "lesson plan" to create! I'm one of the lucky ones though. I teach music and music is, by its very nature - fun and interesting. This year has been made quite a bit easier for me with addition of "Bones

Instruction" to my lesson plan.

Jim Lohmann of Dem Bones has supplied me with more than 100 sets of kid-size bones so far. I received a few samples in varying lengths and different wood types from Jim. After trying them out with the students for a couple of weeks, I decided on bones that were just under 7" in length and 1" in width. These seem to work well for all of the grade levels receiving bones instruction (2nd-8th grade). The cherry wood is a bit heavier than the pine, so I opted for the cherry bones. As Jim has set an affordable price tag of \$4.00 per set, many of my students have purchased bones of their own.

I am now into my 7th month of teaching the bones and it's going just great! There are so many reasons why the bones is one of my favorite instruments to teach. With them, a student learns simple through complex rhythms. Additionally, I am afforded the opportunity to integrate music with various subjects such as history, geography and world cultures. Best of all (albeit selfishly), I get to play the bones all day long! I do have one word of warning however - Yirly, watch out! I have a couple of students that are already experimenting with 4 bones in one hand!!! *Teri Davies - Music Instructor @ Trinity Catholic Academy & St. Thomas Aquinas School, Buffalo, NY*

[Editor note: After I saw Teri's photograph, I asked about her grip and here is her reply.] With regard to grip, I play with the stationary bone by my thumb (I reference it in class as "the thumb bone") and the other between middle and ring fingers - just as Mel Mercier says I should! His VHS instructional video was my only bones reference until I met you all at the Fest and I guess that's a habit I have a hard time deviating from. When I teach, I automatically use that grip and so do most of my students because of it I guess. I have noticed however, that the 'Yankee' grip seems to work better for children with smaller hands. If someone seems to be struggling with getting the bones to work for them, it then pops into my head to offer an alternate grip to try. Some of my students have come up with grip combinations that I wouldn't dream of and if it works for them, I let them have at it. If again, they're really having a hard time getting sound then I'll correct them to one of the two 'tried & true' grips. I should add here that my own daughter (she just turned 5) uses the 'Yankee' grip & mom had nothing to do with it - it just made sense to her and she can play just fine!

(CD Review—Continued from page 3)

fascinating to listen to his work by itself. Yet, it fits right into the groove of Roach's music. *Ain't Got Me No Home* is highly recommended for both fans of the bones and fans of the blues alike. *Greg Burrows*

[Previously reviewed related CDs include *Blues and Bones* with Richard Thomas on bones with Archie Edwards (Vol 2, No 2) and *Blues Professor* with JC Burris on bones and harmonica (Vol 3, No 4.) JC played bones on several CDs with Brownie McGee and his uncle Sonny Terry (Vol 3, No. 3.)]



From left to right, Teri Davies teaching rhythm bones to Mark Martinez, Kaitlyn Griffin, Ashley Trombolesi, Danny Podsiadlo and Tyler Conroy, 6th Grade, St. Thomas Aquinas School.

# Tips and Techniques

## Part 1 of 3: Care and Maintenance of Bones.

There are two main categories of bones: animal rib or shin bones and wooden bones.

**Care of animal bones:** For those who will try to make a set of animal bones, be patient as it takes at least nine months to cure newly acquired bone material. Typically you would select the large upper rib bones of a cow or steer. You do not know what you have until you have boiled the connective tissue and gristle enough for the bone to emerge. At that point it will be soft or bloody black or both. The bones must dry out and the end marrow drilled (without damaging the bone proper). That is a smelly process. Sun bleaching is best while this is going on, but keep the bones away from dogs and other meat eaters while the curing goes on. Do not use bleach to whiten the bones. Bleach makes the bones brittle and they will crack before they are cured. When the bones achieve a tawny or yellowish patina, they are cured. If the holding ends of the bones are wider than 1.25 inches, you will want to cut them to size with a band or hack saw. Typically a 1 inch width feels best. If the bone you selected is naturally just 1 inch or so, you will not need to cut them. Playing length is 6 to 7.25 inches. Cut bones will have one side with exposed marrow. Do not remove this marrow. Carefully give the cut area a light sanding and seal it with an epoxy (that is not sticky when dry). Do not let your newly cured bones get wet. Once in awhile give them a very light paste waxing. This will help the bone material hold the moisture level necessary to keep the bones from becoming brittle.

**Care of wooden bones:** Wooden bones come in a great variety of hardwoods and some softwoods. Most bones are made of white pine, cured, and painted. Many bones are made of walnut. More expensive bones are made from ebony, rosewood, ash, oak, rock maple, and birdseye maple. Birdseye maple is

popular because it is light weight and very hard. This gives it a pop/crack sound that goes particularly well with bluegrass. Bones that have not been painted or dipped need to have their fibers retain enough moisture to keep the bones from chipping or splitting. Oak bones, for example, respond well to having the flesh of a pine nut or hazelnut rubbed all around the ends of the bones, combined with a light waxing. Maple bones have tight fibers and respond well to a soaking in mineral oil about every 6 months. Mainly, you do not want to let your wooden bones get completely dry.

To keep bones from slipping out of your hands, use rosin on the area you grip, or on your hands. Do not throw or drop your bones or put them in a pocket you will sit on. If they break, all your effort will have been lost.

*Walt Watkins*

## A Typical Discussion from the Yahoo Rhythmbones Group

If you are not tuning in to the discussions on Yahoo/rhythmbones, go to [launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/rhythmbones/](http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/rhythmbones/) and sign up. The following is a recent discussion to illustrate what's happening.

"Hi I'm a novice bones player and I'm going to Abbeyfeale for the festival and bones competition in May (as an observer only.) From the sounds of the complicated nuances of sessions, I think its safe to say I won't get to play at all (which is of course a major disappointment since that's why I wanted to go in the first place.) Here in the upper peninsula of Michigan, other musicians have been very generous with me. I jam with a group on Sundays at a coffeehouse (mostly bluegrass) and it's great. On the quiet songs I switch from ebony to pine bones and I never play my shin bones anymore because they are just too loud. Alas the non refundable tickets are bought and lodging reservations made—maybe I'll just have to enjoy the non bones things that Ireland has to offer ." *Gail*

"Hi Gail. As you probably know

I've been to Abbeyfeale three times and played at a few sessions there. I have had some exceptional times, and some not so good times. I was very accepted and seemed well liked at some sessions, and spoken to very sharply at one in particular. Yirry Machar tells a story of someone shouting across the session at him, "No Bones!" but later apologizing for it.

I will say that to an extent the sessions at Fleadh's might be a little different than your weekly session which has many of the same folks each time. That's not to say it can't be a bit complicated. Some of those sessions were so crowded I couldn't play because I couldn't raise my hands up far enough. There were some relatively quiet sessions, and quite loud raucous sessions. I found that I often listened for the sound of the bones before going into a pub, and would join some bones players who were playing, and each of us would take a turn playing the tune while the others listened. I had some of my best moments like that, with Dave Murphy and Paddy Donovan, each one of us taking a turn while the others listened, long into the night and morning. At each competition there are at least a few less inexperienced players, but everybody competed, and hopefully had fun.

Mel Mercier makes some good points—not everyone in Ireland is aware of the bones. I can remember talking to someone last year at the Fleadh who had come all the way from Vancouver, BC and didn't even know there was a bones competition there. If I were you I would connect with the festival organizers Maureen Murphy, Dan Murphy, Anne Marie Dennison and explain your situation to them. They may have a suggestion of which sessions might be more bone friendly, or help you to hook up with other bones players who might take you under their wing. Rules of thumb, don't play at the same time when other bones players are playing. My first year a relative newcomer would play along with Sport Murphy and I thought he was going to kill her. Hey enjoy yourself, its an amazing place, great music, good fun, wonderful



## 1927 Rattlebone Champion of the World

E. J. (Bones) Jensen, who claims he is the undefeated rattle-bone champion of the world, celebrated his sixty-sixth birthday here Wednesday. Jensen, of 724 Second Ave., gave an exhibition of rattling the bones Wednesday night at the Rainbow Club, 407 Fifth Ave.

"There's not much demand for rattlebone men these days," he said. "I'm a landscape gardener now. But I'm the undefeated rattlebone champion of the world. I beat the champ, Robert Wingate, at Seattle, Wash., in 1927." Jensen said several judges decided the contest on the 'basics of rhythm.'

Ebony wood. "I use four four-ounce bones made from ebony wood," Jensen said. "They're about 7 inches long.

I used to make \$375 a week in vaudeville. I was in a movie, too. I played a gypsy in the movie, *When Night Must Fall!*

I started out rattling the bones when I was about 12 years old. I used some old beef ribs. It was quite popular then. I'm no amateur. The bones are sort of a lost art." Jensen in his played the bones while wearing boxing gloves. This earned him place in Robert L Ripley's cartoon *Believe It or Not* in 1936 (see p right.)

Born in Norway, Jensen came to this country in 1900. He served the American expeditionary force 1917-18 in Siberia.

"I'm looking forward to landscaping this spring, but if rattling ever come back in style ready," he said.

[This newspaper article was to me by a fraternity brother at Washington & Lee University, received his hometown paper in mail, and the best I can come up is that this article appeared in a Moines, Iowa paper in 1954. R Myers]

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

identity and working toward acceptance with in the music community. You can see this with the development of the Accordion and other additions to the musical community.

But how can an instrument which has been around for literally thousands of years be considered 'new' to the culture? Although the bones have been around for thousands of years, I think they have really only been played and accepted within smaller communities.

The minstrel show paved the way for bones across the American musical landscape over the last 160 years, and has allowed the bones to find their way into a number of musical genres.

And we see today the musical envelope being expanded by some of our very own players. Kenny Wolin and Bill Vits with their respective orchestra and band, Spike Bones with Bones on Jazz, Mel Mercier with Michael O Suilleabhain, and Barry Patton playing Bluegrass with his uncle Byron Berline. All of these players have the skills, sensitivity, and approach to make the bones work in their respective musics. So where do the bones fit in—you the player can

## Frank 'Grizzly' Metcalf

I read Steve Brown's last quarter article on Benoit Bourque and noted that Benoit mentioned Frank' Grizzly' Metcalf. I remembered that name from Beth Lenz' master thesis titled *The Bones in the US: History and Performance Practice*. He was one of several rhythm bones players whose style she analyzed in detail.

Quoting from Beth's thesis, "Metcalf's style is based on duple rhythms, rather than the triplet. The basis of his style is a rhythm he calls 'the Grizzly shuffle.'" She describes this as a rhythmically altered triplet where the either the first note is a quarter note and the second and third are 16th notes or the first and second are 16th notes and the third is a quarter note. She suggests practicing playing a straight triplet, then the first and then the second at the same tempo.

Benoit mentioned that Frank lived in Vancouver and it was easy to find his telephone number on the internet.

Franks was a delight to talk to. He said he developed his style for playing reels.

Frank's favorite bones are moose bones as they are perfectly shaped for playing even though this is a big animal. The best, he says, come from middle aged females.

One of the things that Beth mentioned in her thesis was Frank added a microphone (actually a Barcus-Berry pickup) and amplifier to his bones. He put a rubber band around the bones to muffle the sound. He plays two distinct sounds, the muffled one and another that sounded like a conga drum by playing on the edge of the bones. He was on a Canadian television program sort of like *What is Your Secret*, and Frank's was that he played the electric moose bones.

He played bones and spoons at the same time. He learned spoons from a traveling French Canadian troupe.

For the last seven years, he is concentrating on fiddle and banjo. In the 1980's he was playing harmonica and bones.

He was an arctic archeologist living in Yellowknife, NT, Canada when Beth wrote her thesis. *Steve Wixson*



This cartoon of EJ 'Bones' Jensen appeared in newspapers on January 26, 1936 Copyright 2006 by Ripley Entertainment, Inc..



(Ev Cowett—Continued from page 1)

place during the early 1940's on his family's potato farm in northern Maine. Francis and Darrell Fisher, kids about 8 -10 years old and nearest neighbors came walking in to the barnyard making an unusual clicking sound. They both had two wooden sticks about 6 inches long and one-half inch wide placed one on each side of their ring finger. As they turned their wrists the sound of the sticks was captivating. Ev was hooked after less than a minute. The sound was 'out of this world,' a simple click-a-de-click, click-a-de-click, click-a-de-click-click-a-de-click-a-de-click. Ev just had to learn to do that. The kids told him that their uncle Louie had taught them the trick and that he was great with 6-inch rulers.

The sound was too much. Ev had to find out how two little pieces of wood could make such a captivating sound. He learned to click them very quickly with one hand. This proved to be a problem later on when he tried to play with both hands. The right hand was so dominant that the left hand was left out. Because of this experience Ev always teaches beginners to use both hands from the start. It is easier and more fun.

The only tool available to Ev for bone making was a jackknife. Every farm boy carried one in his pocket in those days. Whittling seasoned hard wood proved to be difficult. Green wood was easy so Ev made many pairs of bones from green wood and let them dry for several months before he ever knew what they would sound like. Beech, birch and maple were the woods of choice.

Ev thought that the sound might be generated from the end of the moveable bone so he made many mallets to test the theory. It wasn't until 1995, more than 50 years later, that he discovered that the sound depended upon where the tip of the movable bone struck the stationary one. It was apparent that the diameter of the middle finger was important too. All of this suggests that if you want the best sound that you should use custom made bones that fit your hands and fingers. Forget that Ev says, just move the bones you have around

in your hands (called tuning) until you find a position and sound that you like and play whatever you want.

Ev's first public appearance as a bones player took place in his high school gymnasium/auditorium in 1950. The school held a kind of amateur night function where Edna Rand and Ester Page sang *Dry Bones* and Ev played along on bones. He does not recall much about it except that someone tried to beat him up that night.

Shortly after this Ev's mom purchased him a set of the now famous Joe Birl black Rhythm Bones. Ev played these bones until they were stolen in the early 1990's. The loss of these bones and the search for replacements lead to a whole new life for the entire Cowett family. Music stores had never heard of rhythm bones. The internet was silent on the subject except for a definition that said they were idiophones, a poor choice of words Ev thought although by now he had some doubts.

Elaine Conner came to the rescue. She thought that this instrument should be preserved and contacted Arlo Lasson, a local TV personality who hosted a program called Crossing Carolina with Arlo Lasson. Lasson arranged for Ev to appear on his program and within a few weeks Dr. Fred Edmunds, a retired MD and bones player from VA called. What a surprise. Ev had never met another bones player until then. Likewise Fred thought that he was the only bones player left on the planet. They got together at Fred's home in Lexington VA and shared their experiences.

Fred's wildest dream was to hold a bones convention with 100-200 bones players. Ev's was to have 25 bones players meet with 50 Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall and enjoy a fine after noon of clicking and dancing. They compromised and held Bones Fest I in Greensboro NC in September 1997 with 11 serious bones players from Maine to Texas. This has become an annual international event.

Every family member has given Ev full support and became active in the promotion of bones playing. Martha gave Ev a bones player web page for Christmas in 1997 (now

rhythmbones.com). Dan has been sound man since Bones Fest I, and Al was MC of each event except Bones Fest V when weather interrupted his travel schedule, John and Tommy have participated in most every Fest as bones players. Val has been a behind the scenes operative throughout. She also plays the bones when no one is listening or watching. Two grandchildren, Ramsey and Rioux Cowett, are bones players.

As children growing up, my brothers and sister took bones playing for granted as our father played all the time and encouraged us to play as well. We learned on the plastic bones at an early age and basically put them down until dad started getting serious about meeting new bones players in the 1990's. The whole thing opened up when Bones Fest came to light – and here we are now – thousands of players strong from all over the world – communicating with each other, playing and competing, and having a great time sharing new techniques.

*Dan Cowett*

## Recorded Bones Music

**On the Road Again** by the Possum Ridge String Band with our own Russ Myers on bones. The other instruments include guitar, whistles, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, hammered dulcimer (the primary instrument), autoharp and voice. This is a good group and the music is fun There is also some bones history. I asked Russ about the CD and here is what he said.

"Not all the musicians in our group are on all of the tracks. My bones playing appears on ten of them [there are 31 tracks.] It's hard to believe but the personnel at the studio had not heard of the bones, so I was prevailed upon to give some insight into the matter. I did not realize these were being recorded and then incorporated into the CD (track nos. 4, 11, 18 and 26.)

Our group is non-profit, so all revenues after recording costs will be donated to local charities.

I would appreciate anyone interested in a CD send a check for \$15 to me *Russ Myers*, P.O. Box 43, Brightwood, VA 22715."



Flaxmill workers from New Zealand, circa 1906. Note the rhythm bones player seated on right side of the photograph. From Tasman Bays Heritage Trust/Nelson Provincial Museum, Tyree Studio Collection, 177650/3. Used with permission.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 8, No. 2 2006

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## Executive Director's Column

In the April 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the News on the Abbeyfeale On Line Web site the headlines read, "World Championships For Abbeyfeale!". In the brief article by Raymond Fennelly he asserts that Abbeyfeale is "actively being considered" to host the "World Bone Playing Championship" in 2007. he further suggests that the "Championship" has been held in the US and "is actively considering moving the event to Europe". Aside from the World Bones and Spoons Championship held as part of the Missouri Valley Old Time Music Festival and Contests, I know of no other contest in the US, and I'm relatively certain that Missouri Valley is not moving to Ireland. I'm guessing that the idea of a World Championship might be in

response to the recent World Bodhran Championships held in Milltown, Co. Kerry in June. Actually Dan Murphy of Abbeyfeale, one of the main forces behind the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, mentioned to me a year ago of the possibility of holding such a contest in Abbeyfeale. In any event, many of us have felt for some time that the US needs a more legitimate bone playing contest. After all a contest which includes spoons and bones equally, and fails to use people such as Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell as judges, misses the mark, in my opinion, of producing a high quality contest that reflects the true art of bone

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Bones in the United States—Part 1

### Chapter 1. **Bones.** [bone castanets]

Concussion idiophones, or clapper, of indefinite pitch. Originally made from animal rib bones, they now commonly consist of flat hardwood sticks, about 15 cm. Long and slightly curved. They are played in pairs, with one pair usually held in each hand: one bones is held between the first and second fingers, pressed to the base of the thumb; the other held between the second and third fingers, is struck against the first with a rapid flicking of the wrist. The bones produce a sound similar to that of castanets, and like them may be used to produce rhythms of great complexity (from The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, *Bones*, by Robert B. Winans.)

In the 1980's, players of the folk rhythm instrument described above are rare in the U.S. Although these players are scattered across much of the U.S., one is most likely to hear a bones player at a folk festival where old time fiddle music is heard. The majority of these players are in the sixties or older; what knowledge they have of the bones was passed down to them by players older than themselves.

As is often the case when music is part of an oral tradition, little has been written about the bones by the players themselves. The bones have also escaped the notice of music historians. Although the bones and other similar instruments have appeared in many cultures at various time, the purpose of this study is to examine how the bones were brought to the U.S. and focus on the musical context in this country of both past and present that include the bones.

Scholars have suggested two possible routes through which the bones reached the U.S. The first is through the slave trade, the second is

*(Continued on page 6)*



Photograph of Beth Lenz

## Editorial

This issue contains the first part of a thesis written by Beth Lenz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Ethnomusicology) at the University of Michigan, 1989. After a search by both Ev Cowett and myself, a copy of the thesis was purchased for the Society. Beth has recently given us permission to reprint her thesis and share it with other bones players. Over the next year or so, you will see it broken into newsletter size pieces. The thesis is full of footnotes and references, most of which will not be included in the narrative. We owe Beth a hearty thanks for this significant contribution to rhythm bones literature. The thesis is copyrighted by Beth Lenz, 1989 and is used with permission.

Are you ready to perform with your local symphony. I certainly want to. Dave Boyles was ready and you will enjoy and relate to his story about playing bones with the Milwaukee Symphony. He is planning on attending BFX. I wonder—did he use wooden bones or his 'Black Bart' real rib bones?

After reading the letter from Dick Jacobs (below), I called the telephone number he provided and discovered the bones manufacturing company had been bought out. The only person left from the original was, coincidentally, another Steve Brown. He couldn't remember the name of the manufacturer of the bones, but they were in Philadelphia. He remembered the mold for the plastic bones was in bad shape.

I immediately called Joe Birl, who having designed the mold, knew the name of the company. We talked about the possibility of making another run of bones to give to kids or perhaps get the mold for our informal library. Joe called the company and they could not find the mold. He said they are very small nowadays, and had thrown a lot of stuff away. It was a good idea though.

This issue is late and I apologize. I need help with ideas for articles or better yet articles that you write. I thank the authors who contributed to

## Letters to the Editor

I sang in a Gospel Quartet (The Jacobs Brothers) from Pennsylvania for many years until 1991. From 1986 to 1991 we included at least one bones song in our program. Many people, especially kids, wanted a pair of bones. We ordered them from a music company in New Jersey by the 100's. I believe they got them from a distributor in Alabama. We sold over 3,000 pairs during that time period. I only play them occasionally now, usually when we have a Reunion Concert. I learned to play in a butcher shop on real beef bones in 1959-60.

The wholesaler that we last ordered bones from was N.H.F. Musical Merchandise Corp., 9244 Commerce Highway, Pennsauken, NJ, 08110, 800-524-0441, FAX 1-609-663-0436. These were plastic bones that came in a sealed plastic package along with directions on how to play them. Our cost in the early 1990's was about \$1.00 each. *Dick Jacobs*

Good man, that Steve Brown - I still play and treasure the bones he made for me over 20 years ago! He and I have actually spoken a few times about the RBS gatherings and were it not for issues of travel, or a gig, or some other commitment, I would definitely have attended several. Besides Steve's enthusiastic reports, a few of my "Cindy's Super School of Bones Playing & Etiquette" graduates have attended Fests and returned simply waxing rhapsodic about their experiences! So you see, Steve (the other!) I *have* been interested in the RBS, I just haven't been fortunate enough to be a participant!

One of those graduates was Tim Reilly. Riley thinks I'm the hottest player to come down the alley - an illusion which I hope he continues to hold! Although I do understand where that comes from.

Years ago, when I first met Tim he was newly-hired at Mystic, a struggling, intense, young man trying to hold his own among the seasoned chantey crew. His sincerity and humble nature appealed to me, and when I heard he had been a drummer in high school, I suggested he learn to

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

play the bones - none of the other guys did at that time - and offered to teach him what I knew.

Of course, within 2 weeks the student had far surpassed the teacher - or rather, he blew me off the planet! But Tim was shy, and wouldn't play in front of people. So at the Sea Music Festival that June, after much encouragement and co-ersion, we got him up on the stage to play a tune with us during our concert. When the music "got into him", he just let loose with the most fantastic rhythms and poly-rhythms you could ever imagine. The crowd went wild! I can still see the joy on his face - he was overwhelmed to the point of tears. He'd found his niche, and his place in the chantey pack, and he loved how he felt when he played. I think he associates me with all these good feelings; I gave him the key to the door to self-expression, that is the basis of his adoration...not my playing. Yes, I showed him the basics, but more

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(Executive Director Continued from page 1)

playing. Well, more power to Abbeyfeale for taking on this endeavor, and I think it might also influence us as an organization to think seriously about presenting an American contest which is at least a par with the All Ireland contest. Why have a bone playing contest at all? We as an organization have embraced bone playing and each other in a non-competition, truly inclusive way which is some ways is in direct contrast to a competition. However, I think a competition would offer both opportunity for our members, and bring attention to the general public about the art of bone playing. What do the membership think about this? Lets make this a topic of discussion for

## Unknown Amateur Boyles—Featured Guest Performer with the Milwaukee Symphony

The Cedarburg/Grafton Rotary sponsors the Milwaukee Symphony each December. I have been talking to the symphony for two years about playing the bones with them. My point is that the bones are a very historical musical instrument and should be represented at the highest level.

Well, I got my opportunity December 16, 2005, to play with the 85 piece Milwaukee Symphony at their concert in Cedarburg's Performing Arts Center. There was a sell-out crowd and I was nervous and pumped.

But let me tell you about the rehearsal I had to put myself through. I was not going to do this if I was not comfortable with the orchestra or they were not comfortable with me.

There was only one melody I wanted to do—*Parade of the Wooden Soldier*. I wanted a more formal song – not Dixie or bluegrass, not Irish but something more formal to bring up the level of acceptance of the bones as a “bone-e-fide” musical instrument. Besides, it was a Christmas concert. *Parade of the Wooden Soldiers* was perfect. Also it's a march which works

well with the bones as most of you know.

Back to the rehearsal. No one knew what the bones were all about . . . including the conductor Andrew Massey. The business manager introduced me to him just before the rehearsal. I was prepared with a recording of the *Parade of the Wooden Soldier*. I asked conductor Massey to listen to the march in the lobby away from the rehearsal hall. I had a boom box I brought a long. I played along with the music so he would have an idea what I wanted to do. He watched his lengthy score as he listened to me. “Well, I think it will be quite fine,” he said in his British accent with a grin on his face.

I was told to sit in this straight-backed chair in front of the orchestra while the rehearsal was going on. I sat there for an hour getting very nervous. I about walked out. The intimidation factor was very high.

Finally, Mr. Massey gave me a pretty weak introduction. “This fellow is going to do something with the bones,” he said. I asked for a couple of minutes to explain myself and the bones. He said “seven seconds” with a smile. I got two minutes.

He struck up the orchestra. *Parade of the Wooden Soldier* does not start out as a march. There is no tempo until it finally breaks into a quiet march. I played one hand lightly (left, I'm left handed.) As the music broke into a full orchestra march, I brought up the right hand to fill out the tempo with both hands. While I played, I marched in place. As I got into it, I looked for a friendly face from these very up-scale professional musicians. Finally, way in the back, I saw the kettle drum player craning his neck with a puzzled look. Then he started to grin. I began feeling better – maybe acceptance from the percussionist. The rehearsal ended. They all tapped their instruments in recognition of my performance. Mr. Massey asked my opinion. I said “I think it works.” He said, “Then we'll see you in three weeks.” As I was walking past the cello section, a very nice senior lady said quietly “Bravo! Bravo!”

I was flying! As I walked out of the rehearsal hall, I got the idea that I

should be the wooden soldier. So I went to the oldest costume shop in Milwaukee; Millers. They probably have every costume there is since 1800. Well, I told this young gal with great enthusiasm that I'm a guest feature performer with the Milwaukee Symphony, and I want to perform looking like the wooden soldier. I ended up with this great bright red, old military coat with gold trim, gold trimmed black pants and a marching hat, boots, the whole thing. I didn't tell anyone except my wife and the orchestra business manager that I was wearing the costume.

The concert hall was full. In the front row were my friends, my kids, and my mother-in-law. I was hanging it out there to be good or bad in front of everyone.

Back stage I was standing in my nice black suit that everyone thought I was performing in, when the business manager said “Aren't you going to wear your costume because you are on after this next song?” They had changed the line up but had not told me. I ran down the hall to change into my costume I had hid in the band room. The stage manager came looking for me. He said, “Why aren't you in your dressing room?” I said with excitement, “I have a dressing room?” “Sure,” he said, “let's go.” On the door “David Boyles – dressing room B” The stage manager said, “Calm down. I'll help you get ready.” Now I'm really getting hyped, besides the fact that I have to hurry.

I ran back to the stage area with enough time to think about what I was about to do. Well, it was not as bad as the rehearsal, although I was wired.

(Continued on page 8)

## Websites of the Quarter

Here are some websites from Steve Brown that might interest you; an old bones article in Mother Earth, [motherearthnews.com/DIY/1982\\_March\\_April/Playing\\_The\\_Bones](http://motherearthnews.com/DIY/1982_March_April/Playing_The_Bones), an article on bones player Ted Duckett, [mustrad.org.uk/articles/duckett.htm](http://mustrad.org.uk/articles/duckett.htm) and an encyclopedia article on bones as an instrument, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bones\\_\(instrument\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bones_(instrument))

## Young Bones Player

March was a busy month for this bones player. Besides Saint Patrick's Day and my visit to the Massachusetts Music Educators Conference, on March 15, I conducted an after school bones workshop at the Martin Luther King Elementary School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I arrived and was surprised to find an "opening act." Four young string players, assembled on the auditorium stage, played a chamber piece for their peers. I asked them if they knew any fiddle tunes, and soon we were playing (I think it was *Arkansas Traveler*) together!

I played along to some pre-recorded Irish and ragtime music, then got into teaching taps: Over thirty elementary pupils accompanied me on the work song *Take This Hammer* while I played guitar. Rolls were less successful, but there were two outstanding girls.

We closed the hour by performing two renditions of *Elements of a Storm*, the first using only body percussion and voice to create a rain and lightening storm. Then we did it a second time using classroom percussion instruments and some bones.

Thanks to lead teacher Katherine Parks for inviting me and to Constance Cook for the loan of her battery of bones, some of which were made through the largess of the RBS.

## Female wins All-Ireland Bones Competition

I landed in Shannon and headed to Ennis on Thursday night. Went to Brogan's where there was a great session going on. I listened for about an hour then asked if I could join in on the bones. "Yes and Welcome" was the reply so I played until they finished. I found out later it was Eoin O'Neill who said that and Quentin Cooper on fiddle and tenor banjo (I bought their CD). On to Galway City where there were lots of sessions but

lots of university student raucous drinking so I didn't have a good chance to play. Then to Inisheer, the smallest of the Aran Islands, where on Saturday night there were sessions at the hotel and at Tigh Neds.

I played at the hotel Saturday and Sunday night. On to Doolin where I played with two guys at McGann's on Monday night. They were very welcoming. Tuesday night I played at Connor's Pub. They weren't so welcoming, but said I could play. I got shushed once when I didn't realize the fiddle (Yvonne Casey) was taking a break.

I did my best to be sensitive and not overpower with the bones, but there was lots of crowd noise. When I got up to leave the audience shouted "Bravo" (Did they like my playing or were they that glad to see me go?).

I got to Abbeyfeale on Thursday night (the first night of the Fleadh by the Feale) and checked into Noreen Brown's B&B otherwise known as bones headquarters.

At the Winner's Circle Pub they had a gathering session of music and dance by local youth which was fabulous then music and polka by some adults. I introduced myself to Dan and Maureen Murphy and then met Noreen Murphy (mother of 2005 Bones Champion David Murphy.) She introduced me to David and the crowd asked me to play along with Dan Murphy and some others. Dan played a polka and then after a while kept turning up the speed to see just how fast I could go.

It was very funny and good craic. I played at almost every pub in Abbeyfeale for the rest of the 5 day festival. I usually tried to find a group with no bones players.

There was fabulous talent there (players from Crede and 4 Men and a Dog) in the Pubs as well as a lot of others whose names I don't know.

There was a great bones workshop on Saturday by Steve Brown and David Murphy with about 16 students attending.

I didn't plan to compete in the bones championship, but when I signed up for the workshop Maureen Murphy said "Oh, do it. It will give you a great buzz and you've come all

this way." So I signed up and paid my 10 euro entry fee. On Monday I got cold feet and called her back to withdraw but she said do it for the audience—they especially like it when people from other countries compete. So I said OK I'll do it. My name was drawn 7th out of 8 contestants. We each played two songs of different tempo. Ronnie McShane (formerly of the Chieftains) was the adjudicator.

I couldn't believe it when they read the results. 3rd place: Paddy O'donovan, 2nd place: Steve Brown, 1st place: Gail Brayden. (the first female to win the competition). I still wake up at night and start laughing when I think of it. It was a wonderful experience and of course I will be going back to Ireland next spring.  
*Gail Brayden*



Photograph of 2006 All-Ireland Bones Competition winners, Gail Brayden, Steve Brown and Paddy Donovan. Photo by Debhla

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. Our webmaster Jonathan Danforth posts a large number of events of interest to bones players. If you would like to be listed on the Calendar or know of events that should be listed contact Jonathan.

**Bones Fest X.** July 28-30, 2006. Hosted by Melissa and Jonathan Danforth.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 28-September 3, 2006. 31st Annual Festival and Contests. Bones Contest on Sunday of that week. For details



# Tips and Techniques

## How To Hold The Bones

### Part 2 of 3

How to hold the bones will be demonstrated to the class and instructed one on one as needed until all have mastered the fundamentals. This article is to reinforce that instruction, and provide reminders to the techniques and methods used to achieve satisfactory play. Only by practice can one master the fundamentals in playing the bones.

Bones are not rattled together by a twitching movement of the hand, but are rather swung together like a bell and clapper. One bone is held firmly, the other held loose, while the hand, wrist, and arm describe an ellipse through the air, enabling the loose bone to strike against the firm one. The technique is rather like riding a bicycle; you can either do it, or you cannot. Once that first roll is achieved, the would-be-player never looks back.

Bones should be played two to each hand from the start. Double handed playing is the ultimate art, and the interrelationship between the hands increases the versatility and dimension of the sounds that can be produced. If the hands are trained together from the beginning, it will be easier than introducing the other hand later.

Bones are basically the same shape, whether they are wooden or rib bones. The shape is slightly curved along the length, and thicker at one end than the other. These features are important. The curve is for the reason that, when played with the curves opposite each other, only a small area of contact is made. The thicker end gives weight at the bottom, which helps the swing and deepens the sound.

Bones are held the same in either hand. Take two bones. Turn them so that the curves face each other (knock kneed). Place one bone, thin end up, between the index and middle finger (there are other grips that will be demonstrated) with the dome of the curve away from the thumb. This will be your "bell" bone. Set this bone firmly into the heel of your hand and

clamp it down with the tip of your middle finger on the crest of the bone edge. Place the second bone, thin end up between the middle and ring finger, with the dome of the curve toward your thumb. Place the tip of your ring finger lightly on the crest of this bone. This is your "clapper" bone. You will want it to move freely against the "bell" bone.

Now rotate the arm so that the "clapper" bone falls away from the "bell" bone by gravity. Now turn the arm again so that it falls back into the "bell" bone. You should hear a small click. It is this basic clapper action that produces the sound. As the speed of the arm is increased, centrifugal force will replace gravity and a rhythmical roll will ensue. It is essential to persevere with this action until the first double tap is achieved. Analyse the exact flick of the arm you used to produce this, and try to repeat it. It is easier to attempt a very fast roll than to do small ones, as these require greater control, which will come with practice.

The sound bones produce cannot be duplicated by any other method and are surely the most effective pocket percussion instrument ever conceived

## More Letters to Editor

importantly I conveyed the advice and wisdom I'd been given by Percy Danforth: let the bones be an extension of your body and *dance!* Tim, as you know, rocks out!

Now I am back in southern RI, and New Bedford is less than an hour down the road. And, as of this date, I have no commitments scratched on my calendar for the dates of Bones Fest X - I am thinking that this just might be the year!

*Thank you* for reminding me of the RBS and for alerting me to the dates of the Fest! And please, do send me any information you can...I would be particularly interested in a Schedule of Events or Classes, or Invited Participants. *Thanks again! Cindy Peloquin cindy@seasons.net*

I just wanted to drop you a line to let you know that I meet with Roberta Perkins this afternoon. I had a most

enjoyable time. We exchanged stories as well as information on the bones. Roberta was quite interested in some of the different sets of bones I have acquired and made over the years.

I got her started on the basics and showed her some techniques for two hand playing. We have a lot of common interests in history and music.

Thanks for putting me in touch with her. Please feel free to call or email me at anytime.

The bones that I showed her that she really liked were several sets that I got from a friend whom I believe you also know; Tim Riley from Mystic Sea Port. Timmy and I have been friends and swapping stories and bones for a dozen or so years. I have been going to the Sea Music Festival since 1989. I volunteered for several of those years where I got to meet and play with many fine and talented musicians

Till next time, be well my friend and to you and yours; love and friendship, now and forever, Sarion (aka *Jim Fiore*) [Roberta called looking for bones information. I sorted our RBS Database on zip code and saw that Jim had the same zip code. I introduced them via email. *Steve Wixson*]

Well, that's a very interesting article [referring to the Abbeyfeale On Line article Steve Brown mentioned in his column]. As far as bones playing goes, does "a huge event" mean about 100 people?

The NTCMA is not sanctioned by anyone, mostly because we have been doing our [bones contest] for 31 years, and there wasn't anyone to sanction us because there wasn't anyone doing anything like this 31 years ago.

I wonder if they would be interested in our sanctioning them, since we host the official (as copyrighted) "World's Spoon & Bone Playing Championship." They're probably not interested in spoons, eh?

Sheila and I have traveled and performed in Ireland for about 20 years now, and I've never heard of this organization. Greta Elkin, who lives in Londonderry, will be at our festival this year, and I recommend you talk to her about it. See you in MoValley [for the NTCMA Festival and Contests]. Have lots of fun. *Bob Everhart*

## Bones On Tour with “The President’s Own”

[In the Fall 2005, percussionist and resident bones player, GySgt Ken “KennyB” Wolin went on a seven week tour with “The President’s Own” U.S. Marine Band performing on bones and mallet (melodic) percussion in over forty concerts and cities across the country.

Kenny’s bones playing was featured during *Irish Songs*, by Chief Arranger, MSgt Stephen Bullah, written for “The President’s Own” vocalist, GySgt Kevin Bennier. After hearing Kenny perform *Far and Away* with John Williams during the band’s 205th anniversary concert at the Kennedy Center, MSgt Bullah wanted to incorporate Kenny’s bones playing in his wind-ensemble arrangement of familiar Irish songs.

On tour, Kenny used different combinations of bones determined by the performance space and instrumentation. For example, during the piccolo and bones soli, Kenny primarily used custom-made pairs of shin bone from bone shander guru, Tim Reilly. Whenever the snare drum parts were doubled, he used custom-made pairs of wood bones from craftsmen Steve Brown and Jeff Lefferts.]

Tour highlights included a stop in Louisville, Kentucky where I stumbled across an international bluegrass convention and had the opportunity to sit in on bones and spoons. In Kansas City, I had a great time playing spoons and bones during a local blues open-mike jam. The following night, I met up with Irish folk musician Jonathan Ramsey ([jonathanramsey.com](http://jonathanramsey.com)), accompanying him on bodhran and bones at Harling’s Upstairs Irish Pub.

The biggest highlight came in San Francisco where I met up with fellow bones-mate, Jeff Lefferts on the tall ship *Balcutha* for a late-night shantey sing. Jeff was at the marine band concert the next afternoon, so just prior to the performance I had fellow percussionist Steve Owen play some ragtime xylophone while I accompanied with my new *Leffert*

bones. Later that evening, an impromptu jam session broke out at the home of Lukas Hicks, an incredible banjo player and jaw-dropping spoons player (“thanks for the lessons!!”), along with fellow talented Tangles members Sarah (accordion), and Sinder (8 yr old bones player!) ([the.tangles.com](http://the.tangles.com)). The night was capped-off with an Irish session at An Bodhran on Haight Street where Jeff and I were forced to put down their Guinness’ and take a soli, to which a wise old fiddler commented to them, “oh, if you could only do that to music!”

The tour wrapped up near Phoenix, Arizona where I coached my bone-playing mom, Judy Wolin, who is currently manager of the group *Rhythm and Bones. Kenny Wolin*

Founded in 1798 by an Act of Congress, “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band is America’s oldest professional musical organization. Today, “The President’s Own” is celebrated for its role at the White House and its dynamic public performances. “The President’s Own” encompasses the United States Marine Band, Marine Chamber Orchestra, and Marine Chamber Ensembles, and performs regularly at the White House and for more than 500 public performances across the nation each year. For more information see [marineband.usmc.mil](http://marineband.usmc.mil).

Percussionist Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth Wolin joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in October 1997. GySgt Wolin began his musical training at age 8. Upon graduating in 1985 from Oak Park High School in Oak Park, Mich., he attended Oberlin Conservatory in Oberlin, Ohio, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in music. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where he earned a master’s degree in music. His percussion instructors were Michael Rosen of Oberlin Conservatory, Michael Udow of the University of Michigan, and Sam Tundo of the Detroit Symphony. Prior to joining “The President’s Own,” GySgt Wolin performed with the Rhode Island Philharmonic in Providence, the Boston Baroque, the

Sarasota Opera, and served as an extra with the Detroit and New Hampshire Symphonies. Additionally, he performed professionally throughout the state of Massachusetts as a marimba soloist. As a bones player, Kenny performs with the group, The Shebeens ([theshebeens.com](http://theshebeens.com)), and originated and taught the Advanced

*(History of Bones —Continued from page 1)*

through the immigration of people from the British Isles to the U.S. While one possibility need not exclude the other, the evidence more strongly supports the second theory over the more widely held notion that the bones are of African origin.

Slaves first reached America in 1619 when a Dutch ship brought native Africans to Jamestown, Virginia. Slave trade continued well into the nineteenth century, despite its prohibition by Congress in 1807.

Most slaves came from Africa’s western coast, although the central African interior also became a source for slaves. The European demand for slaves encourage fighting among African tribes in the interior, warring tribes often brought captives to the coast to sell to white slaves traders. Such activity took place as far into the interior as Lake Chad. Accounts differ slightly as to how far south the slave activity extended. Claims of slavery’s southern limit range from the equator to southern Angola.

There is no doubt that African instruments were brought to America along with slaves. Conditions in the slave quarters of slave ships were so cramped that slaves were often brought upon the deck to dance in hopes that exercise of this sort would keep them alive and healthy. A few African instruments were often carried on board to encourage this activity. This fact can be substantiated by contemporary accounts such as the following one written by George Pinckard in February, 1796, from Carlisle Bay, Jamaica.

A slave-ship, belonging to North America, and bound to Savanna in Georgia, had arrived from the coast of Guinea...and was lying very near to us, with a cargo of Negroes on board... [We] took off a boat...and went to visit the Guineaman....In the daytime they were not

*(Continued on page 7)*

(Continued from page 6)

allowed to remain in the place where they had slept, but were kept most upon the open deck, where they were made to exercise, and encouraged, by the music of their beloved banjar, to dancing and cheerfulness.

We saw them dance, and heard them sing. In dancing they scarcely moved their feet, cut threw about their arms, and twisted and writhed their bodies...Their song was a wild yell, devoid of all softness and harmony, and loudly chanted in harsh monotony.

In addition to the banjo, other contemporary accounts also mention drums.

Although such accounts don't mention the bones, it is possible they were transported to America as were other African instruments. Another, perhaps more plausible explanation, is that some slaves knew how to make the bones and did so once they came to America. Charles Hamm suggest a similar explanation for the presence of the African balafo, a xylophone-like instrument, in America. The balafo is found in contemporary accounts of music in the South, yet no record exists of its transport from Africa.

African slaves brought to America often constructed musical instruments out of whatever materials were available to them. It is possible that slaves first fashioned and played the bones in America, along with other impromptu percussion instruments.

It has also been suggested that slaves first made bones after the use of drums was prohibited. Drums were associated with slaves uprisings, with drums no longer available, other percussion instruments like the bones may have been made to take their place.

While the above suppositions regarding the origins of the bones in America are possible, none of them can be firmly substantiated. In fact, while several scholars have identified the bones as an African instrument, even that claim remains questionable. Daily Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, in *Gentlemen Be Seated* refer to the African origin of the bones. In *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, Hans Nathan describes bones made by slaves on plantations as being similar to 'their African models.' Dana Epstein also refers to the African origins of the bones in *Sinful Tunes and Spiritual: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. In reference to

a sketch of a Negro dance by Lewis Miller of York, Pennsylvania, while on a trip to Virginia in 1953, Epstein identifies the fiddle in the sketch as European and the banjo and bones as African. But none of these scholars offer sufficient sources to establish the bones as African.

Possible evidence in support of the bone's African origin may be found in the work done by Percival Kirby in the 1930's. Kirby studied musical traditions among the peoples of southern Africa and found several instruments which closely resemble the bones. The *amatambo* played by the Zulu are made from the rib bones of animals. Cattle ribs are preferred since they are large and easy to handle. They are used to provide rhythmic accompaniment to singing. The Chwana *marapo* are also made from rib bones.

Kirby studied the area of Africa south of 22 degree latitude, which is approximately 250-300 miles south of the area where slave trading took place in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is reasonable to speculate that the bones he found in southern Africa were known among Africans several hundred miles to the north where slave trading was common.

However, the *amatambo* and *marapo* found by Kirby among the Zulu and Chwana respectively, are of uncertain origin. Kirby could not determine whether or not the *amatambo* had come from Europe. Kirby is more definite about the origins of the Chwana *marapo*:

The Chwana almost certainly did [get the bones from Europeans]; the Reverend A. Sandilands, who has been for years a missionary in Bechuanaland, assured me that the fact is admitted by the Chwana themselves.

There are further problems with the African origin theory of the bones. If the bones are of African origin, presumably they would have been mentioned in descriptions of slaves' music making. Such descriptions do exist, but date back no further than the mid-1800's when the minstrel show (which used the bones as a standard instrument) had already achieved popularity.

If the bones are of African origin, one would expect to find similar

instruments throughout a substantial portion of the continent. However, evidence uncovered in this study documents the existence of the bones only in southern Africa.

African slaves were brought to Central America and the Caribbean as well as the United States. If the bones are of African origin, one would expect to find the bones in these regions. Since minstrel troupes did not travel to these areas, if the bones did exist in these regions among the black population, one could assume that the bones were brought there by African slaves and were thus of African origin. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the bones were ever present in Central America or the Caribbean. [End of Part 1.] *Beth Lenz*.

## Beth Lenz Biography

Beth Lena learned how to play the bones from Percy Danforth, whom she met while pursuing her degree in percussion performance at the University of Michigan. Her interest in the bones continued and the history and performing techniques became the topic of her thesis for a subsequent master's degree in ethnomusicology, also from the University of Michigan. Ms. Lenz currently resides in Seattle, Washington, where she works as a free-lance percussionist and private percussion teacher. Favorite gigs include two performances with Dave Brubeck, a recording session with Jackson Berkey of Mannheim Steamroller, and occasion feature

## Reflections—A Special Issue of the Newsletter

As we celebrate ten years of Bones Fests, Mel Mercier suggested we publish a special issue of the newsletter to commemorate this landmark event. By now you may have received an email or letter inviting you to contribute to this issue titled *Reflections*. Please send in your thoughts and/or photographs for the Bones Fests you have attended. There will be lots of color photographs included. A keepsake for sure. Email or mail to Steve Wixson.



(Benoit BourquContinued from page 3)

You know what I mean. Now it was the time to actually show my stuff. I was excited to say the least. This may have been done before by some bonest, but not by me.

The conductor introduced me with a bit of his British flair. “Well ladies and gentlemen, this is a new experience for me, too.”

I marched out on the stage in front

of all 85 musicians with my bones in each hand swinging my arms stiffly. You know; like a marching wooden soldier. I did a military turn facing the audience, next the conductor who was positioned next to me on a stand. I could almost hear a low whispered groan from the audience, that “What is he doing?” kind of sound.

I kept my hands on my chest until the great march started. I hit the first note, first click exactly in time with the music... a quiet left hand building to the crescendo. Then I brought up my right hand. Both hands were balanced in perfect time with the music. The mike and sound system were perfect. As I played I marched in place with a sober wooden soldier expression on my face. “I am the wooden soldier!!”

As the music filled out, I am really flying. I hit every note perfectly, stopping at the last march note exactly on time – no over click. I can be my own critic and I know I was perfect.

The audience cheered and gave me a standing ovation. I did a military bow to the audience, to the conductor and to the orchestra. Then I marched off. What a trip!!

One needs approval from their



peers. I got great compliments from the conductor and from the musicians in the orchestra.

If you want to play to this, be sure to get the right song, *Parade of the Wooden Soldier* NOT *March of the Toys*. They are two different songs.

NOTE: There was a program stuffer explaining my background and the history of the bones. *Dave Boyles*. Cedarburg, Wisconsin

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 8, No. 3 2006

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## Executive Director's Column

It is with extreme sadness that I report the death of Russ Myers. Russ Myers was a cornerstone in our little bones community. He learned to play from his father, and developed an amazingly melodic style of bones playing, changing pitch in a way no one else could.

He was a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society, a board member for several years, and the Assistant Director until ill health forced him to retire. He cared deeply about our art, and was eloquent in his description of it. He was truly a walking encyclopedia not only on bones playing matters but on a variety of subjects. In 1976, he, along with Percy Danforth, was invited by the Library of Congress to document the bones as two

of the last remaining bones players.

For me I will not only miss his bones playing prowess, which was great, but that most amazing sense of humor, and humble, gracious style of his, and perhaps most of all, his voice. He was able to attend this year's bones fest, although confined to a wheel chair, and for that I am most grateful.

The service for Russ was held on September 15th at Our Lady of the Blue Ridge in Madison VA. There was a reception immediately after at Russ and Wilma's home. Bone playing was welcome, and the Possum Hollow Band played. *Steve Brown*

## Highlights of Bones Fest X

It's hard to believe that our Bones Fest, which started out in the Cowett's back yard, has grown into an international affair with a hundred attendees. Bones Fest X, held in New Bedford, MA, combined the city's multicultural and maritime music heritage with the sass and rattle that heralds bones players the world over. Despite the heat, it seemed that everyone had a grand ol' time performing, jamming, and learning from one another.

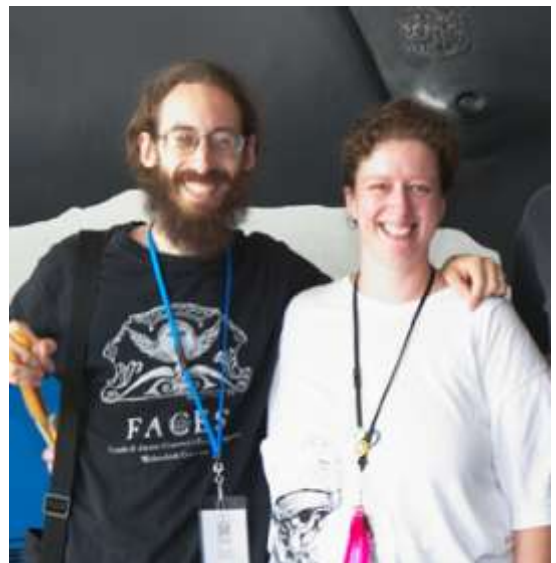
The performances this year took on a fresh tone as Al Cowett encouraged players to combine their acts with personal background or narrative. We expanded the performances into Friday night (because we had so many players).

We were very happy to see the number of bones players combining their talents as duets, trios, or larger ensembles. We were very impressed with the variety and range of techniques and musical traditions that went into everyone's playing — everything from old-time, jazz, and classical to rock-and-roll, Québécois, and sea shanties.

Of course none of this would have been possible without everyone's help and support. Al and Dan Cowett deserve special thanks for their tireless energy and expertise behind the mic and sound board. Kudos also go to the talented and patient musicians who sat in to provide live music — the Rusty String Bandits and the Publicans. Finally, we can't express the honor and pleasure we felt

seeing Russ Myers at Bones Fest X, contributing mightily (as always) to the racket, learning, and merriment. Looking back, we are grateful to have had the chance to make music with him one more time, and we will miss him terribly.

Thanks to all who made 'our' Fest so special — we'll see you next year! *Jonathan and Melissa Danforth* [Note: Jonathan and Melissa will have more to say about Bones Fest X in the special issue of the newsletter titled *Reflections*



Hosts Jonathan and Melissa Danforth. Photo by John Maciel



## Editorial

Russ Myers is the second of our Founding Members to die. Vivian Cox was the first and we miss them both.

Soon after I learned of the death of Russ, I played his *On the Road Again* CD (see review in last quarter's issue, Vol. 8, No. 1) and listened to Russ playing bones and telling bones stories. What a great legacy he left us in this CD. His band, the Possum Ridge String Band, has donated several of these CDs for our members. All they ask for is a donation. See Recording of Quarter.

There is an article on Russ in the Vol. 5, No. 2 issue of the newsletter.

Bones Fest X is over, and I spent the entire airplane trip home writing emails and organizing. Melissa and Jonathan Danforth were great hosts and will be remembered as hosting one of the most successful Fests. Their highlights article is on Page 1.

For several years, we have talked about sponsoring a bones contest. The Board has decided not to hold a contest as part of a Bones Fest as we want to keep it as non-competitive as possible such that even the least experienced bones players feel comfortable performing in front of their peers.

The Bones & Spoons Contest, held as part of the Annual Old Time Country Music Festival & Contests, was not held this year due to lack of contestants. This contest has been held continuously for the past 30 years, and several RBS members have won it. Part of the reason was that the contest was held late Sunday and many people had already left for home.

The organizer, Bob Everhart, said he would move the contest back to Saturday next year. If we want a bones contest close to home (See Steve Brown's Column in the last issue, Vol. 8, No. 2, where he talks about the All-Ireland Bones Competition seeking to host a World Bones Competition), the NTCMA contest is one with a long history. Let's support it next year or it might go away. It's a fun festival with

## Letters to the Editor

I am sorry to say that we did not have a Bones & Spoons Contest this

year. I dropped down to the Miscellaneous Contest and won second place. I do not understand it because, during the [NTCMA] festival, different bones players came in and talked to me. We had the chance to jam a bit and then they went home. It was fun and I got to play a lot.

I taught about a dozen people, both young and old, and I usually give the kids the bones that I teach them on. I ended up teaching a lady and selling her some of my best bones—some that I like to use.

That's about all from the festival. I am always at that festival since I do sound work there. It was great meeting everybody and always great working with Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell! Til Later! *Scott Walker*

I missed Bones Fest again this year as my symphony summer schedule got in the way. I really wanted to attend, but we did a "Music of Led Zeppelin" concert that I couldn't get out of.

I was saddened to hear of Russ Meyer's passing. He was a true gentleman of the bones and one of the last of that generation.

I enjoyed reading the newsletter especially Dave Boyles article about playing with the symphony. Thanks, *Bill Vits* [See Page 3 for an article by Bill on his symphony bones playing.]

Just wanted to let you friends know that last month I sent in Jerry's applications for bones playing to the Iowa Arts Council. I never expected to hear too soon from them; but, last Friday we heard. He has an audition this Wednesday at 10:30 in Des Moines! I have been so nervous that you'd think it was me having the audition. Once I get home from school today, we are going to Des Moines and spend the night—I don't want to take any chances on missing this audition! Hope all is well with you all. Love, *Sharon Mescher*

[New member] Rebecca Cooke attended my Bones Workshop held at the Arizona Highlands Celtic Festival in Flagstaff, AZ this summer. She comes from a musical family and is picking up the rhythm bones quickly.

I like to have bones affordable enough to give away at such a public

## Rhythm Bones Player

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

event, so I built a couple hundred pairs of tongue depressor and penny versions (the Dutch Penny Bones) that I learned about from the Society newsletter. I was able to introduce about 40 people to rhythm bones in two workshops--and promoted the society and the website at the same time. So I'm doing my part to share and promote! Shake dem bones!

*Michael Satterwhite*

Bonex Fest X gave me an opportunity to meet other bones players. It was a great experience. My grandson Andy really enjoyed the interest shown to him as he is just learning to play the bones. We were looked after by all the RBS members and made to feel that we belonged to the group. Meeting bone players from different parts of the globe was super. Jonathan and Melissa Danforth must be congratulated on a first class Bones Fest. They worked very hard, We enjoyed ourselves and we are proud to be members of the Rhythm Bones



# Russ Myers' Obit

Russell Bordley Myers, 72, of Brightwood, VA died Sunday, September 10, 2006 in the University of Virginia Hospital. He was born March 27, 1934 in Baltimore, Maryland and was the son of the late David Russell Myers and Helen Bordley Myers.

He was a retired Manufacture Representative for Goodwin-Rawls Sales in Richmond, VA. He graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1956. He joined the U.S. Army in 1957 and later he became a Captain in the Army National Guard. He was a member of the 16th Special Forces Group Airborne as a Green Beret. He was a member of Our Lady of the Blue Ridge Catholic Church in Madison, VA. He was a member of the Possum Ridge String Band and the Rhythm Bones Society.

He is survived by his wife, Wilma Easley Myers of Brightwood, a daughter, Jennifer Bordley Walters, a son, David Russell Myers and seven grandchildren.

A memorial service was held at 3:00 PM, Friday, September 15, 2006 at Our Lady of the Blue Ridge Catholic Church. The family received friends at their home in Brightwood immediately following the service. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to Our Lady of the Blue Ridge Building Fund. Preddy Funeral Home in Madison, VA was in charge of

## Highlights from Russ Myers' Funeral

There were four representing the Bones Society, Ev and Val Cowett, Kenny Wolin and myself. There were a lot of people in attendance at the reception in the Meyers' home with lots of great food and wonderful live music. The band Russ played with (Possum Ridge String Band) was set up on a deck outside of the house and they were really great. They had a hammered dulcimer player, whistle, banjo, guitar & double bass (who doubled on didgeridoo!!!). They were nice enough to donate their CD's to anyone that wanted them as a

memento so we took several & we'll have one especially for the RBS archives. Some of my favorite Russ stories are recorded on that CD—most especially one entitled *Bones at the Funeral Home*—just a great story and it's wonderful that we can still hear Russ tell it!

Ev, Kenny & myself jammed on bones with the band and we had a really nice time. The great thing was they were used to playing with Russ on bones so we didn't get any strange looks as we joined in.

There was a room set up in their home with all kinds of Russ' treasures. Of course, we were immediately drawn to a table that was set up with all of Russ' bone paraphernalia - most importantly THOSE BONES!! That's one photo in particular you'll probably really enjoy [see Page 8.]

As for the funeral, it was standing room only which is a testament to the kind of man Russ was. Ev could fill you in more on what it was that was said about Russ in the beginning part of the funeral as we didn't get there right at the start of it. They had a group of singers from a Presbyterian church that joined the singers/soloist from Russ' church (it was Roman Catholic). A soloist sang a couple of my personal favorites - Ave Maria and Panis Angelicus.

I'm glad I had an opportunity to attend—it was sort of strange how I was nearby at the time and was able to go. *Teri Davies*

I think Teri described the funeral most eloquently. I was just very moved at how many people were there to attend and pay their respects to a very special person. I only wish I had met Russ earlier, but the short time I've known him (since Bones Fest 8) I am so grateful. I have often told his wonderful marching bones story, especially to some of the members here of "The President's Own." He would have been very pleased about

## Sharon Mescher Remembers Russ

As I have aged, I have come to realize that I need to listen carefully to the wise; and, then, take the time to allow those paragons of wisdom to

teach me by enhancing my knowledge, and, simply, gracing my life. If I am so fortunate to meet such people and soak up all that they offer, my hope is that I have listened closely and allowed my spirit to be changed for the good.

Wilma and Russ Myers are two such people who have profoundly been gifts to my life. Upon first meeting Russ, I thought he was a native southerner because of the prideful manner in which he talked about the South. I, also, assumed he was a Southern Baptist. Then, through a slow process, I learned that he and Wilma had lived in Virginia for years, but both were natives of other regions. The most mouth-dropping moment came when I realized he was a Catholic living in the Bible Belt!! This, still, seems somewhat strange to me.

From the first time I met Russ, I was in awe of his knowledge on every subject under the sun: world history, Catholic Church history, and bones history. I can't remember one question to which he did not know the answer. So, I quickly realized that each time we had the opportunity to be with Russ at the bones fests was a time that I had better pick his brain as much as possible so as to learn, learn, and learn. Wilma has told me the story of an encyclopedia salesperson coming to their door. As I recall, Wilma told the salesman that he/she was welcome to come in, but she was already "married to an encyclopedia." When Russ answered a question, he did so in detail --- one had to know the details in order to fully understand the answer!

How will I remember Russ? With Wilma always "there" supporting him; playing his beloved bones; telling his story; giving history lessons; and, that intoxicating, from-his-toes, belly-laugh. Fortunately, I have Russ on tape playing his bones at Bones Fest X in New Bedford, MA. These memories will forever be precious.

Russ was a gift to my life, and for this I will be eternally grateful. I can see it now: Russ is in heaven, giving a history lesson; laughing with that distinctive laugh; and certainly entertaining the angels by playing his bones! Heaven is now being blessed by the presence of the one and only, Russ Myers. *Sharon Mescher*

## Mel Mercier Remembers Russ

I met Russ Myers for the first time in 1999 while I was in the United States for a year, studying and teaching at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. I needed to find a research topic for one of the seminars I was attending at Wesleyan and I decided to see if I could find any American bone players to interview. I had been playing one-handed bones since I was a young boy in Ireland and I had a vague memory of seeing a two-handed player at a party in Toronto sometime in the early 80s (I discovered later that it was Percy Danforth). I went to seek the advice of one of my colleagues at Wesleyan, Dr. Eric Charry. I knew that Eric had spent some time teaching in Greensboro, North Carolina, and I had a notion that he may have come across some bones players there. At the time I thought it was most likely that any living bones players would be located in the southern states. Eric did indeed recall seeing a two-handed bone player at the University at one time but he couldn't remember who it was.

A few minutes after I left Eric's office he noticed an email from somebody called Steve Wixson in his inbox. Steve had written to Eric to ask for assistance in his research on bones playing in North America. In the email he mentioned two bone players that he knew of in North Carolina and Virginia: Everett Cowett and Russ Myers! Eric forwarded the email to me and it was in my email inbox before I got back to my office after my meeting with him. Some stars in the bone-playing universe must have aligned themselves for a split second and sent Steve, Everett and Russ to me – electronically! I was flabbergasted by the synchronicity and set about contacting Ev and Russ to arrange to visit with them. I subsequently wrote about that visit in the newsletter [Vol 5, No 2] but not the serendipity that preceded it. Now that Russ has sadly passed away it seems appropriate for me to mark the moment when he first came into my life.

I have been enriched by knowing him and by visiting with him and his wife, Wilma at their home in Brightwood, Virginia, and at various Bones Fests over the past seven years. In January this year my fiancé, Maura, and I spent a week visiting with the Myers during which I interviewed Russ each day and we all shared supper in the evenings. Even though Russ was very ill he was extraordinarily generous with his time and he spoke at length to me about his life as a bone player and his hopes for the future of bone playing. I will always be grateful to him for his contribution to my efforts to write about the bones. I hope he will stay close as I begin the final phase of the writing of my dissertation. Russ has inspired me as a bone player and as a writer. He was a great 'character' and one of the very best bone players of the twentieth century. I miss his friendship, laughter, and musicianship.

I feel too for Wilma in her great loss. I have never seen anything quite like the partnership and the deep caring that epitomizes her relationship with Russ. Maura and I were blessed to spend so much time with them both last January. I will never forget the warmth of welcome that Russ and Wilma extended to Maura during that visit. We both remember our time there with great affection. My own most enduring images are of Maura and Russ sitting, chatting and laughing together.

Like many of you, I saw Russ for the last time at Bones Fest in July. It was obviously a huge effort for Russ and Wilma to come to the Fest and I am so grateful to them for that. Of course I'd like to have seen Russ in his high-spec, mechanized wheelchair whizzing around Bones Fest XI next year, but I am thankful that I got to spend a little more time with him before he passed away.

I wonder who he might be regaling with his stories now, or who he might be playing bones pass-offs with? Vivian Cox? Percy Danforth? Ted Goon? Frank Brower? The big man is standing tall again, and he is in good company! *Mel Mercier*

## RBS Members Remember Russ

Russ and Wilmer Myers were two folks who attended most Bones Fests and enjoyed them all. Russ was a jolly man with a huge laugh and was well described in the 'Ode to Russ Myers' by RBS member Walt Watkins. It brings a tear to my eye whenever I read it. Thanks Walt.

Russ brought dignity to Bones Playing and was always willing to share techniques, music, stories fellowship and good food. He is the only member to receive the award of 'Fellow' from the membership. May Your Bones Be With You Russ. The Cowett family will never forget you. *Ev Cowett*

A great loss. I'm so glad I got to meet him. Thanks, RBS, for making that possible. *Ellen Stern*

Darn, I'm sorry, but I am so selfishly happy that I got to see him, speak to him and listen to him play. What a grand man. I know we will all miss him. *Andy Cox*

I am grateful for the time I spent chatting with Russ in the back of the hall during the daytime performances. Gracious and acerbic with a self deprecating laugh and the ability to put anyone at ease. His ready wit and intriguing stories will be repeated and remembered for many years to come. *Hank Tenenbaum*

So sorry to hear of the death of Russ Myers. It is sad to lose someone you admire. We will miss his talent as a Bones player. All the more reason that we carry on and promote the Bones. Kind Regards, *Tony Humphreys*

Sorry to hear about the passing of Russ Myers. Glad we had a chance to hear him play in New Bedford. We will not be able to attend his memorial service, but will be thinking about him. Best wishes...*Guy Gillette*

Russ was a great bonesman, I'll miss him. *Greg Burrows*

*(Continued on page 5)*

(Continued from page 4)

Sorry to hear about Russ. It was a pleasure to meet him at Bones Fest X and to watch and hear his bones style.  
*Dennis Riedesel*

I had a very special and touching moment with Russ and Wilma at Bone Fest X. Russ said, "I wonder if you wouldn't mind sharing your technique for changing the pitch on the bones with me as we both seem to enjoy this profound feature of the bones." I replied, "Russ, of course, but I feel it is appropriate that we both exchange each other's techniques at this time." Russ concurred and, needless to say, we bonded. *Aaron Plunkett*

## Want to Be a Guest Editor?

Want to be a guest editor for the special issue of the newsletter titled *Reflections*. This issue will highlight 10 years of Bones Fests and will include lots of color photographs. It will be a collector's item.

If you are interested, please contact Steve Wixson.

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest X. Summer 2007.**

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest.**

August 27-September 2, 2007. 31st Annual Festival and Contests. Bones Contest on Saturday of that week. For details go to [www.OLDTIMEMUSIC.BIGSTEP.COM](http://www.OLDTIMEMUSIC.BIGSTEP.COM)

## Barry Patton on NBC

Barry Patton will soon be on the Megan Mullally show on NBC national television. Barry says he's made one trip to Hollywood already and has another scheduled. He says the show will include some history of rhythm bones as well as him playing the bones. At this time he does not know the air date for the show, so check out [meganshow.tv](http://meganshow.tv) for guest schedules. The show airs at 11 AM EDT in Chattanooga.

## Ode to Russ Myers

I was glad that Russ Myers got to go to the tenth Fest. I had visited him at Brightwood a week or so before the fest and he was looking forward to the trip and the post Fest trip into Maine.

At the Fest, even though the heat got to him from time to time, he was in his element and genuinely happy.

I had hoped that Russ would have 'looked over a four-leafed clover' many more times, but it was not to be. Russ was a great bones player, one of the prime movers in the Rhythm Bones Society, and a good man. I got to know him rather well and was inspired to try to capture his spirit and essence in this poetic tribute.

He sprang from a proud family heritage,  
as the Tree on his wall does attest.

He valued his southern upbringing:  
ever true, ever gracious, be the best.

While schooling to be a good soldier,  
He marched right file with his bones;  
and played that distinctive staccato,  
for which he had become so well known.

It blew them away that day and since,  
the percussive delights he extolled.

He loved to tell that story,  
And for us it never gets old.

He served his nation when it called,  
earning Airborne Wings on his chest;  
his courage and valor distinctive;  
his leadership among the best.

He found love when he met his sweet  
Wilma,  
and their marriage: an example to behold.

The nest they made in Virginia  
was as welcoming to all as their fold.

He helped spawn the boning Society,  
by hosting the charter Fest.

He dug into boning's history  
which he intoned with a booming zest.

The art of boning, awakened,  
grows daily ever more;  
surely because of those like Russ,  
a man we do adore.

We shall miss that distinctive rumble  
his whale bones produced for him.

The prospect one plays better  
Goes from nil to mighty slim.

But, Hark!! I hear a rhythmic sound  
Growing distinctive way on high

By golly its our Russ  
at the Great Bones Fest in the sky.

*Walt Watkins 11 Sept 2006*

## New Members

We've had a rash of new members. Rebecca Cooke attended a workshop of member Michael Satterwhite, Sam Droege who found us on the internet, Lee Formicola who attended a Mystic Sea Music Festival and discovered Tim Reilly and Kenny Wolin, Dave Hare from NEFFA, Pete Hayselden from the UK who is rejoining, Ron Harvey, son of member Mel Harvey, Andy Humphreys, grandson of member Tony Humphreys, Alan Hoynes, a friend of Tony Humphreys, Dennis Rigg, who found us via a friend in the UK and Scott Walker who runs sound at times for Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell at the

## Joe Birl is 90 and Still Inventing

We sang happy birthday to Joe Birl at Bones Fest X—his 90th birthday was a few days later. And he is still inventing; showing us, not one, but two new things.

First, was his finger rest. He said, "What is the biggest problem people have learning how to play the bones." He quickly answered, "Keeping the middle finger on the bone."

He has placed a small circular notch on both sides of his new wooden Birl Bones in a location where the tip of the finger naturally rests. Joe says, "This notch is all many people need to remind them to keep that finger on the bones. You can also get a circular wrasp and file the notch. Try it."

Second, was a lick he played during the public performance. To me it sounded like he had cut lines into the bones such that when he moved his finger up and down the bone, it made a series of sharp sounds that perfectly matched the music.

But, that was not how it was done. All he did was moistened the tip of his finger and rub it on the surface of the bone. This is similar to rubbing the rim of a glass with a moistened finger tip producing a ringing sound.

Joe says, "For best results, remove the natural oils on the finger tip with alcohol or use some violin rosin. Again, try it out." *Steve Wixson*

# Tips and Technique Etiquette Observed By Bones Players Part 3 of 3

General: The first time you develop and sense the vibration of the bones in your hands it feels good and you just want to keep playing. However, that feeling and that sound, as fun as it is, is not so much fun for those unknowing souls around you. UNTIL YOU REALLY GET GOOD AT PLAYING AND CAN KEEP SOLID TEMPOS, PLEASE BE ADVISED THAT YOU SHOULD:

- a. Practice by yourself away from all others.
- b. Practice with recorded music when you can and nobody else is around.
- c. When you are in an audience in the presence of a band, and a great tune for bones is being played, DO NOT just whip out your bones and play along. NEVER play with or in the presence of a band unless you have been asked to join them (or are a regular member).
- d. When you are ready, find an open jam session to start your public appearance. Approach it moderately until you know "you have it".

Playing with a band: When you have been asked to play with a band (i.e. not as a regular member) the band leader is expecting to feature you either in front of the band, or as one of the instruments he expects to feature during the play of the next tune. It will usually be obvious what the leader intends.

a. When you alone are being featured, the entire band will control its play to allow you to play to the full range of your bones playing talent. When the tune ends, you are expected to acknowledge the audience with a broad smile and bow, and also acknowledge the band by gesturing toward them in your applause. You thank the leader and depart. Your excellent performance gives you no license to hang around and keep playing (unless asked anew).

- b. When you are to be featured

along with other band members, you play rhythm ( light taps with your dominate hand and an occasional syncopated tap with the other hand) until the leader calls "let's hear those bones" (or some other signal he will have announced as the band plays). You then play to the full range of your talent in consonance with the rhythm and volume of the band. You return to rhythm play after one verse or chorus or when you hear the leader call for another instrument to feature. Make your participation fit the music and style of the band; it is the band's sound with you complementing the other instruments and not your dominate sound the leader is seeking. Great bones playing is when a band with you in it sounds terrific.

Playing when you are a regular member of a band: The guidelines above also apply when you are a regular band member. There are some additional points that must be observed. There is a time to play and a time to sit out. Do not try to play bones with every tune. Play only when your sound complements the beat. Vary your pattern of play. Learn to play loud when the music is up and soft when it is down; and to pause when a pause enriches the beat. Stop periodically at the end of key phrases; come back in on the chorus. When there is a soloist or group chorus, DO NOT PLAY WHILE PEOPLE ARE SINGING. Sometimes playing rhythm with singing is OK but do not do it unless you know your sound complements the general effect of the music. It is also appropriate to accent (tap, roll, tap) the end of a singer's just completed phrase if the tempo is right for the accent to give good musical emphasis to the phrase. It is OK to play a full bones complement to the start up of a tune to the point where the singing begins; then quit. It is also OK to play a full bones complement to the chorus if the chorus is unsung. If instruments are being featured between a soloist's verses or during an unsung chorus, play rhythm until you are called; quit when the singing begins anew.

When playing with other bones players: Unless you are the lead bones player, you do not play bones until

you have been given a pass signal. Once you have received the pass signal, you become the lead player. You then become responsible for inviting other bones players to join you or to pass off to another bones player (who then becomes the lead player). These rules assure that only one bones player plays at a time. When you are the lead player it is OK to invite all the bones players to join you for the last few notes of a big finish, or for a major bones accent during a song. This should be called only by experienced bones players. A pass signal is given by the lead bones player by his nodding to a specific bones player and then timing and making the pass by extending both arms toward that player while executing a both hands bones tap. The receiving bones player picks up the rhythm and begins play on the next beat. All participating bones players keep time with their feet, so that they are ready to respond when a pass signal comes their way. After you become experienced, it is acceptable to keep time with your bones using light taps with your dominate hand and an occasional syncopated tap with the other hand. Finally, each bones player has a responsibility to police other bones players who get carried away, to remind them of their bones manners when they appear obnoxious and especially if they have terrible rhythm.

When playing with cloggers: Typically, a band leader will invite cloggers to clog along with integrated play of bones players. The performance may start with a bones player. You play as a featured player for one phrase or chorus and then you give a pass signal to the clogger. The clogger dances for a phrase or chorus and leaves the stage. This is the signal for the next bones player to feature for a phrase or chorus. Another pass signal is given to the next clogger and so on until the tune ends. Most often this becomes a round robin (i.e. each participant is featured several times before the tune ends). *Walt Watkins*

## Bill Vits Plays Bones with his Symphony

Last May 12, 13 and 14<sup>th</sup> I had a chance to take the bones center stage with the Grand Rapids Symphony. I've been with the orchestra since 1979 and I often perform percussion solos on our Pops series. This past spring I was a featured soloist in "Stars of the Symphony" and I wanted the audience to see the rhythm bones in action.

I planned to start traditionally with the classic violin piece "Tambourin Chinois" on the xylophone, the cello solo from "The Swan" on the electronic theremin and then finish with a bones number on the second half.

I was at a loss for a challenging bones selection that would work well with orchestra until John Varineau, our associate conductor, mentioned a tap dance concerto by composer Morton Gould. I tracked down a recording of the piece and found that the final movement was perfect for the bones. The concerto is fully notated and is challenging for the orchestra (especially with one rehearsal!) All the tap rhythms are written out, but I embellished many sections to use my best *hot licks*.

I met and worked with Morton Gould in the late 80's and found him to be very in tune with percussion. I think he would have enjoyed the substitution of bones for tap shoes.

The final movement is fast with lots of call and response between the bones and orchestra. There are even notations in the music to look at the various sections of the orchestra, so I was able to interact and get a few laughs as well.

I wore my tails coat with a skeleton type design so my movements would be highlighted in Devos Hall (which seats 2,400 people).

The concerto was written in 1952 and has recently been performed and recorded by a new generation of tap dancers. My next dream would be to have a concerto written specifically for the bones. Composers, are you

## Minutes of Board Of Directors Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 2:05 pm. All Board members were present. Motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes of the last Board and General Membership meetings as printed in the newsletter.

Steve Wixson present a brief interim Treasurer's Report. We have \$5,742 in the bank.

Jonathan Danforth presented a preview of the Bones Fest X program.

Jonathan Danforth reported that he has updated the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website, but that no new content has been added recently.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to establish a committee to investigate making a Rhythm Bones Society historical documentary. Steve Brown appointed Jonathan and Gil Hibben to the committee and will ask Sharon Mescher to be on it.

The Board sat as the nominating committee. Motion was made, seconded and approved to re-nominate the current members.

Steve Brown gave a brief report on his Bones for Kids Committee. Steve Wixson did the same for the Bones Instruction on the Web Committee. We need new leadership.

Gil Hibben reported on his motion from last meeting about changes to the By-laws to prevent frivolous motions during a General Membership meeting. He will prepare the specific wording needed for next year's meeting.

Steve Brown began a discussion on the Society sponsoring a World Bones Championship. While this would be desirable, we do not want to change the non-competitive feeling of our Bones Fests. No specific action taken.

Ev Cowett showed the Board the framed Meritorious Service Award plaques that will present to Al Cowett and Dan Cowett for their years of service as MC and sound coordinator.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:32 pm.

Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*

## Minutes of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 4:12. It was held in the main room of Gallery X in New Bedford, MA.

The Nominations Committee presented nominations for next year's officers. The floor was opened for additional nominations. The following people were elected by acclamation: Steve Brown, Executive Director, Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and as Board Members, Everett Cowett, Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher

Our committees on Bones for Kids and On-line Bones Instruction made little progress this year. There was a call for both chair and member volunteers.

Dave Boyles made an informal proposal to host Bones Fest XI in Cedarburg, WI next year. There was interest by members and Dave was asked to submit a formal proposal to the Board.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:02 pm.

Respectfully Submitted, *Steve*

## Website of the Quarter

[www.crimple.demon.co.uk/fabm.htm](http://www.crimple.demon.co.uk/fabm.htm). Check out the revival of Morris Dancing and read down to the *Flag and Bones Gang* paragraph. Then check out website [www.lineone.net/~teddodsworth/fandb/flagbone.htm](http://www.lineone.net/~teddodsworth/fandb/flagbone.htm)

## Recorded Bones Music

The Possum Ridge String Band is making their CD, *On the Road Again*, with Russ Myers playing bones and telling bones stories, available to RBS members for a donation to a charity of Wilma Myers' choice. Their website, [possumridge.org](http://possumridge.org) has a photo of Russ and more details about the CD. If you are interested in receiving a copy, send a donation along with your membership renewal. See details on the enclosed Membership Renewal Form.



Above: Russ Myers (almost center in blue striped shirt) and friends from the Bones Fest X group photograph taken by John Maciel. The full photograph will be included in the Reflections issue.

Upper Right: Russ Myer's bones on display with much of his bones paraphernalia at the reception in his home following his funeral. Photograph by Kenny Wolin.

Lower Right: Everett Cowett playing bones with the Possum Ridge String Band at the reception. Other RBS members who attended, but not shown were Teri Davies and Kenny Wolin. Photograph by Kenny Wolin



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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 8, No. 4 2006

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*Special Issue: Reflections on Ten Years of Bones Fests*

*Barry Patton*

## Executive Director's Column

We, as an organization have been concerned and vocal about the future of our instrument, and rightly so. Creating opportunities for children to learn about the bones, sponsoring a regular article in the news letter for children, and nominating a committee to examine bones designed for children are excellent endeavors and I highly support them.

However, I think there is an area we are somewhat neglectful of, and that is the elder members of our society. Grey Larsen, in his book, *The Essential Guide to the Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, encourages readers, "...seek out the older players who may not come into your view so readily (as the younger players). The soul of the tradition rests in them, the ones who have lived the

music for 50, 60, 70 years. They may be highly accomplished or they may play roughly or slow, but they are the keepers of the deepest wisdom and eloquence that you can experience through the music."

The elder members were the torch bearers between generations. People like Ida May Schmich, John Perona, Ray Schairer, Hutch Hutchins, James Newman, Joe Birl, Shorty Boulet, Donnie DeCamp, Jerry Barnett, Gerard Arseneault, Bib McDowell, Walt Watkins, Charles Humphreys, Ronnie McShane, Sport Murphy, Everett Cowett, and many others too numerous to name, have contributed to carrying

*(Continued on page 3)*

## The Mescher Tradition Continues

Bernie Worrell and Jerry Mescher are proud to carry on the tradition started by their father, Albert Mescher, many years ago. Bernie & Jerry are both world champion bone players and both are inductees into the Old Time Country Music Hall of Fame.

In 1921 Albert Mescher, who was ten years old, was enjoying a trip to the Carroll County Fair with his family. As he walked around the grounds, Albert heard an unusual sound coming from the grand stand. He was fascinated by the sound but didn't know what instrument was making the sound. After he got home, he asked anyone who would listen what kind of instrument he had heard. He told them it was something that was held in the hands and played in time to the beat of the music. Finally, he asked a farm hand that came up from Missouri with a pair of bay ponies to help with the harvest. The farm hand said that it sounded to him like he must be describing the bones. In fact, he made a pair of bones for Albert from an old fork handle.

The next spring, a new Depot Agent was assigned to Halbur (Iowa). The Mescher family had a player piano in the parlor. One Sunday the Depot Agent was taking a walk with his wife and heard the piano. He dropped in to say hi, and Albert showed him the bones. The only thing the man knew about the bones was how they were held and with that bit of information Albert had his final instruction regarding the bones.

I've tried to play the bones with expert instruction (I'm Bernie's husband) and let me

*(Continued on page 7)*



Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell

## Editorial

Ten years of Bones Fests and eight years (almost) of the Rhythm Bones Society. Quite an accomplishment, and we deserve a pat on our backs.

When I did my first rhythm bones search on the internet in 1999, I found maybe 75 web pages with bones references. Today there are hundreds, and growing. We are making an impact on bones playing.

There is special issue titled Reflections that will highlight those ten Bones Fests. Sharon Mescher has volunteer to guest edit this issue, and she will make it really special. Read her letter to the membership below.

In two years we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of our Society, and we've only have a couple of years to design an appropriate birthday cake.

One of our traditions is the presence of Jerry Mescher and/or Bernie Worrell in six of our Bones Fests. Read their story beginning on Page 1.

This issue presents the next part of Beth Lenz's Master's thesis on bones. Her Table of Contents is included.

We received a box of bones from member Robert McDowell collected over the years (Bob wrote a bones history article that is summarized on Page 4.) Yes, we have a library of sorts where items of interest to bones people are kept. These items are earmarked for the Library of Congress (our contact Jennifer Cutting isn't ready for them right now.) The LOC will eventually also get an HD/DVD with lots of scanned photos, etc.

This issue has an insert that indexes Volumes 1 through 8 of the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter. It is impressive to see what our contributing authors and I have put on paper about rhythm bones in these few issues. Note that the newsletter is sent to and indexed by the Library of Congress and will be available to future researchers and rhythm bones

## Letters to the Editor

Dear RBS Members: A heartfelt wish for a wonderful New Year to all of you!

As you may know, the next RBS newsletter will be one filled with personal reflections and pictures of the first ten years of Bones Fests.

A bit of background behind the Reflections newsletter. The idea for this special edition came from the creative mind of Mel Mercier, and of course, Steve Wixson is doing the hard work of putting it together. Last fall Steve sent out a call for help in editing. I volunteered, but only if no one else wanted to do it. So, we are at the point of sending out another plea for each of you to send me your reflections. As a reminder, here is Steve's format for your writing: a) one to two sentences of your best memories about each Bones Fest that you attended; and, b) several sentences that sum up your thoughts about your experiences over the last 10 years of being a part of RBS. (Thirteen people have submitted their memories/ thoughts. From a personal point of view, I can tell you that I have enjoyed, immensely, reading these people's reflections. Each one has its own flavor and humor. I am looking forward to the publication of this issue!)

Just as we ponder over the passing year, looking forward to a new one, we are asking that you take a few moments and reflect on the year(s) that you have attended the Bones Fests - with anticipation for many wonderful and fun years to come. We will put together a memorable newsletter, and one, I believe, we all will treasure. Please send us me reflections as soon as possible! We look forward to receiving every one. *Sharon Mescher*. sjmescher@gmail.com, P.O Box 25, Halbur, IA 51444, 712-658-2211.

A newsworthy item. Martha Cowett is engaged to marry fellow bones player and RBS member, Joe Cummings. All of the Cowetts are happy about this. I don't know if this is appropriate for the Newsletter or not, but it is your call. *Ev Cowett*

I recently got some very nice bones by Clif Ervin. The yellow cedar pair is subtle and variable, not too loud. The teak pair is louder and more solid, but not as variable. Here's a nice recording of Clif playing with banjo player Dan Gellert: orphonon.utopiandesign.com/

## Rhythm Bones Player

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Blackeyed\_Susie.mp3. See my link page for more details/ *Jeff Leffert*. [bones.JeffLeff.com/links.html](http://bones.JeffLeff.com/links.html)

Beannachtai na Nollag (Seasons Greetings) to Steve Brown, Steve Wixson and all members. With every good wish for a happy and peaceful Christmas and New Year. Keep up the

## Website of the Quarter

[www.frappr.com/rhythmbones](http://www.frappr.com/rhythmbones). Check out Scott miller's frappr website and see a world map that shows where some rhythm bones players live.

Scott say, "Since the website came up, the Frappr people have added the ability to visit the RBS Yahoo Groups forum. This thing is pretty cool. So take a peak and let me know what you think. Rhythm bone players are now on the map!

"If you want to take over administration of this 'Rhythm Bones' Frappr group, let me know and I'll transfer it over to whomever. All the

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

on our instrument.

They have brought not only those that taught them, but generations before them through the years and into our consciousness by their playing, and stories of how they came to the bones and how they carried it on.

This year saw the passing of one of our founding members, Russ Myers, and I think of the number of older players who have passed on in my time Percy Danforth, John Burrill, Len Davies, Will Kear, Fred Edmunds, and Vivian Cox.

I think we might consider ways in which we can honor those older members, and learn more from them, to ensure they will live through us and into newer generations of bones players. It is these older folks who brought the bones to where we are today, and I think each and every one has something to bring to us as bones players.

As I was in the process of writing this article I had the pleasure of meeting John Hennessy at our local Irish session. John tells me he's been playing the bones for "83" years and is 88 years old. He plays one handed, in the Irish tradition, with a pair of wooden bones.

"I thought I was the only one left!" he said when we met. His understated quiet style drew me in, and I promised him a complementary newsletter as I left.

How many more of them are out there? Now is the time to give tribute and recognition to our older players

## Comedian Shelley Berman Plays Bones

Members Gil and Linda Hibben have an interesting friend—actor, comedian, writer, director, teacher, lecturer, poet—Shelley Berman whose career took off in the 1960's. Like Gil, Shelley is an avid knife enthusiast and rhythm bones player.

Shelley said, "For me, in elementary school in Westside Chicago, a pair of twin brothers were making rhythm with a pair of sticks in one hand. I found a pair of sticks and tried the same thing. After several days of

getting nowhere, I began to hold the sticks firmly and snapping them with a twist of my forearm and wrist. There and back and there and back, and wow, to hear the clacking! Oh, the classmates were second generation Irish. Later, listening to real Irish music, the wonderful rattle was unmistakable bones."

He told me another story. "It's about an eighth grade teacher in Chicago and me as a thirteen year old loving my home made bones, fashioned from two xylophone bars I found in an alley where someone had thrown away an entire old xylophone. Oh, how I worked in the shaping of them with a small pocket knife and sandpaper -- hours and hours, until they were smooth and perfect and clacked tunefully.

And the teacher, seeing me carrying them in my hand, going out to recess to play them with my buddies, decided it was just another way for me to show off, and took them away from me. She would not return them at the end of the day, even though I pleaded. I never forgot that day."

Shelley told me he did play bones in his act in the early years of his career.

Gil discovered that Shelley played bones at a knife show. Gil was playing them and Shelley picked them up and they started playing together. The whole floor of the show got quiet for a while. *Steve Wixson*

## Recorded Bones Music

The UK based Acrobat Music Company has released a nice compilation of bones playing songs titled *Brother Bones and His Shadows*. Brother Bones, whose real name was Freeman Davis, recorded during the late 1940s and all during the 1950s and became famous with his recording of *Sweet Georgia Brown*, a recording that became the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. There is an article on Brother Bones in the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, Vol 4, No 3.

There are 17 tracks on the CD with bones playing and whistling. The genre of the songs is swing. Freeman plays a variety of bones including

kitchen knives and frequently plays with three bones in each hand.

Acrobat includes some interesting liner notes

While his bones playing is great, people will enjoy his whistling. One track, *Listen to the Mockingbird*, has some amazing bird imitations.

You can get more information about the CD and hear samples at [cduniverse.com](http://cduniverse.com) (search for Brother Bones.) The CD is widely available, but one good source is member Scott Miller.

Scott's price for RBS members in the US is \$11.97 per CD plus shipping and handling. For details or further pricing contact Scott at [scott@rhythm-bones.com](mailto:scott@rhythm-bones.com) or 314-772-1610.

## Tentative Date for Bones Fest XI

Reserve the weekend of August 17-19 for Bones Fest XI. Dave Boyle, also known as bones maker *Black Bart* is proposing the Milwaukee area as the site. This is the weekend of Irish Fest, the biggest Irish Festival in the world, and people may wish to attend both. More details in the next issue.

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. All events are in year 2007.

**Le Vent du Nord**, February 22, with bones-player Benoit Bourque in Lewiston, ME. His group is also plays in Arlington, MA, Randolph, VT, Lancaster, PA, Portland, ME and Montreal. Check website for dates.

**2nd South Carolina String Band**, March 3, with bones player Bob Beeman, Gettysburg, PA. They also play in Spartanburg, SC on May 25-6.

**Bones Fest X**. Tentative date is August 17-19. Details in next newsletter.

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest**. August 27 - September 2nd. The bones contest was scheduled for Sunday last year and not enough people showed up to have the contest. This year the contest will be on Saturday, September 1st. How about a bunch of us RBS members attend and make it a big

## Tips and Techniques The Tap Roll

At the Saturday afternoon session at Bones Fest X, I started and ended my performance with what I am calling a *Tap Roll*. What I like about it is there are virtually no accent beats making it a gentle introduction and/or finish, though it has other uses.

My technique is exactly what we tell beginners not to do. We teach beginners to roll the hand over the wrist (the turn the door knob move.) What I find most beginners doing is keeping the fingers in a mostly fixed position and rotating the palm of the hand under the fingers. This is the wrong move for beginners, but the right move for the *tap roll*.

To me, this roll seems more like the action of a clapper in a bell. The speed of the roll is mostly determined by the weight and length of the movable bone which limits its use somewhat. The roll is much faster with my dominate hand, so the tension and speed the muscles place on the movable bone do play a part.

In my experience, it is difficult to switch back and forth between the *tap roll* to normal playing without actually stopping all motion.

As the commercial says, try it—you'll like it. *Steve Wixson*

## Robert McDowell's Bones History

As we reprint part of Beth Lenz's Master's Thesis, we cannot overlook member Bob McDowell's article titled "*Bones and Man: Toward a History of Bones Playing*," published in the *Journal of American Culture*, Vol 5, No. 1, Spring 1982.

The article covers some of the same ground as Beth's thesis and comes to the same conclusion—namely bones came to America from Europe and not Africa.

Bob said, "When I wrote that article, it was on a dare of sorts. I specialized in African literature at the University of Texas at Arlington (and had done my dissertation in that field.) Once, sitting around with friends at an

African Studies conference, I broached the subject of bones, African musical instruments, etc. Some said, "I'll bet that the bones are of African origin." At any rate, I went home from the conference, dabbled in the field of African musical instruments for a while, dug around in minstrel studies, and so forth. The result was this article. I enjoyed writing the piece, but make no claim for heavy scholarship in connection with it."

Bob begins the article with how he became a bones player at age eleven. He was inspired by an traveling evangelist bones playing preacher. He carved a crude set of bones from wooden laths and began to master a few basic rhythms.

He then introduces bones from a musicology point of view before examining bones and minstrelsy. Almost half of his article cover the minstrel era beginning with Frank Brower, the first minstrel bones player (see Vol 6, No 1 for more information on Brower), the rise of minstrelsy, and the spread of minstrelsy around the world. These are covered from a rhythm bones point of view, a view that many modern minstrel era writers almost completely overlook.

He transitions with non-minstrel bones stories before spending the rest of the article on the history of bones playing.

He summarizes a body of African and then European literature. He backs up in time through Roman times, Egypt, Ur and back to the Chinese ruler Fou Hi, who some call the father of music, and Bob likens as an earlier 'Brother Bones.' Rhythm bones from that era have been dated to 3,468 BC.

He included a photograph of William Sidney Mount's painting titled *The Bones Player*.

He concludes, "In the history of mankind, Brother Bones has demonstrated extraordinary endurance and versatility and a capability for infinite transformation. He has visited the most remote recesses of our civilization—from the Australian Outback to Brother Welch's little Foursquare Church of the Open Bible [Bob's early church in Iowa.] Like Tiresias, he has "seen" all—mourning and mirth, delight and dread..."

What a bizarre journey—from Fou Hi to Berryman, a span of nearly five-and-one-half-thousand years, a voyage marked with blood ritual and cruelty, a journey shrouded at times in mystery, marked at times by barbarism. But is also a journey betraying amazing human energy and inventiveness and artistry, and one encompassing moments of sheet ecstasy derived from hearing the rattle of bones."

He includes a length bibliography.

Bob said, "I would really like to see something fresh from one of the young graduate students like Beth Lenz." Well Bob, many of us are anxious to read Mel Mercier's PhD thesis, a work in progress.

Bob hopes to make it to a Bones Fest. He plays in a jazz band. He plays ivory and animal rhythm bones.

If you would like a copy of Bob's article, please contact me. *Steve Wixson*

## History of Bones in the US—Table of Contents

The second part of Beth Lenz's thesis begins on the following page. To put the reprinted text in context, the Table of Contents from her thesis is below.

The thesis is 312 pages, double spaced, in length. At this time, only Chapter I and Appendix A will be reprinted in the newsletter.

Introduction, Acknowledgements, List of Figures, List of Appendices, Chapter I. History of the Bones in the U.S., II. How to Play the Bones, III. Danforth's Style of Playing, IV. Other Styles of Playing, V. A Conversation with Percy Danforth. Appendix A. Bones and Similar Instruments in Other Cultures, B. Biographical Sketches of Nineteenth-Century Bones Players, C. Methodology, D. Sources for Illustrations, and Bibliography organized in seven categories, 1. Africa: Slavery and Indigenous African Musical Practices, 2. Minstrelsy and the Musical Life of Slaves in the U.S., 3. European Folk Traditions in America, 4. Bones and Similar Instruments in Other Countries, 5. Sound Recordings, 6.

## History of Bones in the US—Part 2

[Part 1 of this article appear in Vol 8, No 2 issue of the newsletter.]

While there is little evidence to support the African origin theory of the bones, there is enough evidence to outline a fairly complete argument that the bones reached the U.S through British immigrants and later reached Africa through touring minstrel troupes from American and Great Britain.

Soon after minstrelsy became popular in American, American minstrel troupes toured in Great Britain. Minstrelsy quickly caught on there and British troupes sprang up. Subsequently, both American and British troupes traveled to southern Africa to perform in British colonies there. In fact, amateur minstrel shows appeared in Cape Town as early as 1848, and in Durban ten years later, seven years before the first professional minstrel troupe reached Durban. The amateur performance was given by a company which called itself the Ethiopian Serenaders after an American troupe of the same name which had visited London in 1846. This suggest that British citizens who traveled to South Africa brought knowledge of minstrelsy with them, even though professional troupes had not yet toured in South Africa.

In his article *Of Gospel Hymns, Minstrel Shows, and Jubilee Singers: Toward Some Black South African Music*, Dale Cockrell states that nineteenth-century accounts from South African newspapers noted the performance of occasional shows and concerts for nonwhite or mixed audiences. Cockrell suggest that blacks were allowed to attend minstrel shows as well. Cockrell also quotes an article from the *Natal Mercury* of December 28, 1880, recounting a performance by the Kafir Christy Minstrel, a troupe made up of “eight genuine natives, bones and all.” These accounts strongly support the possibility that black South Africans had some contact with minstrelsy.

Cockrell has also found etymological evidence for the European/American origin of bones

found in southern Africa:

In the Killie Campbell Museum in Durban, there is a set of bones, supposedly played on the diamond fields at Kimberly in 1871 by a former Durban resident, a white man to judge from his name. A comparison between these minstrel bones and their likely manner of playing with the “Zulu bones” documented by Kirby in his treatment of the native instruments of southern Africa shows that the instruments are essentially the same. The Zulu name for this instrument—the “amatambo”—suggests that there may have been confusion as to which end man in the minstrel show played “bones” and which one played the “tambo.”

Evidence of influence from American minstrelsy in one former British colony raises the question of whether or not similar influences may be detected in British colonies elsewhere in Africa. Out side of South Africa, no evidence has even been found that documents the presence of the bones (or any other vestige of minstrelsy) in Africa. Evidence strongly suggest that the bones were brought to Africa by touring minstrel troupes. The picture is not complete. However, unless one also examines how and when the bones reached American. While no written documentation has come to light which explicitly states that the bones came to America with European immigrants, circumstantial evidence suggest this as a strong possibility.

Documentation does exist that substantiates the existence of the bones in Western Europe since the Middle Ages. (See Appendix A. *Bones and Similar Instruments in other Cultures.*) What is of particular interest is the use of the bones in Great Britain, particularly among members of the lower classes. It is these people who in all probability brought the bones to American. Such people in Great Britain were part of two musical traditions which were hundreds of years old. One was a tradition of ballad singing and the other an instrumental tradition associated with dancing. From c.1600 the fiddle was a popular instrument used in dance music. Other instruments included the hammer dulcimer, pipes, tin whistle,

“squeeze box,” and a wide variety of small, portable, home-made instruments, including the bones. When members of Great Britain’s lower classes came to American, they brought their music with them.

Immigration from the British Isles to America began in the early seventeenth century and lasted until the mid-nineteenth century. The people under discussion here were not Puritans, but were from the labor, farm, and servant classes. Many came to America as indentured servants, some came to escape poverty and famine, some were criminals sent by Great Britain, while others were political refugees.

Conditions in America were often no better than those in Great Britain. Immigrants from Great Britain’s lower classes tended to settle in remote areas considered undesirable by other people, areas as far removed as possible from urban centers where one faced problems similar to those experience in Great Britain. The hills and mountains of Virginia, North Carolina, Vermont and New Hampshire became the new homes for these people. After the Revolution they moved further west into the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee.

The roots of their culture lay in the nonliterate strata of British society: their music was a part of an oral tradition. When this is considered, along with the fact that they tended to live secluded lives, it is not surprising that accounts of their way of life, including their musical practices, are practically non-existent. Frederic Louis Ritter (1834-1891), one of the first people who attempted to compile a history of American music, was highly misled in this regard. An immigrant to America himself, he was unaware of the musical traditions carried on by British immigrants of the lower classes.

The people’s song is not to be found among the American people. The American farmer, mechanic, journeyman, stage-driver, shepherd, etc., does not sing,—unless he happens to belong to a church-choir or a singing-society: hence, the American landscape is silent and monotonous: it seems inanimate, and imparts a melancholy impress, though Nature has fashioned it beautifully.

Yet evidence that these people had musical traditions of their own is

found in the work of Francis Child (1825-1896) and Cecil Sharp (1859-1924). Child was an American scholar who collected ballad texts in England and Scotland from 1882 to 1898. Englishman Cecil Sharp later collected ballad tunes from the British Isles. Sharp discovered the existence of British ballads in America, and in 1916 began collecting ballad tunes and texts in the southern Appalachian mountains. The ballads collected by Sharp in Appalachia were among those collected by Child in the British Isles, although changes had occurred in the ballads which reflected the immigrants' new experiences in the New World.

Sharp also found dances and dance music from the British Isles preserved in southern Appalachia. The fiddle was the most common instrument used to accompany dance in Great Britain, as well as in America as early as the Seventeenth century. Evidence suggests that other instruments were used as well. According to *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, hammer dulcimers were "almost certainly" introduced in America by English colonists before 1700. Dulcimers were used primarily to play dance music, and were often included in string bands. It is highly likely that people living in Appalachia made their own instruments, although general knowledge of this was not prevalent until the nineteenth century when hammer dulcimers became more popular and were also made by commercial makers.

Just as the dulcimer and fiddle were brought to America by British immigrants, along with a body of ballads, dance music and dances, so could have the bones made their way across the ocean to America. These traditions still exist today in both the U.S. and Great Britain, including the use of bones with different combinations of the instruments named above in the performance of dance music.

Common factors of instrumentation and repertoire may be found in the music of Great Britain's lower classes during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the music of British immigrants who settled in

Appalachia. This, in addition to evidence that the bones were brought to Africa by American and British minstrel troupes in the mid-nineteenth century, is strongly supportive of the theory that the bones were brought to the U.S. by immigrants from the British Isles rather than by African slaves.

The bones have been a part of three musical contexts since they were brought to the U.S., they have been used by black slaves in the South, by performers in the nineteenth-century minstrel show, and by folk musicians in the performance of dance music in the Appalachian area. The role of the bones in each context is unique and warrants close examination.

Like other instruments played by slaves, the bones were made by the slaves themselves. The bones were made with sheep and cattle ribs.

Many contemporary accounts describe the music making activities of black slaves in the South. Such activities took place in the evening when work was done, as well as on Sundays and holidays such as Christmas. The following account was written by Issac Holmes while visiting Louisiana in 1821.

In Louisiana, and the state of Mississippi, the slaves have Sunday for a day of recreation, and upon many plantations, they dance for several hours during the afternoon of this day. The general movement is in what they call the Congo Dance; but their music often consists of nothing more than an excavated piece of wood, at one end of which is a piece of parchment, which covers the hollow part in which they beat; this, and the singing ... of those who are dancing, and of those who surround the dancers ... constitute the whole of their harmony.

Similar accounts also mention the bones, often in combination with the fiddle, banjo, or both instruments. An elderly Virginia woman wrote:

When I was about ten years old a family from Fluvanna County settled within half a mile of us. They had several slaves who sometimes came to our house at night and gave us music, vocal and instrumental, the instruments being banjo, jawbones of horse, and bones (to crack together, two held in one hand.)

In a Northerner's letter written from Savannah, Georgia, dated March 28, 1853, the writer describes Negroes as having "two accomplishments ... —whistling and playing on the bones—both of which are going on under my window at this moment, as they always do."

A resident of Eutaw plantation in South Carolina during the Civil War recalled that every day of Christmas week

In the afternoon, the Negroes danced in the broad piazza until late at night, the orchestra consisting of two fiddlers, one man with bones, and another had sticks with which he kept time on the floor, and sometimes singing.

In addition to impromptu music making at slave gatherings, slave musicians often performed for the entertainment of their masters and their guests. In fact, some slaves were purchased solely for this purpose. Masters sometimes "rented out" their slave musicians to play for other whites.

In 1982 Robert Winans published a study of the prevalence of music among slaves in the mid-nineteenth century, based on musical references in ex-slave narratives collected by the W.P.A. in the 1930's. Winans' study suggests that wherever there were concentrations of blacks in the mid-nineteenth century, fiddle music was common. His study also suggests that the banjo and bones were known throughout the same geographical area as the fiddle, but at a lighter density.

What type of music slaves played is also of importance. Few contemporary accounts exist which describe slaves participating in musical activities of obvious African origin. Such accounts usually date back to the late seventeenth century when slaves were already playing the fiddle. An early account that mentions the bones is yet to be found. Contemporary accounts which mention the bones do not appear until the mid-nineteenth century after the minstrel show had become popular. Rarely were instruments played only to accompany singing; the bones (as well as other instruments—most often the fiddle and/or banjo) were associated with European/American culture.

Information extracted by Winans from the ex-slave narratives includes a list of dance tunes and songs most often remembered by the ex-slaves interviewed.

Turkey in the Straw, Miss Liza Jane, Run Nigger Run, Sally Ann, Arkansas Traveler Swanee River, Molly Put the Kettle On, Sally Goodin, Old Dan Tucker, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Dixie, Cotton Eyed Joe, Hop Light Ladies.

Most of these pieces are also associated with both the nineteenth



*(Mescher Tradition—Continued from page 1)*

tell you, I'm impressed that Albert could not only figure out how to play them with virtually no help but that he could master them and invent a new way of playing.

Albert developed an advanced style of two handed bone playing. His contribution to bone playing was the development of the offset. The offset is a syncopated rhythm with the right hand playing three beats and the left hand filling in a fourth beat. When the hands are synchronized the rhythm has a unique sound. The offset is great for the verses with a more traditional style used for the choruses.

Jerry also started playing the bones when he was ten years old but he had his Dad to watch and learn from. He made himself a set of bones from a peach crate. At noon and six o'clock he would run into the house, stand in front of the radio in the kitchen and practice with the "Polka Time" broadcast. Albert's dad had bought him a pair of Ebony bones from the Sears and Roebuck catalog so when Jerry got into shop class in high school, he knew what he wanted for a project. His instructor located some Ebony wood and Jerry made himself a great set of bones. He also had a teacher and advisor named Sister Margaret Mary. She felt that Jerry could do well with a speech and demonstration centered on the bones. Sure enough, Jerry did well with the speech and got the highest award available at the state competition, but more than that, he got a de facto agent. Sister Margaret Mary was very instrumental in making it possible for Jerry and his father to play with the Lawrence Welk troupe when they came to Carroll, Iowa.

Finally they entered a competition, held by Vanita Rich, for a chance to audition for the Ted Mack Amateur hour. They won the competition and traveled to New York to try out for the show. They had worked up an arrangement of "The Jolly Polka" with choreography by the Nuns. Dancing the Polka, while playing perfectly synchronized bones, was quite a hit and they were scheduled to be on the show in June 1961. Unfortunately, at the last minute, they couldn't get

permission to use the number for their act – so they had to come up with a new song and arrangement. For the show they played "Under the Double Eagle". Because we were able to find the kinescope of the show in the Library of Congress we have a tape of the show. Albert died in 1967 so I never had a chance to meet him; I'm so glad we have the tape and can enjoy that performance.

Jerry played the drums for a Polka band that played for dances in an around Carroll, Iowa. During many of the sets he would be featured for a special number. In the 1980s he went to the Old Time Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa. He found out that they had a bones contest and he really enjoyed not only the contest but the chance to jam with all of the great musicians that attend the festival. The attendance for the festival is from 30 to 40 thousand participants per year and it draws traditional musicians from around the world. Jerry won the contest and began giving workshops and performing at the festival. It was around this time when Bernie and Jerry began to perform together. But I've left out how Bernie learned to play the bones so I better back up for a minute.

In 1970 Bernie and I moved to Keesler AFB in Biloxi, Mississippi where I was assigned for training. It was about that time that Bernie's airline (Bernie is a Flight Attendant) was hit with a strike and she had a lot of time on her hands. One afternoon she felt as if her Dad were in the room telling her to pick up the bones and give them a try. She had watched Albert and Jerry practice for years, but she had never been able to play the bones. This time she picked them up and was able to get something out of them. She really got excited and asked her Mother to send a complete set of bones. On her visits to Halbur she began getting lessons from Jerry. Her first performance in front of an audience was at Good Shepherd parish in Miami, FL. The parish was having a fund raiser; she asked Jerry to come down and play for the show. Jerry convinced Bernie that they should do something together. Bernie said it would have to be something funny –

so they picked "I like Bananas, Because They Have no Bones". Jerry started the performance with "Red Wing" and then played "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and the two of them finished with "I like Bananas". They were a hit and they were a team. They played the same performance for their high school alumni fund raiser, at Kuemper High School in Carroll, IA.

Jerry encouraged Bernie to come to Avoca, and finally in 1999 she joined him for the Old Time Country Music festival. She got a lot of encouragement from the musicians and fans at the festival and she made the plunge and entered the Bones contest – she won!

The next year she and Jerry gave a workshop and were assigned to perform on many of the stages at the festival. From then on Bernie and Jerry have performed at the festival. Bob Everhart, who began the festival and the association many years ago, has been an avid promoter and supporter of Bernie and Jerry. His dedication to preserving Old Time Country Music and traditional instruments fits in perfectly with Bernie and Jerry's commitment to preserve their family tradition. As Bob has added new festivals, he has asked Bernie and Jerry to perform; most recently, they performed at the festival in Fremont, NB (October, 2006). In April they'll be performing at the Oak Tree Hall of Fame Festival in Anita, IA.

Because Bernie lives in Miami, FL and Jerry lives in Halbur, IA, synchronizing their music beat for beat is a challenge. They can make it work because there are arrangements for each song. Their Dad, Albert, arranged each song and practiced and polished the performance until it was the way he wanted it. He and Jerry then practiced the song until they could play it the same way every time. Some of their Dad's arrangements they like the best are: Red Wing, Hot Time, Four Leaf Clover, In the Mood (by Crazy Otto), Down Yonder and San Antonio Rose. By video taping Jerry on all of these songs and others, they were able to capture the arrangements. Playing with the video, Bernie was able to learn the



Albert Mescher and his seventeen year old son Jerry Mescher performing on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour television show in 1961

arrangements. Bernie and Jerry practice every day on their own and they polish their performance when they are together at the festivals, during family visits and of course at Bones Fest. Sharing the tradition and history of the bones between numbers is spontaneous, but it is based on the work Jerry did many years ago when preparing to speak about the bones.

The tradition continues as they find and arrange new songs, perform, and conduct workshops.

For their work in preserving and promoting this traditional instrument and musical style Bernie and Jerry were inducted in the Hall of Fame. Both Jerry and Bernie have dedicated their Hall of Fame awards to their dad because of his love and passion for the bones, and because of the unique style of bone playing he created. The Hall



Jerry and Bernie performing at NTCMA in Iowa



This old wind-up minstrel bones player toy sold at auction for \$37,500. Found on the internet by Jeff Leffert. For more information, check out [bones.jeffleff.com](http://bones.jeffleff.com).

of Fame is located in the Pioneer Music Museum in Anita, Iowa. Information about the Hall of Fame and museum can be found on the web: <http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com>.

Bernie and Jerry are active members and supporters of the Rhythm Bones Society. Jerry makes terrific sets of bones out of many different types of wood (of course he prefers Ebony but has been surprised at the quality of bones he can produce with less expensive wood). *Tom Worrell*

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 8, Special Issue 2006

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## Reflections on Ten years of Bones Fests

The question I am asked most often by rhythm bones players is: "In your wildest imagination, after the first Bones Fest, did you think that 10 years of Bones Fests would produce such a result"? An international organization with a paid membership of more than 100, an annual festival, a top quality quarterly newsletter (The Rhythm Bones Player), a logo, by-laws, a web page (rhythmbones.com), awards program and an opportunity to meet and play bones with some of the

worlds most wonderful people, money in the bank and many, many greatly improved rhythm bones players, and more. It is without question beyond my wildest dream.

Certain elements of each bones fest have remained the same over the 10-year span, but each fest has been uniquely different. Only Wilma Myers, Val Cowett and I have had the privilege of attending each of them. Something

*(Continued on page 3)*



Bones Fest I photograph taken in the back yard of Everett and Val Cowett. From left to right, Carl Hedrick III, Carl Hedrick, Tom Rice, Parker Waite, Russ Myers, Mel Bryant, Fred Edmunds, Martha Cowett, Ev Cowett, Dan Cowett and Jim Alberti Hobbs



Bones Fest X group photograph taken at the Whaling Museum (yes, that is a whale skeleton in the background), New Bedford, MA. See Page 23 for naming guide. Photograph by John Maciel (Melissa Danforth's brother)



## Editorial

This special issue, suggested by Mel Mercier, celebrates 10 years of Bones Fests. Who at Bones Fest I could have imagined Bones Fest X, and what a celebration of our art it was. The Bones Fest X group photograph is on Page 1 and a naming diagram is on Page 23. Mel is number 24 and I am number 21.

The quality of bones playing has improved over the years due in part to these Bones Fests. I look at myself, a one handed bones player at Bones Fest II (my first Fest) and now a two handed bones player with many more skills. I now have a reason to practice and do. My experience is shared by most, if not all, of our members.

To make this special issue really special, Sharon Mescher has agreed to be our Guest Editor. She is Number 5.

There are people to thank for the photographs in this issue. Our biggest thanks goes to Michael Ballard who shares his photographs from several Fests. Also Nicholas Worth, Ev Cowett's brother-in-law, at BFVI, Mike Carter at BFVII, Mary Lee Sweet (stills from video), and John Maciel, Melissa Danforth's brother, at Bones Fest X, me and many other members.

## Guest Editorial

The diversity of each member's submitted reflections and memories is parallel to the technique of his or her bones playing – it's personal with a distinctive and wonderful flavor. But, the one common element that shines through each submission is the love for and sharing of an eons-old instrument. At the point of sharing this love, our spirits become one. This is the timeless beauty of the Rhythm Bones Society. I do feel the spirit when I am in the midst of all of you.

It has been such a pleasure and a privilege to work with Steve Wixson on this special newsletter. Where this RBS journey will lead is unknown, but that is much of the attraction for me. It is akin to dreaming of the next trip I will take to that unknown land (for example, Ireland or Germany)! I look forward to the challenges and the life-changing experiences ahead!

## Sharon Mescher Bones Biography

When Steve asked that I write a short biography, I thought, "How does one compress 58 years into several paragraphs?" One doesn't.

Still, I mentally raced through the 58 years and quickly decided what to pick and choose as the most pertinent biographical info to me, today.

--- I was born in New Mexico

--- I am the oldest of six children (five girls and one boy)

--- Higher education was never an option or a choice; it was a must!

--- Other legacies from my parents: be responsible, do not use and/or abuse the good will of others, and above all, be compassionate.

For the Rhythm Bones Society the most recent details of my life centers around and focuses on the bones. This part started 20 years ago when I married Jerry Mescher, a master bones player. Fast forward to our joining the RBS in 2001. At that time I began dabbling with the instrument off and on. By January, 2006, I was making progress and was determined to play with Jerry at the next bones fest. We practiced and we did play together at New Bedford in 2006! I truly felt like a bona fide member of the RBS!

One night as I was lying in bed



Photograph of Sharon Mescher playing bones at Bones Fest X. See her with husband Jerry in the color photograph on Page 17.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Reflections on 10 Years of Bones Fests  
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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

pondering my life as a bones player, I had a light bulb moment: Jerry's and my life were more connected than I had realized! My dad, Stanton, was a classically-trained musician. He sang in and directed church and school choirs. Likewise, he made sure his children played musical instruments; sang in church and school choirs, and listened to opera and all other types of classical music! Jerry's dad, Albert, was a self-taught bones player, sang in his church choir, and eventually partnered with Jerry in bones playing.

The sad part of this story is that both fathers died at a young age – 47 for my dad and 59 for Jerry's. But, the story does not end there. Both fathers imparted a great and grand love of music to both Jerry and me. That musical spirit thrives in both of us. Because of this, I know I cannot deny this bones-playing journey with Jerry. Where the journey leads, only God knows. But, with Him in charge it can only be fulfilling, fun, and extremely adventuresome. Here's to the adventure! *Sharon Mescher*

*(Reflections—Continued from page 1)*

new and/or different has occurred at each of them making them particularly remarkable. I always look forward to “what will happen this time”.

At **Bones Fest I** it was meeting Russ Myers and Dr. Fred Edmunds and sharing bones playing techniques, instrument construction material, musical preferences and having fun and fellowship. Very little has changed.

At **Bones Fest II**, hosted by the Cowetts in Bur-Mil Park, Steve Wixson entered the picture and nothing has been the same since. Within 6 months he generated 100’s of e-mails and Internet searches all related to bones and bones playing. What a find. What enthusiasm. A newsletter was in progress before we had a society. And by this time Martha Cowett had established a web page for rhythm bones players called Rhythm Bones Central (now [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)).

**Russ and Wilma Myers hosted Bones Fest III**, in their almost one-century-old home overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was here that the boning world opened to all of us with the arrival of “Spike Bones” Muhrer, John “Mr. Bones” Cahill, David “Black Bart” Boyles, “T” Paul Dehon, Joe Birl, Sally and Terry Carroll, Vivian Cox and Matteo the classical castanet player. It was here too that the Rhythm Bones Society was founded (see picture below). What a party and weekend to remember!

**Bones Fest IV** was hosted by Steve and Janet Wixson at their home over

looking Chattanooga and in a nearby Mountain Opry house. It was here that we first met Ida-May Schmich who knocked our socks off; Barry Bones Patton, who has incredible speed; Gil and Linda Hibben who very soon became an important part of the Rhythm Bones Society; the brother/sister act of Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell playing synchronized bones tunes; and Bill Vits from the Grand Rapids Symphony with something different.

**Bones Fest V**, held in a barn on Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, Ma was a real blast. It featured the Dave Reiner band and introduced us to Don Decamp, Dave Gagne, Nick Driver, Norm Conrad, Gerard Arseneault and the NH gang of three, Shorty, Ernie and Sky. A great weekend.

**Bones Fest VI** was held on the Guilford College campus in Greensboro, NC and hosted by the Cowett family. Performances were heard in a real planetarium. Dan Griffin, a CT rocker and Jeff Newman a TX copy of Don Decamp were great newcomers. Russ Myers was honored and designated Fellow of the Rhythm Bones Society. Brother Bones (Freeman Davis) was recognized on what would have been his 100th birthday with a special birthday cake. The Conga line was introduced by Gil Hibben as was the “pass-off” by Walt Watkins.

**Gil and Linda Hibben in Louisville, KY hosted Bones Fest VII.** The venue was a real antique Kentucky Theater. This fest was truly a family affair. The Cowetts, Fraziers and Hib-

bens were prominent, and the brother/sister act of Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell were also there demonstrating precision bones playing, and don’t forget Mary Lee and Frank Sweet in 1800’s regalia and music.

**Bones Fest VIII** can be characterized as the fest with the many successful workshops. It was hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll in Restin, VA. There was something for everyone: bones making, scrimshaw carving, bones playing tips and techniques and much more.

Kenny Wolin made his first appearance here. Between Kenny and Bill Vits even our old stand-by experts were learning something new too.

**Bones Fest IX** took us back to Chattanooga with Steve and Janet Wixson hosting again. It was almost a repeat of Bones Fest IV with many new and improved bones players. It can be noted that Steve Wixson, Mel Mercier, John Davis, and Walt Watkins are now two-handed bones players and some who could not play at all 10 years ago now play very good.

**Bones Fest X** was a real happening in New Bedford, MA. It was hosted by Jonathan and Melissa Danforth. And what a job they did. There were over 100 attendees. New Bedford is a multicultural community with a famous whaling museum and maritime music heritage and the Rhythm Bones Society fit right in (see Jonathan and Melissa’s article on page 16 and the picture on Page 1.) Each year the bar of excellence and innovation has been raised at the annual Fest. This is the mission of the Rhythm Bones Society. At first I thought it was due to simple practice in anticipation of the upcoming Fest, but I came to realize that it was the addition of new licks and tricks picked up from other members. Of course practice means a lot for without it nothing much happens.

The efforts of Dan and Al Cowett for sound effects and Master of Ceremonies duties were recognized at Bones Fest X. Spouses such as Val Cowett, Wilma Myers, Linda Hibben, Sharon Mescher, Jennifer Brown, and Kay Cahill who did so much to keep us all going at so many fests should not be overlooked. Thank you.

“May your bones be with you”

*Ev Cowett*



Rhythm Bones Society Founding members at Bones Fest III. See Vol 1, No1 for their names



## Reflections From The Originator Of This Special Issue

Bones Fests have been a wonderful, surprising and enriching part of my life ever since I attended my first Fest in Brightwood, Virginia at the home of Russ and Wilma Myers in 1999.

Earlier that year I met Russ and Everett Cowett for the first time. Apart from a brief encounter with Percy Danforth in Toronto sometime back in the 1980s, Russ and Everett were the first dipterous (two-winged) rhythmbone players I had ever come across. Meeting them was quite an event for a bodhrán and bones player like myself who had been playing in a single-handed, 'traditional' style for almost thirty years at that stage. The opportunity to meet them again and to meet several others of their species was too good to miss and so I flew from Shannon airport across the Atlantic to Washington, DC and drove down to Brightwood to attend the Fest.

At that first Fest [Bones Fest III] I met the many other great bones players, including the extraordinary Joe Birl. One of the two bones that I had been playing for about fifteen years at that stage was a black plastic one which my father brought back from America where he was playing with the Chieftains. I loved the sound made by this very unorthodox combination of cow rib-bone and black hard plastic. I had been playing this set for so long that it had moulded itself to fit beautifully into my hand, between my fingers, and I knew the feel and the colour of its sound intimately. Unfortunately I had been careless over the years with the set of four plastic bones I received from my father and one by one I either broke or lost them! The last of the four had served me well right up until I attended that first Bones Fest in Brightwood but I managed to lose that too by leaving it on a stage somewhere in Scandinavia just a few days before my trip.

I was delighted to get the opportunity at Bones Fest to talk

about my own relationship with the bones and to play a little. I felt somewhat at a loss however because I didn't have my familiar pair of bones to play. I decided to tell the story of the box of four black plastic bones that came all the way from America and into our house in Blackrock in County Dublin some time in the mid 1970s.

You can imagine my surprise and delight at discovering that the inventor of those very bones, Joe Birl, was sitting in the front row listening to me on the deck of the Russ and Wilma Myers' house at my very first Bones Fest. Thanks to Joe's generosity, and that of several others, I left Brightwood that weekend with enough Joe Birl Rhythm Bones to last me a lifetime of playing!

Bones Fest and the Rhythm Bones Society have been important parts of my life since that first Fest. I have met many wonderful people there and made some dear friends. Each year brings with it a deepening of those many friendships and every year that I attend I am inspired by the wonderful musicianship of my fellow bones players. Not only do I learn many new things at every fest, the events have also been a vital part of the research for my soon to be completed dissertation.

I am grateful to all of those wonderful, generous people who have hosted Bones Fests in the past and I look forward to attending many more of these unique musical and enriching community occasions in the future.

*Mel Mercier*



Mel Mercier performing two-handed at BFVII

## Bones Fest I September 20, 1997 Greensboro, NC

Bones Fest 1 was held on a beautiful autumn Saturday afternoon, September 20, 1997, at the home of Ev and Val Cowett in Greensboro, North Carolina. Some of the eleven bones players who participated in this fest started arriving, quietly, Friday eve-



Everett Cowett is the first to play at BFI

ning at the Comfort Inn. Earlier that morning, a group of us, including Mel Bryant and Dr. Fred Edmunds, went to Shoney's Restaurant for brunch. By 1 PM we had gathered around Ev and Val's backyard deck. The players present came from four states:

North Carolina – Ev, Al, and Dan Cowett (Greensboro); Martha Cowett (Raleigh); and Jim Hobbs (Winston Salem);

Virginia – Russ Myers (Brightwood); Dr. Fred Edmunds (Lexington); Carl Hedrick and his grandson, Carl (Fincastle); and Tom Rice (Farmville);

Texas - Mel Bryant (Houston);

Maine – Parker Waite (Sedgwick).

Soon, we, the players, were talking "a mile a minute" with each other while intermittently rattling our various styles of bones, exchanging techniques, tricks and licks. Ev showed us his workshop, tools, wood and some of the many sets of 4 bones he had made.

Then the sound system, set up by Dan, was brought to life. Each of us



had the opportunity to stand before the microphone (nervously at first) and play our rhythm bones to music we provided, or that was made available by Dan.

Russ Myers gave us chromatic glissandos accompanied by classic Dixieland Jazz. Martha gave us driving syncopated rhythmic support of OMC's "How Bizarre". And, Ev played his classic two hand rolls.

Dr. Edmunds led us through chapters from his "handbook" played to rock music. The rest of us unleashed whatever rhythms our chosen music drove us to.

About 4 PM Dr. Edmunds announced that he was grateful he'd been able to make it to the Cowetts and he hoped the jamming would continue, but he was not feeling very well and had to go lay down. Later that afternoon the rest of us sat down to an incredibly delicious barbecue feast brought together by Val and family. With enough refreshment, the now ten players were all back up jamming until dark to whatever Dan put on the sound system.

Later that evening, back at the Comfort Inn, the talk and jamming continued. Dr. Edmunds rallied as we gathered in his room, where on his bed lay the Holy Bible and, comfortably under the covers, a bottle of bourbon.

Sunday we all headed home and over the next few months we exchanged phone calls, fax's, letters and the video that Al Cowett had made of the event. It was wonderful and fascinating to be able to see moments from that afternoon again!

Dr. Edmunds called Russ to say how disappointed he was in his own performance at the get-together. Russ assured him otherwise. We all recounted how much fun we'd had at Ev and Val's. Russ and I exchanged drawings and notes on bone shapes and materials. I sent Russ some 1 x 3/16", # 6061, aluminum flat stock to work with in his shop. I think Russ



Dr. Fred Edmunds performs at Bones Fest I

was able to bend the flat stock, but the results were not playable. He sent me a diagram of the "Irish bone" bones he had, along with the names, Sue Barber and Torry Barrand. Carl Hedrick sent photos of the event. From Ev and Val

came the wonderful "Christmas Greetings" which I have been gratefully receiving ever since!

It was the beginning!

Thank you, Ev, for what you, with Val's support, initiated that weekend. We have come to be "players" at an extended family's annual celebration, now known as "The Bones Fests".

A barbecue dinner was provided by the Cowetts followed by a business meeting where decisions were not made and an evening of spontaneous bones-playing. A video was made of the event and a copy was provided to each participant. *Parker Waite*

## Ev Cowett's Opening Remarks at Bones Fest I

Here is a transcription of Ev Cowett's opening remarks at BFI.

"I thought we would start the program. I want to keep it very informal and really do three major things. Number 1 is share boning things so that we can all learn from one another. Secondly, I was hoping we could get together and do a little bit of bones synchronizing, harmonizing if you will. And third, I'd like to talk to you all about having a real big bones festival where you invite people other than just bones players. During the afternoon we can talk about that."

Well talk they did which lead to Bones Fest II. The rest is history including that informality, synchronizing [is that jamming] and the sharing of technique started by Ev at BFI.



From the left; Al Cowett, Tom Rice, Ev Cowett, Russ Myers, Martha Cowett bones synchronizing with Dan Cowett on guitar on Ev's deck.



Cowett's backyard from left, Dan Cowett, Al Cowett, Wilma Myers, Carl Hedrick's grandson, Russ Myers and Ev Cowett.

## Bones Fest II September 26, 1998 Greensboro, NC

Bones Fest II was again hosted by Ev Cowett in a shelter at a local park on September 26, 1998 from 1:00 to 3:00. Registration was not required and no fees were charged. Again the Cowetts setup a sound system. The event was followed by a barbecue in the park hosted by the Cowetts. All bones players in Guilford County attended - all 8 of them - in addition to a few from outside the state including, Carl Hedrick, Tom Rice, Russ Myers and myself. A video was made of the event.

I discovered Bones Fest II by accident as a result of a vacation trip. I bought a pair of black plastic bones in an old music store to replace a pair that I had broken. (These, of course, turned out to be Joe Birli's patented rhythm bones, and I would meet him at Bones Fest III.)

There was a trademark on them that I had not really noticed before and when I got back to Chattanooga, I entered it into the computer.

To my surprise, there were several pages on rhythm bones and the first was Rhythm Bones Central. I clicked on it and here is what it said.

"Welcome to Rhythm Bones Cen-

tral. Your host of this spot is Everett Cowett, a national known 'boner' or for you sophisticates out there you may call him an 'osteonist.' (I, on the other hand, just call him Dad.) Here is a picture of me, Martha, and my Dad, Everett, playing bones together at last year's Bones Festival."

There was a lot on the website including, a description of what bones are, a bit of bones history, a list of the known players and the mention of another Bones Festival. I looked up



Sister and brother Martha and John Cowett with Bill Swirin on bodhran

Ev's telephone number and gave him a call. He, of course, invited me to the Fest. I knew that I just had to go!

I drove from Chattanooga to Greensboro and was the last person to arrive at the Fest. At that time, I was a one handed bones player and not all that confident of my playing ability. When I heard the likes of the Cowetts, Carl Hedrick, Tom Rice and Russ Myers, I was hesitant to play for the



Ev Cowett presents a certificate to Russ Myers after his history presentation.

group, but I did briefly.

After some informal jamming and talking, Ev started the program. As in all Fests since, each of us played bones to music we'd brought along.

Russ Myers gave a great talk on the history of rhythm bones. Carl Hedrick was very funny. Dan played his guitar. Ev lead the group in some synchronized rhythm bones playing.

I was juiced up when I returned home and after kissing wife Janet hello, I went straight to my computer and found almost 100 pages of bones websites. Wow, I've got new friends.  
*Steve Wixson*



Ev Cowett leads the Cowett family bones players in a group performance at Bones Fest II. Ev's wife, Val, is in this photograph and also is number 18 in the group photograph on Page 1.



Bones player and humorist Carl Hedrick



# Bones Fest III

## September 25, 1999

### Brightwood, VA

Bones Fest III was hosted by Russ and Wilma Myers and held in their home with most of the activities on the back porch overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains.

This was a one day fest beginning about 10 am and ending about 4 pm. Many people stayed in a hotel that was about 10 miles away. 34 bones players attended and individuals played during the day.

Lunch was purchased by attendees at an old general store next door. Sound equipment was provided by Dan Cowett. Virginia Public Television videoed the event for a special program that was broadcast by them.

Russ' dining table served as a display table for bones information.



Steve Wixson, Dave Boyles, Spike Bones, Al Cowett and Ev Cowett jam on the Myers' deck



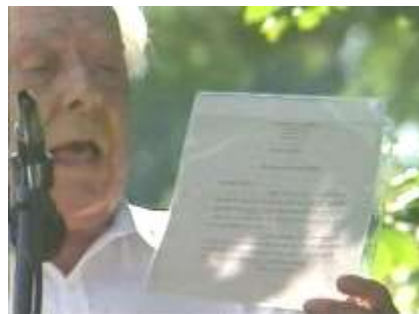
Matteo gave a beautiful castanet performance

A business meeting was held where the Rhythm Bones Society was officially organized with By-Laws patterned after the Jews Harp Guild. An election was held and the following were elected: Ev Cowett, Executive Director; Russ Myers, Assistant Di-



John Cahill performs in costume

rector; Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer; and Board Members Steve Brown, Sally Carroll, Mel Mercier



Joe Birl tells the story of how he patented his black plastic rhythm bones

and Jerry Mescher. A photograph of the founding members is on Page 3. Following the Fest, the first RBS



Dave Boyles and Spike Bones' Bone-Off

Board meeting was held. The Board authorized a newsletter including the use of color with Steve Wixson as editor. Dues were set at \$20 per year. The Board authorized the purchase of [www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com) as our official website. Chattanooga was selected as the site for Bones Fest IV.



Vivacious Vivian Cox



Female players Vivian Cox (silver hair), Martha Cowett, Sally Carroll (almost hidden) and Deborah Brower entertain as a group.



# Bones Fest IV

## September 22-24, 2000

### Chattanooga, TN

Bones Fest IV was hosted by Steve and Janet Wixson in Chattanooga, TN (more precisely Signal Mountain and Walden, TN). A three day event was held based on comments from previous Fests that people were traveling too far for just a one day event.

The Saturday events, similar to previous Fests, were held in the Mountain Opry building in Walden. Each Friday night people gather here for country and bluegrass music. On Friday, a small group played bones for the audience and invited them to join us on Saturday night. Several of them and a few others came for that public performance.



The Cowett family performs, Martha, Ev, Dan, Al (yes he actually plays), John and Tommy



The Mountain Opry building

Here is Bernie Worrell's reflection on the Fest.

"Bones Fest IV was very special to me. Steve and Janet Wixson were fantastic hosts. Beginning with a reception on Friday night held at their home, through the Saturday performances at the Mountain Opry building, the BBQ dinner at their home, and concluding with a Sunday Brunch again at their house. What a great place to be introduced to the Rhythm Bones Society, make new friends and to share the folk instrument we love.

One of my fondest reflections was during the Saturday performances. My brother Jerry performed with our father, Albert Mescher. This was no mean feat since my father died in 1967! As you may have guessed this was not a live performance; it was a video tape of their performance on Ted Mack's Amateur Hour (see photo-

*(Continued on page 21)*



Jerry Mescher showing a video of him and his father on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour show



Ann Hoffman was featured on Worlds Funniest Videos television show



Michael Ballard provided many of the photographs in this Special Issue



Perky Ida May Schmich



Mel Mercier, Steve Brown and Barry Patton



Barry Patton plays the fastest rhythm bones

# Bones Fest V

## August 3-5, 2001

### Winchendon, MA

Bones Fest V was hosted by Steve and Jennifer Brown in the Red Apple Barn in Winchendon, MA. It was a 3 day affair patterned after Bones Fest VI. Here is Steve's story.



Steve Brown starts the T-shirt tradition. Jennifer Brown is number 30 in group photo on Page 1.

“When I got back from BFIV, I started out quick, visiting the farm and making some contacts, but somewhere around March, I began to get things together. By NEFFA (last weekend in April) I had a rough draft of the flyer, had contacted hotels, had Lori Grady on board working on the flyer and booklet, and had finally settled on the Red Apple Farm. My objectives were to duplicate BFIV, with some new twists: a program book that would include contact information for participants, a T-shirt, and increased live music on Friday as well as Saturday.

It really helped that I had some connections for music. Dave Reiner was more than willing to come for the whole day with his two sons.



Nick Driver came from England



Dr. Jerry Barnett

But clearly I couldn't have done it without Jennifer who made and organized food, and worked tirelessly. Bill



T-shirt with Bones Fest V motto

Rose was invaluable in setting up the publicity and I did contact a bunch of people including many radio stations.

Saturday morning's program centered around attending bones players accompanied by Dave Reiner (fiddle) and his two sons. The evening performance invited the public (as in BFIV except a fee was charged) and Dave provided the music. Food for Saturday lunch and dinner was from Boston Market.

Sunday was an informal gathering serving coffee and donuts and ending about 2pm.

I spent more time working and missed all kinds of things - Steve Wixson's cave man outfit, and a bunch of players, especially during the day.

By Sunday I couldn't have done any more, although I was the last to

*(Continued on page 21)*



About one half of the attendees play at the close of the Fest. By this time the rain on the tin roof stopped and the flood subsided.



# Bones Fest VI

## August 2-4, 2002

### Greensboro, NC

Bones Fest VI was again hosted by Ev Cowett and family at Guilford College in Greensboro, NC. This was a catered affair with: a reception on Friday night, lunch on Saturday, a banquet on Saturday night. We also had the use of several buildings on the campus.

Many of the attendees stayed in campus housing, and breakfasts were served in their cafeteria. Steve Brown remembers sharing a room with Jon Danforth. He had only connected with him the year before. They stayed up really late talking, reminiscing about grandfather Percy and other things.

*(Continued on page 11)*



The Board of Directors. From left are Steve Brown, Member; Everett Cowett, Executive Director; Jerry Mescher, Member, Sally Carroll, Member; Steve Wixson, Sec/Treas; and Russ Myers, Asst Director.



Walt and Joy Watkins and Joe Birl



Dan Griffith rocks the crowd



Our **Mazster** of Ceremonies, Al Cowett



Karen Singleton, Hank Tennenbaum, Steve Wixson and Danny Aldridge with cake in memory of Brother Bone's 100th birthday.



Dan Cowett (yes he actually plays the bones), Parker Waite, Steve Brown and Jeff Newman



Spike Bones performs in the beautiful planetarium auditorium at Guilford College



Hank Tennenbaum performs a bones solo



Michael Ballard-bones player and photographer



Sally Carroll



Mike Passeotti with bones and ???



Donny DeCamp



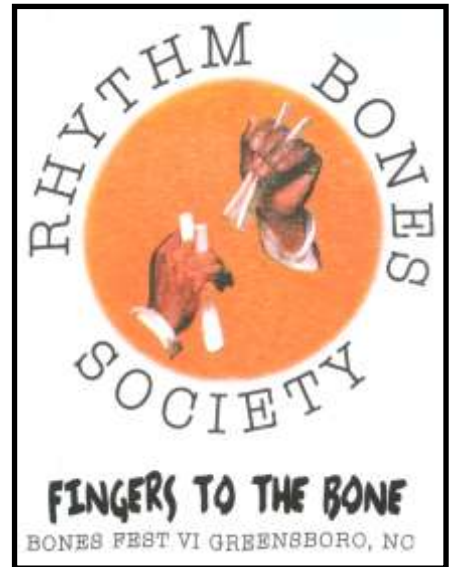
Vivacious Vivian Cox finishes her performance



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet



Steve Wixson with rhythm bones hooked up to a drum synthesizer



T-shirt with Bones Fest VI motto

This Fest had one of the best facilities as shown in the photograph at the bottom of page 10. It was a planetarium (without its projector) with terrific sound system and acoustics.

Sharon Mescher remembers being inspired by the energy of Vivian Cox and rocker Dan Griffith. Mary Lee Sweet has some nice memories of BFVI on page 19.

BFVI was Mike Hannan's first Fest. "What a treat to see and meet so many other bones players and, yes, even to realize that I was not the greatest bones player in the world - not even close! What fun I had especially at the jam session on the opening night when the most bones players I had ever seen were jamming together, having snacks and meeting other participants. I hit my best licks on the bones that night and started a very enlightening and fun weekend with a bunch of great folks. I was amazed by the number of styles employed to make rhythm with a couple of sticks!"



Martha Cowett and nephew Roux Cowett and Banjo Bandits



Composite of John Davis and good friend Will Kear (deceased) and Banjo Bandits



# Bones Fest VII

## July 25-27, 2003

### Louisville, KY

Bones Fest VII was hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben in Louisville, KY, on July 25, 26, &, 27, 2003. The host hotel was the Holiday Inn Downtown located 3 blocks from the Kentucky Theatre where the events took place.



The Kentucky Theatre

Prior to the reception on Friday evening, Bones players who were here a day early were featured on 3 separate TV shows.

Friday night was a reception at the



Bones Market Place and reception area with Linda Hibben welcoming bones players

Kentucky Theatre where heavy hors d'ouvres were catered by Linda Hibben and sister-in-law, Sally Cochran.

Dr. Sandra Graves provided her original paintings and flower arrange-



Young Sky Bartlett, Shorty Boulet and Ernie Duffy team up for a great performance

ments to set the tone for a very welcoming reception area. There was plenty of jamming and fun for all.

Saturday morning opened at the KY Theatre with coffee and pastries and the show began...what fun!! Everyone who wanted to get up and play had the opportunity and everyone was fantastic!!



Jonathan Danforth graciously plays for others

The event was professionally videoed by dear friends, Mike and Janet Carter.

Both lunch and dinner were served at Cunningham's, a very well known Louisville restaurant, just 1/2 block from the Kentucky Theatre.

Can't forget to mention the T-shirts. Picked up 100 on the Tuesday before the Fest. Linda and I were sitting at a stop light when I discovered they spelled Louisville, **WRONG!!!** Anyway, the T-shirt company was more than embarrassed, and had another 100 printed correctly within 48 hours.

Saturday night was the public performance and it was awesome. The 200 seat theatre was packed and people were standing in the aisles. People who never heard of "Playing the Bones," were grinning from ear to ear and clapping like crazy after each performer finished.



Parker Waite



T-shirt with Bones Fest VII motto



Steve Brown received the Meritorious Service Award and then showed his championship style

Sunday morning was a brunch at Hibben's place in LaGrange, a bit of a problem for those who needed transportation from downtown, but it all worked out in the end.

A lot of bones playing and new friendships occurred over the weekend. We hope everyone had as much fun as we did. *Linda & Gil Hibben*



The mostly Oregon Frazier family surprised Norris, 3rd from left, by attending the Fest

# Bones Fest VIII

## August 20-22, 2004

### Reston, VA

Bones Fest VIII (or "V, eye, eye, eye" as our MC, Al Cowett put it) was hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll and held by the beautiful Lake Anne Plaza in Reston, VA on August 20-22, 2004.



Host Sally Carroll dancing with her hands

It was my first Fest, which made it all the more meaningful and special to me, most of which is because it was the very first time meeting everyone and forging so many new friendships with wonderful people with the same passions for such a complex yet deceptively simple musical instrument as the bones.

The first person I met and recognized (from watching the Bones Fest VII video from the previous year in Louisville), was Russ Myers, who was in the process of buying a book in the used book store. Then I ran into this great fiddle player who I asked to jam with outside to a 7/8 tune (off a Nickel Creek album I heard), who (of course) turned out to be our very own, Jonathan Danforth. I know he's heard it several times before, but it was still an honor to tell him that his grandfather, Percy, taught me how to play during the 1979 Michigan Percussion Festival at the University of Michigan



Tim Reilly and Kenny Wolin meet

(where I bought a set of Joe Birl bones from him).

As I played for the first time, Jonathan quickly told me that I absolutely had to meet Tim Reilly, because our styles of playing were so similar. Meeting Tim and eventually becoming very close friends has made a very profound impact on my life and I'm very grateful for that.



Kenny Wolin's First Advance Workshop

On Friday, Sally added workshops to the Bones Fest tradition. Ev Cowett taught a Beginner's workshop, Jim Lande a wood bones-making workshop, while I taught an Advance Bones workshop which led to more advanced workshops at later Fests.

Hank Tennenbaum was originally slated to teach a bones-making workshop during the same time as my workshop. Fortunately, Hank was gracious enough to meet with me just prior to our Festival to teach me his craft. He's a wealth of knowledge and hope he'll be able to have an opportunity to share this with everyone.



Steve's Wixson & Brown aka Meschers

Saturday's individual performances were varied and innovative from period costumes to "tambones" (ask Spike!)

I chose to perform without any musical accompaniment because I wanted to really feature just the bare bones, so I improvised a solo based on Ravel's, Bolero.

Saturday night saw a couple of co-



T-shirt with Bones Fest VIII motto

medic performances, Bill Vits' amazing technique while sporting a leopard-skinned and tassled lamp shade on his head (a la Spike Jones), and Steve Brown and Steve Wixson (wearing a long blond wig) imitating Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell's brother/sister duo act.

I invited Mel and Jonathan up with me where I played a jig for the first time in my life. Because of that experience, I've been heavily delving into Irish culture and music, and playing most recently with The President's Own Irish Ensemble (we only form up once a year), playing bones in the Grand Foyer of the White House right on St. Patrick's Day. And if it hadn't been for the Bones Fest VIII, none of these wonderful experiences may have happened.

There were so many other bones players I met there that have made such an impact on me, and I hope they all know who they are. Steve Brown put it so well when he described meeting other bones players like we are all platypuses, who think we're the only ones until we meet our brethren!

*Kenny Wolin*



Jeff Leffert at Sunday's public performance



# Bones Fest IX

## July 8-10, 2005

### Chattanooga, TN

Bones Fest IX returned to Chattanooga five years after Bones Fest IV. In many ways it was Bones Fest IV. The venue was again the Wixson



Steve Wixson with a castanet-like move



A great performance by Tim Reilly



Yirdy Machar wows them on Saturday night



The Bones Market Place



Olivia Lohman, Randy Sepalla, and John Perona



Executive Director and All-Ireland Bones Champion, Steve Brown, demonstrates his winning style



Scott Miller plays bones and dances



Ev Cowett and Bill Rose accompanied by Frank Sweet



Ramsey Cowett shows us how it's done



Part of Jonathan Danforth's Kid Workshop home and the Mountain Opry building (see BFIV article on Page 8.)

Members brought their musical instruments including Kenny Wolin's xylophone to Donny DeCamp's banjo



which he used to lead jam sessions on the outside deck. The food was among the best of all the Fests and included a home cooked Italian dinner.

The performances continue to get better with each Fest. Several people were interviewed on video tape. We need to preserve all of this history.

Next year will be the 10th Bones Fest. Hard to believe. *Steve Wixson*



Walt Watkins leads his pass-off with Mitch, Jerry, Walt, Bernie and Don



Top is Bones Fest IX ball cap and below is back of ball cap with Fest motto.



From left, Mike Hickey, Julie Kurtz-Kunesh, Randy Walker and Robbie Hilliard



Spike Bones with his flags and bones



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet in costume



Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell in sync



Kenny Wolin's surprise performance!



Gil Hibben leading all bones players on stage after his traditional conga line finale

# Bones Fest X

## July 28-30, 2006

### New Bedford, MA

Bones Fest X was held in New Bedford, MA, with Friday night and Saturday daytime events at the Gallery X building and the Saturday daytime events at a nearby church. This was the largest Fest in terms of attendees with 89 paid plus a few guests. Melissa and Jonathan Danforth were our hosts and here is how they remember it.



Gallery X with outdoor registration tent

*Jonathan: Hey all, this is Jonathan  
Melissa: and Melissa*

*J: And we'd like to welcome you to our reminisces of Bones Fest X*

*M: It was hot, a lot of work, and involved a whole lot of running around, but I'd like to think it was a success overall.*

*J: Of course it was stressful at times (and you have the herniated disc to prove it), but we knew it would be; we'd had plenty of warning from past hosts, and we'd been planning it for more than two years.*

*M: I remember how we started*



Mitch Boss and his silky bones style



Guy Gillette and his daughter perform together



Gerard Arseneault, Canadian with a warm smile



The Mescher Tradition grows with Jerry, Bernie Worrell and their adopted brother Mel Mercier

making notes and plans on the long drive back from Bones Fest VIII in Virginia -

*J: Actually I remember you starting to make T-shirt design sketches on airline napkins while heading back from Bones Fest VII in Louisville!*

*M: That's right - I think we still have those! We knew we wanted the tenth bones fest, with its roman numeral X, though - for the skull and crossed bones! A piratical image would tie in with our maritime his-*

tory,

*J: And with the gigantic whale bones in the whaling museum...*

*M: and we could score some really cool pirate stuff! Seriously, though, I know you had a more personal reason for wanting to host...*

*J: Well, yes... many of the people currently involved in New Bedford's musical rebirth used to attend the old Tryworks Coffeeshouse, where my granddad had performed back when he was touring a lot, and where we*



Mel Mercier organized group. From left, Aaron Plunkett, Kenny Wolin, Mel, Kevin Kelly, Tim Reilly and Teri Davies



The Cowett family synchronizing together. From left, Martha, Ev, Tommy, Dan and John





Gil Hibben leads the Conga Line Finale



Maestro Kenny Wolin performing another dazzling bones routine in black tux and tie.



T-shirt graphic for Bones Fest X



Tony Humphreys works his English style



Dave 'Black Bart' Boyles, Bones Fest XI host



Steve Brown presented Meritorious Service Awards to Dan Cowett for years of running the sound system and Al Cowett for years of serving as Master of Ceremonies..

were lucky enough to have our public performance almost 30 years later.

M: That was a very special evening for you. I'm not sure people really understood how moved you were to be able to bring it full circle

*J: I know we didn't get to see a lot of the individual performances during the Fest, but what would you say were the highlights that you remember best?*

M: Well, to start with, Bones Fest X was huge! We had over 120 people in attendance.

*J: That was something we had*

*(Continued on page 18)*



The fast hands of Sky Barlett



Jeremy Brown and father Steve play together

like that.

*J: I did get a little teary...*

M: That night was also the first time we were able to sit down and enjoy everyone's bones playing. Up to that point, we'd spent most of our time in the kitchen, or running for more water, or coordinating people and time.



Jerry and Sharon Mescher at Sharon's first public bones performance

(Continued from page 17)

*hoped for – we put a lot of effort into publicity and into keeping the cost of the fest at an accessible level. I was definitely happy to see that those priorities paid off, and even happier to see that the Fest came very close to paying for itself.*

M: I remember being amazed at just how far people traveled to get here. Bones players from the Midwest, Florida, Texas, California, and from England, Ireland, and the Netherlands, all coming to “my house”!

J: *I think that helped make the fest an especially diverse one musically, too. We had bones playing along with Irish, old-time, bluegrass, ragtime, cowboy music, Dixieland, jazz, rock and roll, sea shanties, classical, and many many other kinds of music.*

M: Another great memory was the last-minute bones performance we threw together at Café Arpeggio on Thursday night – we were able to open a lot of local ears up to bones-playing with a 10-player pass-off, and many of those came to the Saturday night performance.

J: *Some of them are now bones players! The performances throughout the Fest were something to be proud of.*

M: I felt like we were able not only to witness their musical talent, but also to learn more about them as people, to experience a small part of their backgrounds because of the music they played with. I’ve only been able to attend three Bones Fests previously, but I’ve always appreciated that connection with the performers.

J: *Bones Fests have always felt more like a family reunion to me than a folk festival or convention. That feeling, I think, really shows in the performances: open hearts, joy shared.*

M: I felt privileged and humbled that we could host an event like that. In particular, I was amazed and confounded beyond joy to learn that Russ Myers was planning on coming; to have him make this difficult journey to the festival we hosted will always be a very special and touching gesture. I know we had no control over the weather, but I wish I could have made his stay more comfortable. Finding

out later that this had been his last Bones Fest made the experience very bittersweet.

J: *Yes, he was very patient with what turned out to be just about the hottest weekend of the year in New Bedford. In fact, everyone was very understanding about the heat. Having the entire Cowett clan here was also very special. They’re our founding family – our first family.*

M: Not only were they experienced guides and a huge help in general, but they also maintained a level of energy and excitement that really helped us whenever our own flagged.

J: *There were lots of other people, of course, that we couldn’t have done without.*

M: Absolutely! To start with, there were the musicians who backed up the bones players: The Rusty Stringbandits played old-time music, the Publicans played Irish music, and Richard Horwitz played banjo with you on Friday.

J: *Steve and Jennifer Brown both went way beyond the call of duty helping us with all kinds of stuff, and so did Tim Reilly and Kenny Wolin.*

M: We’d also like to thank everyone else who helped with loading and unloading chairs and tables, with food setup, with shuttling stuff over to the hall for the Saturday night performance, and making runs to the store for us.

J: *Norm Conrad deserves special mention for doing our T-shirts at such a nice price.*

M: My brother, John Maciel, gets extra credit for taking a hundred bones players, finding space for them in a museum that was already setting up for a wedding luncheon, getting them all to face the same way with smiles on their faces, and taking a great group photo.

J: *And of course, thanks go to the Unitarian Church (where the Tryworks Coffeehouse was), to Gallery X, and to lots of folks in New Bedford who made the Fest not just possible, but fun.*

M: And last but not least, thanks to you all, fellow bones players! You all rock.

J: *We’d do it again in a heartbeat!*

M: Well, maybe not quite so immediately.

J: *True. (laughing) We’re still exhausted from Bones Fest X.*

M: But we can’t wait to see you all again soon at future Bones Fests.

J: *May your bones be with you until then!*

[More photographs on Page 24.]

## Steve Brown’s Regional Bones Fests

I have held three Regional Bones Fests. The first with 8 people in my living room, the second in 2003 with 35 people in my back yard and the third in 2004 with 20 people at the Red Apple Farm (see the photograph below). They were more like Bones Fests I and II—smaller, but a lot of fun. *Steve Brown*



2004 Regional Bones Fest held at the Red Apple Farm. From left are Phil Brake, Shorty Boulet, Dave Reiner on fiddle, Eric Reiner on piano, Ernie Duffy and Dee Tatro.

## Reflections From Mary Lee Sweet

Bones Fest VI. I was a struggling, one-handed bones player when by chance I found the RBS website. There was to be a Bones Fest in Greensboro. I made arrangements, and in July, Frank and I were in a hotel practicing our music when there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and a man I did not know said, "I hear a bones player in this room." It was Don De Camp. That was the beginning of my first Bones Fest.

There were many amazing bones players at Guilford College. When introductions began, the first person to introduce himself (I can't remember who it was – sorry) said that he had been playing bones since 1939! That's when I realized just how hopeless I was. I had been playing a couple of years. These people had been playing for decades! Inspiration was in the air! I had come to the right place to learn how to play this percussion doodad. As the introductions continued, I learned that there were many, many, many Cowetts! They were everywhere! They were handing out programs, announcing, performing, organizing, and handling the sound system. Truly, this was a family affair.

During one of the breaks, Hank Tenenbaum came over and introduced himself. He said, "You're from Florida, and I know this is probably a silly question, but, would you happen to know a fellow called Vgo?" Well, we do know Vgo. In Florida it's a small world, after all. Apparently he and Hank played gigs together thirty years ago. Then we met Russ Meyers, who demonstrated how to change pitch on the bones. I loved the sound of his whalebones. He really liked the sound of my cow bones, which I had bought at the Willy Clancy festival in Ireland. He wanted to know what kind of trade we could make. "No," he said, "you CAN'T have the whale bones!" I guess it wasn't a good trading day.

Of course I was an instant fan of Spike Bones, "Mr. Bones" John Cahill, Vivian Cox, Bernie Worrell, Jerry Mescher, and Jonathan Danforth, whose performances were won-

derful and whose dedication to honoring his grandfather, Percy Danforth, is admirable. I left Greensboro with wonderful memories and a two-handed bones playing style.

Bones Fest VII. I was not as overwhelmed, since this was my second time around. We got there on Thursday night and enjoyed jamming at the Irish pub. Then we got up early to be part of a television filming that host Gil Hibben had arranged.

Spike Bones and his mother were there. Spike, of course, was the ultimate showman and came up with even more outrageous ideas to show off his talents. Shorty Boulet, Ernie Duffy and Sky Bartlett, who turned 16 at the fest, put on an amazing show of bones playing which included choreographed movements to the knees, elbows and head. It was very different and fun to watch. With each performer, I learned a few new tricks. Not that I could implement them all! The entire Cowett clan was there, each with a different style of playing. Joe Birl, Bernie, Jerry, Vivian Cox, John Cahill with wife Kay, and many others, including the "ring leaders" Steve Wixson, Steve Brown, and Gil Hibben each performing their own musical treats.

This was the fest where I met John Perona. He is an amazing bones player and a truly wonderful man with an awesome musical background. His style of playing is very elegant and the silver spoons sound heavenly. One of the highlights was when Mel Mercier and Tim Reilly played together. Their bones were literally talking to each other. Jonathan Danforth's bones playing while accompanying himself whistling was a showstopper. He always finds a unique way to entertain.

The conga line ended the bones fest and surprised the guests who came to the Kentucky Theater to see the performances. Sunday we went to Gil and Linda Hibben's home for breakfast and learned that we had been hobnobbing with a celebrity. Gil is world famous for his knives and all of us Star Trek fans have been watching his weaponry in action for years! Who else is a secret celebrity bones player?

Bones Fest VIII. One of the joys of attending Bones Fests is visiting cities that are new to me. Lake Anne Plaza in Reston was a great place for a fest.

We did get a bit of rain, but no one melted. There were lots of new friends to meet. Kenny Wolin tried to turn us into bona fide polyrhythm percussionists. Jim Lande tried to teach us to make our own bones.

I met Jeff Lefferts and bought a set of baby bones from him for my brand new grandson. While boners jammed around the plaza, I videoed all the usual suspects playing the baby bones. So now I have a pair of bones for little Miles, when he is ready, with a combined rattling experience of probably 900 years.

Of course, there were Cowetts, Cowetts, and more Cowetts. All were smiling, playing, and making everything work. Bill Vits did a funny impression of Spike Jones with a lampshade on his head. Not to be outdone, the Steves – Brown and Wixson – imitated Bernie and Jerry's act! This fest gets more outrageous every year. But the most astounding thing this year was when Bill Vits rattled his bones vertically and they were hitting so fast that as they rose up into the air you could envision the wings of a mockingbird.

Bones Fest IX. Mountain driving makes me nervous, so I was glad the fest was in July. If there was snow, I wouldn't go! The fest was one of workshops. Kenny Wolin helped us with a variety of rhythms. Tim Reilly showed us how to scrimshaw and make our own bones (I'll just buy mine, thank you). Some lucky kids got to learn bones playing with Jonathan Danforth. The thing I remember most is the rocks. Steve Wixson keeps huge ones in his home! Jamming was especially memorable with the sounds echoing through the mountaintops. At the performances, I can still see Gil Hibben clicking and clacking and swaying to a Hawaiian melody. Kenny Wolin in a wig leaping and cavorting barefoot to heavy metal music definitely stopped the show. Another conga line, another morning breakfast overlooking the Tennessee Mountains, and Bones Fest IX was done. We went home wondering why the wolves wouldn't howl.

Bones Fest X. There were lots of bones in New Bedford, including whale bones at the whaling museum. So much history in such a small place.



Now the RBS has made history there, too. Jonathan and Melissa gave us a wonderful setting for a bones fest. The fun started at the hotel where we were given a "goodie bag" which contained a box of candy! Inside the bag were other interesting items, such as a pirate's eye patch.

It was great to be able to see the ship where Tim Reilly works. There was a picture of it on the wall at Gallery X. Aaron Plunkett, from whom I ordered my Irish goat bones, was there this year. He did a wonderful workshop on using bones and percussion theory. There were a couple of people from England who came, and, of course, there were Cowetts aplenty, helping out where ever they could. This year, among all the great performances, Kenny Wolin and Sky Bartlett stole the spotlight. Sky did a solo performance, which left the audience in awe. He can rattle the bones with the best of the old-timers and is beginning to leave everyone else in the dust! Kenny, in contrast to last year's wig and bare feet, appeared in a tuxedo and meticulously, crisply clicked and clacked to the music of "The Typewriter", by Leroy Anderson. *Mary Lee Sweet*

## Reflections From Other Mem-

Bones Fest V - Neither rain nor threat of floods would keep bones players from enjoying the event. *Norm Conrad*

Bones Fest I -when I received the invitation from Fred Edmunds I said, "Who in their right mind would drive all the way to North Carolina to play bones? Did not go.

Bones Fest II -when I received my invitation from Everett, I said "Oh, yeah", but couldn't find North Carolina on the map and didn't go.

Bones Fest III -I really planned on going to this one, but a combination of family problems forced me to cancel out (I found Virginia on the map)

Bones Fest IV -After being elected to the board of directors, I knew I had to go and what an amazing unbelievable time it was - I was hooked.

Bones Fest V -My wife offered to

co-host bones fest in order for me not to fly off some where, and after offering, I realized I had to follow Steve and Janet Wixson's remarkable BFIV. Through the rain on the tin roof, it all worked, Nick Driver et al had a fabulous time and I slept for a week.

Bones Fest VI -Going back to college in North Carolina, sharing a dorm room with Percy Danforth's grandson, and feeling like a big bones fraternity! Bones Fest VII -hanging out with Gil and Linda at their beautiful home, pulling up to the motel and seeing 10 bones players serenading the desk clerk at 5 am! playing in the old Louisville theater; getting a meritorious service award for drinking too much Guinness in Ireland!

Bones Fest VIII -the old Reston courtyard, pretending to be Jerry Mescher, seeing Jeremy play on stage for the first time, Sky Bartlett playing like an old master.

Bones Fest IX -Jamming on Thursday night, taking over Ev's workshop for beginners, eating the most fabulous food, hanging out with Steve and Yirdy, talking with Janet in the kitchen, playing at the Opry stage again.

Bones Fest X -Thursday night jamming with Joe Birl, et al, playing at the X Gallery, walking around the whaling museum after the most amazing picture, seeing Aaron, Mel, and loads of new comers, being with Russ Myers for the last time, Mel's coming out party as one of the Meschers.

Bones fests have literally changed my life. From the early days when I didn't attend until now when it is a major event in my life, it has always had a major impact on me. Fred and Ev stirred early interest, Russ' fest made me wish I had attended, and Steve Wixson's first fest brought it all home. Bones fest has been the focal point of my development as a bones player, has given me a new pallet to paint my paintings of bones players and has given me new reason to play. I always learn something new, meet the most amazing people, and come away refreshed and reinvigorated. Each one takes on its own personality, and each one has a different cast of characters. Think about the number of times an interesting person has come, but only that one time? Barry Patton, Nick

Driver, Jeff Newman, Sandor Slo-movits, Aaron Plunkett -all once so far, but made the fest so interesting by their presence. And there's the rest of us who can't stay away. The location changes but the feeling remains! *Steve Brown*

It was my first Bones Fest, a fantastic experience, all these bones players, with their own style. Surprising about the sundries bones makers, from real bones and wood. I felt myself at home very soon in this company of bones friends. In Europe there are a few bones players, but maybe we can organize a Bones Fest in Europe (with you all together). A first-rate holiday object. *Hans Weehuizen*

Bones Fest X was my first--Thanks for the things I learned!

Since I came back I have been really working on the new skills and techniques I learned. Thanks to all who made this such a wonderful learning experience. One of the most informative things I learned was to play bones to jazz. A friend of mine plays an excellent blues guitar and at our last gig, we really had a good time grooving on the guitar and bones.

Some of the other first timers and I were talking at the Fest and we talked about the Fest being a bit daunting for first timers. We would like to see a breakout session for first timers where we could meet and display or try out our skills in a small group setting with an experienced player before we got on stage in front of most of the best bones players in the world. *Dennis Riedesel*

Bones fest IV-Chattanooga: At my first bones fest I was awed by the earthy history of the mountain opry auditorium. Steve Wixson and all the bones family made my mom & I feel right at home. I remember a strange local fellow who played really long bones in an unorthodox manner(?). I bought Black Bart's, Joe Birl's and Jerry Mescher's bones!

Bones fest VII-Louisville: I loved the Kentucky Theater and met many players. The sit down meal at a local dinner spot made me feel like a southerner again. The party at Gil's was on the "cutting edge" (he's a "sharp" guy!). I bought some Steve Brown bones!

Bones fest VIII-Reston: At Reston I found a kindred percussionist spirit in Kenny Wolin's playing and the ancestry of my teacher, Percy Danforth, in Jonathan Danforth. The Cowett family retained their title as Bones Ambassadors (at Happy Hour!). I bought some Tim Reilly bones! *Bill Vits*

Bones Fest IX - All those bodhrans on the pool table, not to mention Steve Wixson's electronic bones, were a real hoot!

Bones Fest X - Didn't realize the fest was just a few blocks from the ocean until I looked out the window on the return flight - and read the tourist handouts.

All in all, RBS and the bones fests have put me in the midst of a bunch of terrific folks from all walks of life who represent many styles and skill levels and caused my own playing to significantly improve.

Ideas/suggestions for other articles, etc to include. I would like to see articles telling about various styles and makes of rhythm bones from both the past and present. (Maybe a kind of "Antiques Road Show" for bones?)  
*Scott Miller*

Bones Fest X was my first bones fest, which I enjoyed very much. There was so much talent there. I didn't know there were as many styles of bones playing. I enjoyed it very much. Although I had never met Mr. Joe Birl before, I had owned and played a lot of the Bakelite Joe Birl bones. It was wonderful to watch and hear him play at 90 years young. Hats off to Bones Fest X. *Melvin Harvey*

Fest IV: Gracious host, great food, chaotic jams.

Fest V: Best T-shirt; best music support of all Fests attended.

Fest VI: Terrific venue; best acoustics of all Fests; great jamming.

Fest VII: Fun venue; great host; superb bones playing.

Fest IX: Gracious host; great jamming; quality of bones play excellent.

Fest X: Hard working hosts; tech bones overkill, limited jamming; poor venue due to heat.

The Rhythm Bones Society -- priceless!! The eight years I have been associated with it have been

wholly rewarding. For 60 years I played bones one handed and thought I was the only bones player in the world. In the past 8 years I have met over 50 bones players, learned to play two handed, and have learned from other players' techniques and styles I have started to master. The association and experience I have garnered at fests have provided me opportunities to play in social and professional venues in many parts of the United States. I am grateful to the Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) and the many wonderful people I continue to meet there.

In its growth, the RBS has evolved into four quite distinctive interests: the neophytes and beginners, the Irish style of play, the technical percussionists, and traditional play. These interests are beginning to clash. It is time to try to organize fests so that each of these is accommodated fully. Further, it would serve us all well if the administrative and vending operations at fests be set up completely apart from the play of bones.

Lastly, I suggest the RBS form a Rhythm Bones Foundation (RBF) which could be used to take advantage of tax laws thus permitting the RBF to sponsor events and other activities that will subsequently permit the RBF to raise funds for the support of the RBS promotion of keeping bones playing from becoming lost from our folk lore. *Walt Watkins*

Bones Fest IV. A fest of "firsts": Meeting more great bones players at the Wixson's; playing my first triuplicate using Steve's bones!

Bones Fest V. Paraphrasing Jim Nelson: Playing the bones is a spiritual experience.

Bones Fest VI. The energy of Vivian Cox and Dan Griffin was inspiring.

Bones Fest VII. One more year to be with great people who have become friends.

Bones Fest X. I play my first bones fest with Jerry, and have just begun my journey on that "spiritual road."

For me, the most meaningful part of the Bones Fests is the gift of all the people who have become wonderful friends. I do not have adequate words

for what all of these people have come to mean to me. Also, the fests are exhilarating fun! I had not really thought about why I started playing the bones, until someone asked me, and my without-thought-answer was, "I don't want to miss out on the fun!" So, how can one not want to be a part of an organization where one meets life-long friends, has unimaginable fun, and experiences the spirit? *Sharon Mescher*

## BFIV Continued

graph on Page 8.)

But we would never have had the tape if it hadn't been for the Rhythm Bones Society.

Through a series of contests my father and brother won the opportunity to audition for the Amateur Hour. They were selected for the show and performed on Father's day June 18, 1961. For more than thirty years we thought that the performance was only a memory, but then Steve Wixson managed to locate Albert Fisher who was a producer for the Amateur Hour and had access to the Kinescopes of the old show. Unfortunately, getting a recording of the show was not cheap. It turns out that the old Kinescopes are very fragile and can only be played on a special projector that moves the tape through oil. A digital copy is made and then tapes can be produced from the copy. What a surprise I got when my husband Tom gave me a tape of my father's performance for Christmas. The tape is a real treasure.

Being a part of the Rhythm Bones Society and being able to share our father's creation, both in video and in person, is a joy and a blessing!"

To learn more about our style of rhythm bones playing, read *The Mescher Tradition Continues* in RBP Vol 8, No 4. *Bernie (and Tom) Worrell*

## BFV Continued

leave and cleaned up and packed the tables and chairs. It really was a tremendous amount of work, but well worth it. I glow just writing about it."  
*Steve Brown*

## The Next Ten Years

The next 10 years will be a challenge to keep the society together and bones playing exciting and relevant as we pass the mantle to a whole new crop of bone players.

The society was founded by Ev Cowett and Russ Myers, along with the inspiration of Fred Edmunds. Many of our founding members will be a whole lot older in 10 years with people like Fred and Russ already having left us.

The next 10 years will be sparked by current members taking their place while we continue to inspire newer players to come into the society.

How do we keep our instrument interesting and exciting in the eye's of the younger generation? How can we make it relevant to today's music? How do we ensure that bones playing continues long into the future? By acknowledging the past players and bringing their accomplishments into the present, and encouraging the Sky Bartletts of the world now.

It's not only bringing the instrument to the youth, its reminding the current generations of who we are. It's encouraging the elderly to remember the bones players in their history. Its reminding the baby boomers that bones were a part of their history. Its showing the younger generations that bones are a part of music now. Sow those seeds, fan those flames, keep those memories and hopes alive, and above all keep playing those bones, let bones playing ring!

Now all stand and sing a chorus of *Ain't She Sweet* while Ted Goon [See Vol 2, No 2 for the story of Mr. Goon-Bones] clacks out the beat! Is this a little too corny? *Steve Brown*

## The Next Ten Fests

One way to predict the next ten Fests is to look at the first ten Fests.

Bones Fest I started it all off in the Cowett's back yard. Bones Fest II moved it to a different venue. Bones Fest III started the Rhythm Bones So-

ciety. Bones Fest IV added two days making it a full weekend event. Bones Fest V added a program booklet, T-shirt, Fest graphic and Fest motto. Bones Fest VI returned to Greensboro with the nicest facility of any Fest and began the pass-off and Bones Market. Bones Fest VII had the best match of a facility to its Fest and began the conga line finale. Bones Fest VIII added workshops. Bones Fest IX was a repeat of BFIV. Bones Fest X was the biggest Fest with the great group photograph at the Whaling Museum.

Bones Fest XI is scheduled for the same weekend as Milwaukee Irish Week giving attendees a chance to participate in both events.

There is a rhythm to all Fests with people buying in the Bones Market Place, performing to their peers, jamming anytime they can, attending workshops, passing-off, eating good food and joining the conga line finale. There is a feeling of family reunion at each Fest. These can obviously continue for many years.

Some new things members have suggested include more involvement of young bones players, kid's workshops, bigger public performances, more Regional Bones Fests, and a European Bones Fest.

In the end, it's the Fest host that creates something new with the Board worrying about it breaking even financially. So let us hope that members with great new ideas step up and host these future Bones Fests that people will remember as the best ever. *Steve Wixson*

## The 10 Year Obituaries

This Special Issue of the newsletter is dedicated to the following RBS members who died during this 10 year period, Carlton Bohanan, Vivian Cox, Dan Dwyer, Carl Comer Hendrick, Will Kear, and Russ Myers.

Non members bones players who died during this period. Albert Baker, Bud Bartram, John Burrill, Len Davies, Dr Fred Edmunds, Ted Goon, George Lillard, Johnny Muise, Richard Thomas, and Don Sarrell who played the banjo for Bones Fest IV.

## Bones Fest XX Prophecies

**Scenario 1.** I have consulted my local Gypsy fortune-teller here in The Bronx and, upon paying my special "for you, \$25" rate to her (cash only, of course), she informed me that Bones Fest XX shall be conducted thusly: It will be held in the cultural conference complex in the center of Bonesiana, a newly incorporated city nestled in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains. This will be the only city entirely governed and populated by Bones Players. There will be an audition necessary for entry of new residents, but all dues-paying members of RBS will be "grandfathered in" for instant residency status. The length of the fest will be 5 days and nights, with 3 soundstages featuring jam sessions and solo performances going 24/7.

*Greg Burrows*

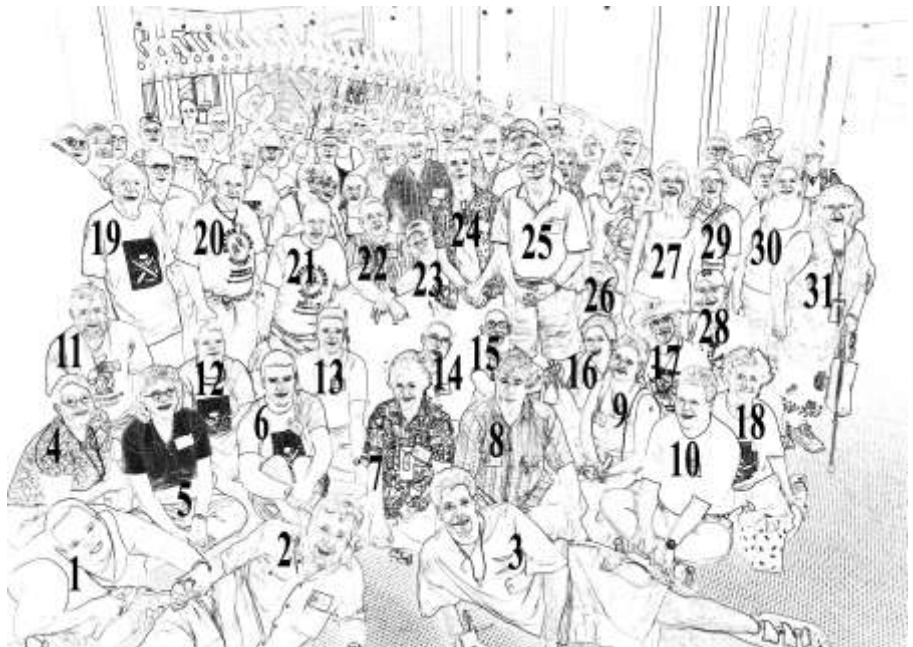
**Scenario 2.** Bones Fest XX will be in Chicago hosted by Spike Bones. It was moved to the big city as the size of the Fest has outgrown most other cities. Bones players from China and Thailand attend for the first time. The MC is Ramsey Cowett taking over from his father Al and most people say he is even funnier than his dad. The sound man is Dan Cowett who returns after a disastrous substitute the preceding year.

The surprise performer is Wilma Myers who, with the now famous Possum Ridge String Band, just returned from a performance on the Conan O'Brien Late night television show (David Letterman's old time slot). She is a full time performer of the likes of Vivian Cox. Mickey Hart, drummer for the Grateful Dead Band and a great bones player, is the dinner speaker.

The Fest motto is *Clone them Bones*, and the T-shirt graphic shows the earth with twenty bones radiating out like the rays of the sun. [Thanks for this idea to Jim Conner, a rhythm bones and banjo playing preacher who sang with the New Kinston Trio and wrote Grammas' Feather Bed made famous by John Denver. Jim showed up for the Friday night reception at Bones Fest VIII.] *Steve Wixson*

# Bones Fest X Group Photo Naming Guide

The image below shows a number for each attendee at Bones Fest X. Find a person from the photograph on Page 1 and look up their name from the image below.



Naming guide for Bones Fest X group photograph on Page 1



Enlargement of upper left section



Enlargement of upper right section

1. Jeremy Brown
2. Kevin Kelly
3. Aaron Plunkett
4. Mary Carty
5. Sharon Mescher
6. Andrew Humphreys
7. Barb Gilmore
8. Don Gilmore
9. Martha Cowett
10. Joe Cummings
11. Richard Carty
12. John Cowett
13. Al Cowett
14. Scott Miller
15. Jonathan Danforth
16. Melissa Danforth
17. Tim Reilly
18. Val Cowett
19. Joe Birl
20. Gil Hibben
21. Steve Wixson
22. Russ Myers
23. Steve Brown
24. Mel Mercier
25. Ev Cowett
26. Shorty Boulet
27. Teri Davies
28. Kenny Wolin
29. Joy Watkins
30. Jennifer Brown
31. Margaret-Mary Maciel
32. Al Lemieux
33. Joe Giotta
34. Matt Cassidy
35. Unknown
36. Robert Goulet
37. Ernie Duffy
38. Parker Waite
39. Bill Rose
40. Dan Cowett
41. Dennis Riedesel
42. Richard Clifford
43. Guy Gillette
44. Doug Danforth
45. Tommy Cowett
46. Ceo Gaudet
47. Isabel Danforth
48. Joe E. Birl
49. Unknown
50. Liz Cassidy
51. Norm Conrad

- |                       |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 52. Gerard Arseneault | 65. Robert Waddell? |
| 53. Randy Seppala     | 66. Dave Boyles     |
| 54. Hank Tenenbaum    | 67. Rob Rudin       |
| 55. Hans Weehuizen    | 68. Emily Conrad    |
| 56. Bernie Worrell    | 69. Sky Bartlett    |
| 57. Ron Harvey        | 70. Cathi Gillette  |
| 58. Michael Ballard   | 71. Mitch Boss      |
| 59. Jerry Mescher     | 72. Dorci Gillette  |
| 60. Mel Harvey        | 73. Al Gregoire     |
| 61. Joe Bernier       | 74. Frank Sweet     |
| 62. Tony Humphreys    | 75. Annette Boss    |
| 63. Unknown           | 76. Mary Lee Sweet  |
| 64. Walt Watkins      |                     |

**Photographs from the Bones Fest X Saturday night public performance**



Jonathan and Melissa Danforth and friends welcoming the audience



Mitch Boss



Walt Watkins wows us in a costume



The audience at our Saturday night show held in a nearby church

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*Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 9, No. 1 2007

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## Executive Director's Column

While reading through the transcript of the Barry Patton interview, it suddenly occurred to me how many of us have influential bone players in our lives which caused us to begin playing the bones. Barry had Cecil Hyatt who was well known enough in Bluegrass circles to have his own recording released, with the help of Byron Berline, back in the 80's.

Percy Danforth influenced me to play, as well as many of our current members, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Spike Bones, Adam Klein just to name a few. Sport Murphy influenced a region of bone playing in Abbeyfeale, with Dave Murphy being his most notable pupil, and seeding the area with many bone players which led to the

creation of the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship.

Each one of these significant bones players are like a pebble tossed into a pond with corresponding ripples moving out across the pond. How many of these individual schools of bones playing exist, and what are there family tree of bone players?

For many of our members their playing started with their families, their father or grandfather, who played the bones and brought it into their homes from their childhood, perhaps influenced by another significant bone player. Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell's great style of bone

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Barry Patton— Ambassador of Bones

If the Rhythm Bones Society awarded an 'Ambassador of Rhythm Bones' title, Barry Patton would receive one. He has performed all over and as far away as China. He has performed on television and in movies. He makes and sells rhythm bones and has an instructional video. He is a regular at the Walnut Valley Festival. He plays bones faster than anyone I've seen.

Barry Patton was born in Winfield, Kansas in 1960 and has lived there for most of his life. He runs a diesel truck repair shop and plays bones as often as he can. I asked Barry how he learned to play the bones.

"My grandfather, Lou Berline, was an old time fiddle player. He had a guitar and bones player whose name was Cecil Hiatt [for more on Cecil, see newsletter Vol. 5, No. 3.] This was going back in the 40s, 50s and 60s when they were all young men in the farming and cattle business. Cecil would come over to our farmhouse always with his bones in his pocket or in his guitar case.

"One day they were playing some fiddle tunes and he pulled out these cow ribs. I was about five years old, just up off the floor, you know, where I could watch. They had a snappy rhythm and just kind of intrigued me. I never gave a thought about playing them.

"My grandpa and Cecil played for years and years until my grandpa passed away in 1973. At

this time, I was 13 years old and Cecil had been diagnosed with cancer of the bladder.

*(Continued on page 4)*



Barry "Bones" Patton. Photograph by Judy Regehr

## Editorial

The lead article in this issue is on Barry 'Bones' Patton. I recorded a telephone interview with Barry and liked his words, so most of the article is quotes from the interview.

Bones Fest XI is just around the corner and host, Dave Boyles, has given us a preview of the Fest. He has planned another exciting event. A Registration Form is included, and people are encouraged to send it in as soon as possible to help in the planning.

Membership is down about twenty percent this year, and I don't know the reason why. Some of our regulars have not renewed, though I expect that they will before Bones Fest XI. After each newsletter is mailed, I send out a notice with a list of newsletter contents and that always brings in a few more renewals. Members who have not renewed do not get the newsletter, so this is a plea to current members to help recruit new members.

## Letters to the Editor

Martha Cowett is engaged to marry fellow bones player and RBS member, Joe Cummings in June. All of the Cowetts are happy about this. *Everett Cowett*

I am looking for CDs to practice the bones with. Any suggestions? *Lee Formicola* leeformicola@bignet.net. [Members—help Lee and the rest of us out. What are your favorite CDs to practice rhythm bones with?]

The Grand Rapids Symphony has been nominated for a Grammy award for Deborah Henson-Conant's "Invention & Alchemy" CD. We made a CD/DVD with her and it's in the "classical crossover category". I play bones briefly on it, but they give me a nice close up on the DVD. I'm also featured on the encore playing a garbage can! Here's a link <http://hipharp.com>. I'll keep you posted...*Bill Vits* [I'm sending you a DVD so you can see it all. Please add it to the library and share it with our members. Enjoy!]

"Pipes, fiddles, men of no valour,

bone-players and pipe-players; a crowd hideous, noisy, profane, shriekers and shouters"-"The Fair of Carman" in *The Book of Leinster*, c. 1160 A.D. Found by *Steve Brown*

I thought you might like to know that I was able to get a DVD of the June 7, 1958 show of Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour when my father and I played the rhythm bones. The quality is excellent. What a keep-sake! Maybe someday I will be able to make it to a Bones Fest and show it to the assemblage. Best Wishes. *John Hall*

## YouTube - Website of the Quarter

YouTube is an online video service that allows anyone to view and share videos. There are at least two people playing rhythm bones on YouTube now.

70 year old Hoosier born Glen Delmont Johnson, a.k.a. "Hoss", has been rattlin' the Bones since the age of 5. He claims that he ended up with the Bones, because his dad got the Banjo, one brother got the Mandolin, the other brother got the Harmonica, and there weren't anymore instruments to go around.

Hoss' current set of Bones are made from the remains of a well enjoyed meal of Barbecued Beef Ribs. He cured them in the sun, and polished them with a piece of glass, and has been playing this set for more than 40 years.

Hoss now hails from Canon City, Colorado, where he and his wife Barbara make music with their band, "The Canon Creakers." Hoss' son Glen proudly made a YouTube page where you can see a video demonstration. Here's the link: <http://www.youtube.com/user/PaPaHoss>. When you get there select his bones playing entries.

Member Greg Burrows also has contributed his bones playing expertise to YouTube. Check him out at [www.youtube.com/profile?user=gregoryburrows](http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=gregoryburrows). In addition to Bones Solo and Bones Solo 2, he has some interesting percussion.

RBS members can use YouTube to

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

get rhythm bones some national exposure. Try it out at [youtube.com](http://youtube.com) and click 'upload videos.'

If you find other rhythm bones videos on YouTube, please let me know and I will share them in future newsletters. *Steve Wixson*

## Update on Special 'Reflections' Issue

Guest Editor, Sharon Mescher, has a first draft of the special issue of the newsletter titled *Reflections on 10 Years of Bones Fests*. This newsletter will highlight Bones Fests I through last year's BFX and is full of color photographs.

There is still time for additions and please contact with stories or photographs that you would like to be included. Her email address is [sjmescher@gmail.com](mailto:sjmescher@gmail.com).

(Executive Director Continued from page 1)

playing was developed by their father Albert Mescher.

You can't see a family any more influenced by the bones, I think, than the Cowetts, with all Everett's children playing bones and several of his grand children.

Our instrument clearly was a word of mouth instrument, handed down just the same way Cecil Hyatt did for Barry. There are few written documents, although there are a few, and little formal documentation of the instrument until a more modern era.

I think it's important to preserve our heritage and document those influential bone players. So what's your bone playing family tree? How many of these great folks can we identify and show how their influence on us has kept this great instrument alive and hopefully caused it to grow and flourish into the future? *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XI Preview

Mark your calendars for Bones Fest XI in Newburg, Wisconsin on August 17-19, 2007. Dave Boyles is our host and with Don Gilmore has organized another exciting Fest.

They scheduled the event to coincide with the Milwaukee Irish Fest, the biggest such fest in the world.

There are opportunities for Bones Fest attendees to participate in some Irish Fest events including some stage time on Sunday at 11:30 am.

Irish Fest is preceded by Irish Fest Summer School, a week of formal study where a variety of Irish music is taught by excellent instructors. See [www.irishfest.com](http://www.irishfest.com) for details.

The Bones Fest will be held at the Riveredge Nature Center, one-half hour north of Milwaukee.

Riveredge was one of the first and today is one of the largest nature centers in Southeastern Wisconsin. Riveredge sits on a 370 acre sanctuary consisting of prairies, forest, ponds and marshes along the Milwaukee River. The sanctuary serves to protect the local ecology, its plants and animal and their natural interactions.

It offers the opportunity for the

study and observation of nature while protecting it from disruption. Each year around 8,000 students from over 80 schools come to Riveredge to experience the wonder of nature through their hand on environmental education programs.

The facilities that will be used for Bones Fest XI include a 8,000 square foot visitor center with two classrooms, a renovated 1890's barn, both fully air-conditioned, and several other small building and observation platforms scattered throughout the sanctuary.

Riveredge is also close to historic towns with quaint shops and old time mid-west settings. See [www.riveredge.us](http://www.riveredge.us) or contact [riveredge@riveredge.us](mailto:riveredge@riveredge.us)

There will be workshops and individual performances and lots of time for jamming.

The registration fee is \$75 that covers Friday and Saturday lunch and dinner and Sunday breakfast as well as a tee-shirt and facility use.

A registration form and list of hotels is included in this newsletter.

For more information on the Fest contact Dave Boyles at [bones-boyles@wi.rr.com](mailto:bones-boyles@wi.rr.com) or 262-375-1276.

## Russ Myers' CD Still Available

At Russ Myers' funeral, his band, The Possum Ridge String Band, gave away copies of their CD titled *On the Road Again*. We asked them if this CD could be made available to RBS members and they graciously donated as many copies as we want with the only stipulation that each recipient give a donation that would be passed on to Wilma Myers. We've received a very generous response so far.

The donations will be used to make a small exhibit of Russ' bones memorabilia for the Madison County Historical Society. A future newsletter article will describe the exhibit.

For those who have not heard this CD, it contains tracks with Russ playing bones and tracks with Russ talking about rhythm bones in his unique, entertaining style. This is a keepsake for anyone who knew Russ or wants

to learn something about him.

Copies of Russ' CD are still available. Send a donation of any size to RBS, 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mountain, TN 37377.

## Recorded Bones Music

### Kvasir's Blod—Viking Music

On the tracks 2, 6, and 12 you will find the combination of bones and three hole pipe (actually made of bone) played by one person. The idea to this I found on a Swedish fresco from c. 1460 and as a pipe and tabor player I had to develop this ancient playing style. On track 7 you will find ordinary one handed bones playing.

If the members go to <http://www.classicorecords.dk/> and search "Kvasirs blod" they should at once come to the page where they can order it.

Unfortunately I'm afraid that the information's, or sources, to the Swedish bones tradition are very few (maybe too few for a whole article), but I can try to get in touch with someone who maybe knows a little more than I do. In any case I will try and do some research. You know - we just gather the historical information that it did exist and then we have met a couple of old guys who played them as a child, etc. Our thing is merely to submerge in old traditions where they are known, but not necessarily still living, and then indulge in the variety of possibilities.

Thank you for a good webpage. I have been in e-mail contact with Jonathan Danforth. *Poul Høxbro* <[hox@mobilixnet.dk](mailto:hox@mobilixnet.dk)>

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XI.** August 17-19, 2007. Details in this newsletter.

**NTCMA Spoons and Bones Contest.** August 27 - September 2nd. The bones contest was scheduled for Sunday last year and not enough people showed up to have the contest. This year the contest will be on Saturday, September 1st.

*(Continued from page 1)*

“The Walnut Valley Festival had opened in 1971, and we all went to this bluegrass festival because it was our kind of music. Everybody loved it.

“Also I had an uncle, Byron Berline, who was a very well known fiddle player all over the world, and was living in California at the time. He was one of the headliners at the Festival with a band called the Country Gazette. They all came over to our house. My grandpa was there, Cecil was there and I got interested in playing any instrument so I could join in.

“I was down watching Cecil play the bones in the jamming area. Like a lot of other people, we had a jam tent at the festival. Cecil got me in his car and said “I’ve got this cancer and I’m afraid I’m not going to live much longer. I’ve tried to get all my nephews and cousins to play these bones and nobody will play ‘em. You know somebody ought to pick these us because it’s a lost art.

“So he showed me a couple of licks, a forward roll as I call it, you know the back and forth motion, and the little figure eight lick that I do. Then he said you’ve got to get some music and play with it. Just try to do it and if you don’t, you don’t.” But Barry did and he still does.

One of the things that characterizes Barry’s playing is timing. I asked him how he developed it.

“The timing deal did come with a lot of practice and I literally wore out cassettes playing them back and forth and back and forth—using the same song to get every lick possible out of the music.

“I was a one handed bone player for a while because my right hand was more dominant. I was trying the left hand, but my timing was off and people realized that it wouldn’t keep up with the right hand.

“So I went back with Cecil, my teacher, who said I needed to get that left hand in there more. “Your playing right hand real good and you need that left hand.” So I picked up both left and right hand and of course, practice makes perfect they always say. Now my left hand is right up with my right hand.”

Barry had mentioned that his

rhythms are based on the melody in a song. I ask him to explain.

“I follow the melody of the music in my head. I listen to it. Let’s say you’re going to take a break on a song. Well I know how that song’s going to play.

“A lot of people say they can play to any song, and well you can. You can play any song to most any rhythm, but the melody is what I listen for. When it’s your turn to do a little solo, you got that melody in your head.

“Dan Curry, a great guitar player, a flat picker, said if you can’t play the melody in your head, you can’t really play it on a guitar or any instrument. So I learned early in life that I wanted to play the melody of the song. Even some of the great fiddle players and guitar players say the bones are rhythm, but when you play them you play the melody.

“One of the biggest ovations I ever got was playing by myself on a stage. I told them what song I was going to play. I got it in my head and started playing the song with the bones, no backup, no guitar, no nothing. Man when I got done it was like the crowd just went wild. And I’m just playing clicks. Everyone said it was the body English I put into it, but I was just standing up there having fun.”

I asked Barry whether he plays music other than bluegrass.

“I like other types. I like Irish music. It’s one of the better ones to follow. I play with country and western bands. Vince Gill gets us to come up and play and it’s all country. We’ll throw in some bluegrass.

“Going to Bones Fest IV gave me a wider variety of what music the people were playing. You had some kids that were 25 years old and they were playing to a rock and roll beat.

“I played on an album called Picken’ on Hendrix,” and it’s all about Jimmy Hendrix music. They pay you a flat fee to come and play on it, but I’m playing on a rock and roll album.”

I wondered if he played classical music. “I’ve played with classical fiddlers like Mark O’Connor when he does classical jazz. Bones go good with jazz. It doesn’t have the same rhythm as bluegrass or Irish music,

but most of the time you’ve use the same technique.”

I asked if he still looks for the rhythm in that music. “Yes, but at times they don’t want that. The only time they want that is when you are doing a solo or something. Most of the time you are doing rhythm backup.”

I asked if they give him music to play. “No, I didn’t have music in front of me. They sent a tape and I sat down and played it through. A lot of times when Mason Williams writes music for you, he lays it out—when you come in. The brass lays out, here comes the woodwinds, here come the fiddles, I mean violins.”

Tell me how you started playing with your uncle, Byron Berline. [For those who don’t know, fiddler Byron Berline is known for expanding bluegrass, adding elements of jazz, pop, blues, rock and traditional country to the genre. In addition to being a popular solo act, he performed as a session musician on a number of albums, including records by the Flying Burrito Brothers, Stephen Stills, the Dillards, Gram Parsons, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Emmylou Harris, Kris Kristofferson, and James Taylor.]

“I had just started to play—probably 15 or 16. My uncle had a buddy named Alan Wall that was playing guitar with him. We were doing a rehearsal in our front room and I was playing with them. Alan told Byron that he needed to get his nephew up on stage and play on a couple of these tunes. “He can really play those bones.” Byron said he would think about it. It’s one of those deals where you are playing with them at practice, but they never got you to play on stage.

“The next year I had improved and thought I was really good. I was playing with Royce Campbell who said I was going to get up and play with them. Well sure enough, I got up and played with them. You know how the crowd gets—they enjoyed it I guess.

My uncle called me from CA in less than ten days and said “I hear you’ve been playing the bones on stage in Winfield.” I said, yeh they got me up there. I didn’t know what I

*(Continued on page 5)*

(Barry Patton—Continued from page 4)

was doing, but I enjoyed it. He said well maybe we'll play the next time. Lo and behold when he came back the next year, he got me up and I played. I was playing two handed by then and everything kind of clicked. I started playing with Byron about 1976 or 77. I started recording with him in 1986, professional recording in the studio.

Barry's career highlights include playing bones with Jana Jay on the TNN television show *Nashville Now*. Following that he met Chet Atkins and, with Jana on fiddle, got to play bones with Chet.

Jana was a classically trained violinist who played on the Hee-Haw television show. Barry was introduced to her by Byron who had taught her some country and bluegrass fiddle playing. Barry describes it this way.

"I watched her country jamboree show and later I got to talking with her. She asked if I played any instrument, and I said yes I play the bones. She said, "the next time you get around us, you bring those bones up here and play with us." I thought she was joking, you know. Jana Jay, I found out, was one of the nicest people. She wanted to get young people on the stage and get them doing something they've never done before.

"Sure enough, she got me up and I played the whole back half of her show. Later on, she got me to play a show with just her, a grand opening of a Wal-Mart store. Well after that, we started opening these Wal-Mart's together. "

The Tulsa Philharmonic was another one of his highlights because everyone there was from Oklahoma. Mason Williams was the production guy on it. Barry has played with the Louisville Philharmonic, Denver Philharmonic and Kansas City Philharmonic. Barry said, "these were all big shows, really big productions, playing in front of a hundred musicians with maybe 25 to 50 fiddlers. For people who have never seen that before it is fun to go to watch. We're going to play with the Bartlesville Symphony at a big festival soon."

I asked Barry about Mason Williams.

"Most people know him for his number one hit, Classical Gas, that he

also wrote. That put him on the map in 1968 and he was a millionaire overnight. Byron started playing with him right after that. I went to watch Byron and Mason play in Kansas City with the Philharmonic. Byron said, bring your bones along. I went up and sort of auditioned—we played Ragtime Annie. Mason said, you're playing with us tonight and I was like floored. I said, You mean tonight? You're playing on stage, and I'm going to have a microphone set up for you. I think that was the most stage fright that I ever had. I'm 17 years old, about that, and Mason got me up there. He put me up in front of the director. The spotlight was on me, and I did Ragtime Annie.

"Mason more or less took me under his wing. He would send me music—his music, and said I want you learn this because you're going to be playing at this symphony. He told me where I'd be sitting. He was perfectionist. Everything had to be rehearsed. He taught me a lot about rehearsing and getting everything right.

"Another highlight was playing before all the governors at the opening night of the revival of the Broadway musical, *Oklahoma*. We also performed on a national television morning show. That was one of my bigger highlights with Byron."

Barry played on the HBO series *Deadwood*. "When the producer heard us play he said we want you to be our music track. They used the bones and the fiddle for a wedding scene and a wedding party.

"We filmed it at Melody Ranch Studios in a little town near Santa Barbara. We basically went in and cut it live in 30 minutes. We thought we could do it better, but they wanted the old timey sound of our first take. The next day we got dressed up and went out on the set. We had to play to the recorded music for two days, I mean off and on, reenacting that same movement. It was really neat to be a part of it."

Earlier I mentioned that Barry has played bones in China. Here is how he described that trip.

"The trip was sponsored by the Chinese Government to bring US folk

(Continued on page 6)

# BONES FEST XI

**Riveredge  
Nature  
Center**

**Newburg,  
Wisconsin**

**August 17-19**

**Milwaukee  
Irish Fest  
Same weekend**

*Dave Boyles,*  
**Host**

For more  
information  
contact

**bonesboyles@wi.rr.com**  
Or

**262-375-1276**



music and bluegrass music to China. We spent about 1 ½ weeks over there and we toured several different towns from Beijing to Shanghai.

“Playing in China is totally different and we found out that people really liked us. It was a rhythm that they had never heard before. When I got off the stage, there would be lines of kids and older people waiting to get an autograph or a picture with me. Byron said I was the hit of the show. It was a great experience for me to play bones in China.”

Barry got to play on the nation wide Megan Mallaly television show.

“Well, I got a call asking if I would come out and play on the show. They treated me like royalty out there, I mean limo service, the whole bit. It was recorded in Hollywood on Sunset Blvd. We filmed it twice, and it turned out really good. They called me back about 30 days later, They liked it so much they wanted me to come out and shoot another show. I said “was there anything wrong with that show.” They said no—we’re going to air it too. We want another show and it’s a sequel

with you teaching Megan how to play the bones.”

His website is [barrybonespatton.com](http://barrybonespatton.com) and there he sells bones and an instructional video.

I asked him how he developed the design of his bones.

“Cecil Hiatt gave me a pair of oak bones that he had made. They were made out of staves from a chair or an oak barrel. They had the shape of the rib with a bow in it. I had previously made some bones for myself and other people. I’m not a woodworker, but I whittled them out, carved them out in kind of a crude fashion to where I had them sound similar to the bones I was playing. I showed them to this guy and he said he could make me some using the hard, dense Osage orange wood. He put this flat back on them so they would hold on the outside of your fingers better. I kind of liked it and said let’s make a few sets. Some of the people I showed them to liked them and that’s how I started making them. We make smaller sets for kids.

Barry plays a unique combination of bones on stage, Micarta, a synthetic

ivory, backed up with a regular cow rib. “I’ve had them for 25 years.”

Byron helped Barry make his bones instructional video. Part of Byron’s income is lesson videos. He’s got a camera room and he condenses lessons down so people can actually see what he’s doing. In Barry’s video, he played a real slow song and used one hand to show people how to play. He played a couple of tunes in the video so people can play along, as a practice. He shows how to hold them—how he was taught. He is ready to redo the video with a professional studio.

Here are a few closing comments from Barry..

“I’ve probably exposed more people to bone playing due to the Walnut Valley Festival here in Winfield. We are hosting ten to twenty thousand people a year now.

“I think bone playing is growing. If you’re going to play bones, you need to have a set of goals such as I’m going to really work on the left hand and then I’m going to the right hand. People just need to set goals and, what am I trying to say, then finish the goals.

*Steve Wixson*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 9, No. 2 2007

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*Bones Played at Martha Cowett/Joe Cummings Wedding*

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*History of Bones in the US—Part III*

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*Highlights of Bones Fest XI*

## Executive Director's Column

The All Ireland Bone Playing competition just concluded last night [this was written May 8] in Abbeyfeale, West Limerick, and although it was felt to be a big success with a high level of competition, I just can't understand why only 8 contestants competed. The prize money is generous at €300 for first, €200 for second, and €100 for third. The "craic" as they say is mighty with good will from the crowd and the community in general. Granted it's a bit of a distance for most of us, but well worth the visit I assure you.

In fact the number of competitors at the Missouri Valley competition has decreased to a point where the competition was cancelled last year. With only three official bone playing competitions in the world, we may be loosing them if we can't

muster more competition, in my opinion. The organizers of the Abbeyfeale contest remain optimistic about the future of their event, and even speculate that a World Bone Playing Championship would fit right in. Truly they have the highest number of bone players living in such a small area, and the level of play is strong.

The junior competition actually out drew the adult section, with nine competitors and four who could have competed in the Adult section, according to Dan Murphy. Where goes the future of bone playing competitions?

It was the Board's unanimous decision at Bones Fest X not to sponsor competition, but left the door open as to our ability to support

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Bones Played at Mercier/O'Keefe Wedding

It was a bright and glorious day for a bright and glorious occasion, the wedding of Maura O'Keefe, prominent theater producer, and our own Mel Mercier, Professor of Music of University College Cork, and Bones Aficionado. Held in the tiny village of Innishshannon, in West Cork, approximately 20 miles south of Cork City, the wedding saw a gathering of family and friends, some of whom are nationally known in both theater and music circles, all of whom were jubilant to be at this most joyous occasion.

And RBS was represented as well, with Wilma Myers and her son David, Newsletter Editor Steve Wixson, and Executive Director Steve Brown and his wife Jennifer.

The wedding itself took place on April 21 at 3pm in St. Mary's Church in Innishshan-



Mel Mercier and Maura O'Keefe light candles at altar



*(Continued on page 7)*

Steve Brown on bones with Recessional Band

## Editorial

This issue has a couple of stories about weddings where rhythm bones were played.

First the wedding of Mel Mercier and Maura O'Keeffe. This was the first Irish wedding that I've attended and the Irish people I spoke with before my trip filled me with expectation. They also advised me to get plenty of sleep as an Irish wedding can last for days. The wedding exceeded expectations (see story on Page 1.)

Second was the wedding of Martha Cowett and Joe Cummings (see story on Page 6.) Outdoors and beautiful.

I am sure I speak for all RBS members in wishing Mel and Maura and Joe and Martha the best in their married lives. May your bones be with you (where have I heard that before?)

After Martha and Joe's wedding, I drove to Wilma Myers' home in Brightwood, Virginia. There I captured by camera and scanner much of the history and memorabilia that Russ Myers had collected over the years. You will hear more about this in future issues. I also visited the Madison Country Historical Society and met with the people who will help us assemble a small display to commemorate Russ' and his contributions to rhythm bones playing. We've got a few ideas on how to use the donations we've received in his memory and the Board will discuss these at its meeting at Bones Fest XI.

There is another installment beginning on Page 4 from Beth Lenz's thesis titled *Bones in the US*.

## Letters to the Editor

Earlier this year my nephew (who lives in Dali, China) told me about an ancient Chinese tradition that essentially combines rap music with bone playing. I am not making this up. This is what he says about it

"Well, I have seen 'bones' here. They are used to accompany a 'rapper' as he tells a sort of rhyming story. The art is from Shandong province (literally 'Mountain East') and is hundreds of years old. It's called 'kuai ban' in Mandarin which literally means 'fast clacker' or 'kuai shu'

which means 'fast tales'. I found this article showing a guy clacking away:

<http://media.www.thelantern.com/media/storage/paper333/news/2006/01/26/Arts/The-Myth.The.Legend-1505943.shtml>

I finally found a Chinese kuai ban video clip. It is on YouTube and was recorded in a tea house. It runs just 42 seconds: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR45ksPpqus>"

It would be great to see a live example of this at a Bones Fest. All the best, *Scott Miller*

Howdy Steve, Thanks for putting the together the BFXI email, announcement and stuff. I think I can attend this year. I'll be mailing in my registration. It will be great to catch up with the Bones Society. *Mike Passerotti*

I have been watching You-tube recently and getting inspiration from your latest newsletter. I was thinking, could it not be easier and cheaper to post videos on the RBS web-site where members could see for themselves how to play 8 bones. There is one on You-tube already. Here you can see two videos of one of my Danish pupils, Jes Lund, who has been playing now for about six years. He is now 22. All the best to you and family. [www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Jes+Lund&search=Search](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Jes+Lund&search=Search). Slainte Mhath, As Aye, *Yirdy Machar*

## Bones Fest XI Update

Here is some last minute information on Bones Fest XI. First check out the Website of the Quarter in the next column not only for the RBS stage time for Irish Fest, but also for other ways to take advantage of Irish Fest.

For attendees flying into the Milwaukee General Mitchell Airport, ground transportation to your hotel is easy and can be obtained from [www.goairportconnection.com](http://www.goairportconnection.com) or by calling them at 800-236-5450. They accept most credit cards, but payment must be by telephone or at their Customer Service Booth at the airport. Make your reservations at least 24 hours in advance.

I am looking forward to another great Bones Fest. *Dave Boyles, Host*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XI.** August 17-19, 2007.

See Page 4 in this newsletter.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 27 - September 2nd. The bones contest was schedule for Sunday last year and not enough people showed up to have the contest. This year the contest will be on Saturday, September 1st. If we want this to continue, we need to support it. Lots of great music and jammin'.

## Website of the Quarter

**[www.irishfest.com](http://www.irishfest.com).** Check out the Rhythm Bones Society's stage and performance time on the Milwaukee Irish Fest website. Enter the above web address and click on *Entertainment*. Then scroll down to the *Saturday* events and then to *The Snug* stage.

This is a great opportunity to participate in the world's biggest Irish Festival (at least that's what they say.) We will perform to an Irish music lovin' crowd and maybe find a few new members.

(Executive Director Continued from page 1)

contests by contributing to prize money or ear mark contributions for other purposes. Hardly objective, I think Bone playing competitions are good for our art by focusing our energies to improving our play and bringing significant publicity to the bones.

I've been on the winning and losing end of contests, and the one I did most poorly in produced one of the finest weekends for comradery and general fun that I've ever been involved in. I would like to see more players go to Abbeyfeale and compete, as well as travel to Missouri Valley in Iowa. If nothing else you'll have plenty of chance to play and meet more bone players. And who knows, perhaps there will be that coveted "World Bone Playing Championship" in Abbeyfeale some day, I hope to see you there.

Here is news about Abbeyfeale. With the best weather and crowds yet at the Fleadh, the Bone Playing Competition put the icing on the cake Monday, by displaying a very high level of play. First place went to David Murphy of Ballaugh who played brilliantly according to Dan Murphy (no relation) of the Fleadh committee. Just one half points beneath him was perennial winner Paddy Donovan. In third place was our old friend and member Yirdy Machar. Surprise contestant Kevin Kelley of New York held his own and played well by all accounts.

The junior competition was held Sunday with nine competitors, the most so far. John Ford came in first place with stiff competition from several contestants.

Tommy Hayes adjudicated and was spot on in his results, most everyone agreed. Abbeyfeale continues to be the best run bone playing competition with the highest standard of play and judging. It is their hope that at some point the World Bone Playing Competition will be held in Abbeyfeale, although no definite plans have been set. All the best to the Fleadh committee for a marvelous job. They would love to see you all there next year competing. Especially you, Nic Dupin! *Steve Brown*

## Wixson Plays Bones on Great Wall Of China

My wife, Janet, and I went on a tour of China sponsored by the Tennessee Aquarium and the Philadelphia Zoo. One highlight was going to the Panda Breeding Center and playing with young panda bears—a once in a lifetime experience.

Other highlights included playing bones on the Great Wall of China (see photograph on Page 8), seeing the Terracotta Warriors, a cruise on the Yangtze River and a few days in Shanghai. China was not what I expected—it's gone modern in the past 20 years.

While in Beijing, I visited the *Central Conservatory of Music* and made a contact in the percussion department that may lead to learning more about early bones playing in China (see below.)

While in Shanghai, I also visited the fairly new *Exhibit Hall of Music Instruments of Chinese Nationalities* where I discovered a small display of modern looking rhythm bones. One of their staff spoke good English and provided a text on rhythm bones in Chinese that I will try to get translated.

When I talk about the history of rhythm bones, I quote an article titled *The Ancestry of Brudder Bones* that appeared in the Harper's New Monthly Magazine in 1878. Here is part of that article.

"The potentate in question was named Fon Hi the First. He invented several instrument, improvements upon which have made the fortune of man an unscrupulous invader of Chinese patents in these our time.

Among his instruments were of course the bones, which, when rattled by Fon Hi, gave forth celestial harmony. His bones were a peculiarly prime order of article, better than those in use in these degenerate days. The lowness of the standard of national taste in America today was never more distinctly shown than in

the utter indifference of the average auditor as to what a minstrel's bones are made of, so that they rattle as lustily as any sucking dove will roar.

Fon Hi, with that nicety of taste invariably observable in the fabrication of choice article by the Oriental people, always insisted upon having his bones made of the right shank of infants of good ancestry, specially massacred in the neatest way, for the purpose of manufacture."

The date of this record was 3,408 B.C.

When I showed the drawing of him from the article to our Chinese tour guide, she read his name in Chinese characters pronouncing it *Fu Xi*, and remembering him as a legendary ancient ruler. The article unfortunately did not have a bibliography.

I talked to Jonathan Danforth about this article, and he had reason to question its authenticity suggesting that many of the things attributed to *Fu Xi* are folk legends. If anyone has knowledge of *Fu Xi*'s interest in rhythm bones, please share it in an article or a Letter to the Editor.

An internet search on *Fu Xi* produces many websites of interest. Such as [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fu\\_Hsi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fu_Hsi) that shows a color photo of *Fu Xi* and *Nuwa* and *Nuwa* appears to hold something that resembles rhythm bones. It also dates his reign to 2800 B.C.

One night while walking the streets of Beijing, I ran across a blind beggar and his wife. Rhythm bones are a great icebreaker and I would play them to change street vendors from sellers to listeners—worked great. When he heard me play, he held out his hands asking for my bones. When I gave one set to him, he started playing, dancing and singing in a rather grand style and his face lit up in joy.


He held the bones with most of the bones above his hand (as in the *Fu Xi* website photograph described above) and he played them with a combination of arm and finger movements. When I asked him what he called the instrument, it sounded like he said *jetar*. If this sounds familiar to anyone, please let me know. *Steve Wixson*



The Rhythm Bones Society  
presents

# BONESFEST

XI 2007



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## History of Bones in the US—Part 3

[Part I of this thesis appeared in the Vol 8, No 2 issue of the newsletter. Part II appeared in Vol 8, No 4 along with the Table of Contents of the complete thesis.]

In addition to their association with black music, bones were also associated with the nineteenth-century minstrel show. The practice of imitating blacks on stage goes back to English comic opera of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The English actor Charles Matthews came to the U.S. in 1822 to collect new material for his already popular portrayal of blacks on the stage. His impersonations of blacks helped to form the stereotype of the black slave which was to become the basis for the minstrel show.

However, Matthews was not the one to introduce the bones to the entertainment business. American Frank Brower is credited with this innovation. While engaged by the Cincinnati Circus, Brower accompanied Dan Emmett on the bones as Emmett sang "Old Tar River" during the July 4th week, 1841 in Lynchburg, Virginia. He reputedly used horse ribs sawed to the length of twelve inches. [See Vol 6, No 1 for more on Frank Brower.]

Brower later became the bones player for the first professional minstrel troupe. Organized by Emmett, the group also included Billy Whitlock and Dick Pelham. The group called itself the Virginia Minstrels and gave its first performance in New York at the Bowery Amphitheatre on February 6, 1843.

They were a huge success. Many aspects of their performance became the norm in minstrelsy. Standard instrumentation consisted of fiddle, banjo, bones and tambourine, although other instrumental combinations were sometimes used as well. Other percussion instruments were utilized, another banjo was added, or the fiddle was replaced by the accordion. Although less common, the tongs and hammer dulcimer were also used. At times smaller instrumental combinations were popular, among



them accordion and bones.

The performers arranged themselves on stage in a semi-circle with the tambourine player at one end and the bones player at the other. The tambourine and bones players became known as "endmen" due to their positions in the semi-circle. They were often hailed as "Brudder Tambo and Brudder Bones" or "Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones." They played the role of comedians as well as musicians; their use of puns became particularly popular with audiences.

In the middle of the semi-circle was "Mr. Interlocutor," the M.C. for the show. He was often the butt of the endmen's jokes, portrayed as a man of "stupid correctness" as compared to the "homely phraseology" of the endmen.

The endmen dressed flamboyantly, spoke in a heavy, exaggerated negro dialect and engaged in all sorts of antics. An endman also might be called upon to give a "stump speech," a tongue-in-cheek lecture.

Bones used in the minstrel shows were usually made of animal rib bones. Later bones were made of ebony or other hard woods. Players apparently played sitting as well as standing. Playbills and the covers of sheet music used in the minstrel shows portray bones players in both postures.

During the 1840's most minstrel troupes included one tambourine player and one bones player, but thirty years later minstrels performed on a much larger scale. When touring in London in 1884, Haverly's Mastadon Minstrels reportedly had eighteen tambourine and bones players among their sixty members; six of the endmen were considered star performers.

During the height of minstrelsy, several men emerged as bones players of high skill. They included Frank Brower, Joe Murphy, George Swaine Buckley, Dan Bryant, Chuck Atkinson, Johnny Pell, E. Freeman Dixie, David Reed, Fred Huber, Eph. Horn (Evan Evans Horn), Gilbert Pell and "Pony" Moore. (For biographical details on these and other bones players, see Appendix B [not included here.]

Tunes performed by a minstrel troupe consisted primarily of songs

with texts, although some songs were performed as instrumental solos. Arthur Loesser, in Humor in American Song, gives a representative repertoire in the section entitled "Bones and Tambo." The list includes the following songs:

"Jim Crow"  
"Lip Coon"  
"Turkey in the Straw"  
"The Camptown Races"  
"Oh! Susanna"  
"Polly-Wolly Doodle"  
"Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me"  
"Noah's Ark"  
"Oh! Dem Golden Slippers"

Other songs from the minstrel repertoire may be found on Early Minstrel Show (New World Records, 1985). The liner notes include the following:

"The songs on this recording are among those that were the most frequently performed on the minstrel stage between 1843 and 1852, as indicated by a study of a large number of playbills from that period. They were chosen as particularly good representatives of the various types of popular minstrel songs."

The repertoire on the recording is as follows:

"De Boatmen's Dance"  
"Old Joe"  
"The Fine Old Color'd Gentleman"  
"Dr. Hekok Jig"  
"Stop Oat Knocking"  
"Mary Blane"  
Instrumental Medley: "Old Johnny Boker,  
"Jim Along Josey," "Back Side of Albany," and  
"Old Zip Coon"  
"Miss Lucy Long"  
"Old Uncle Ned"  
"De Old Jawbone"  
"Pea Patch Jig"  
"Lucy Neal"  
"Hard Times"

Oftentimes the lyrics to such songs mention the bones, usually in association with music making by black slaves. Below are a few examples.

"Sally Come Up" verse 3

De fiddle was played by Pompey Jones  
Uncle Ned he shook de bones,  
Joe played on de pine-stick stones;-but  
he couldn't play to Sally!  
Old Dan Roe  
Played on de ole Banjo.,  
Ginger Blue de big drum blew;  
But he couldn't blow like Sally!

"Slaves Return" words by J.H.

Collins verse 1

'Twas on the old plantation, not many years  
ago,  
Our work was done, at set of sun, we quit

the spade and hoe;

And on the green were darkies seen, in many  
a happy row,

Dancing to the music of the bones and ole  
banjo.

"Yes, in a Horn" by Cool White  
verse 6

When de work's ober, de fun will begin,  
We'll dance to de banjo and merrily sing,  
We'll dance to de banjo, de fiddle and bones,  
And when day breaks we'll return to our  
homes.

The bones are the main topic in  
"De Rattle of De Bones," a selection-  
from IM Ethiopian mtt.6.2.2k (1848-  
1850).

"It is difficult to know what the  
bones or the minstrel band itself actu-  
ally sounded like in the context of a  
nineteenth-century minstrel show.  
Lacking sound recordings, evidence is  
limited to a few contemporary ac-  
counts.?"

Olive Logan, in her article "The  
Ancestry of Brudder Bones" (1879),  
described the "frisky caper of Brudder  
Bones" during a rendition of the  
"Sleigh-bell Polka";

He stands upon his chair in his excitement  
frantically rattling the bones, he dances to the  
tune, he throws open the lapel of his coat,  
and in a final spasm of delight, as the last bar  
of music is played and the last stroke is given  
to the sleigh-bells by the others, he stands  
upon his head on the chair seat, and for a  
thrilling and evanescent instant extends his  
nether extremities in the air.

An article in the New York Clipper  
(March 3, 1877) entitled "The Min-  
strel Melodist," speaks of Stephen  
Foster's "Camptown Races" "of which  
the late Jerry Bryant, as well as Billy  
Birch made a specialty giving bone  
imitations of horse racing."

George Swaine Buckley of Buck-  
ley's Serenaders became famous for  
his bones solo on the overture to  
Zampa. A program of a performance  
which included this number claims  
that such a feat was "never attempted  
by any other performer."

Sometimes during the course of a  
song the bones player took a "break,"  
a solo of several bars which showed  
off his prowess. At times the banjo  
player joined him on these breaks,  
known as symphonies. Indications as  
to where symphonies should occur  
appear in song texts found in minstrel  
songsters. Sometimes instrumentation  
is indicated for each symphony; other

(Continued on page 6)

times no indication is given. Clues may be provided by references in the text to a specific instrument or instruments.

Manuals of instruction written primarily for amateur minstrel performers were published after the turn of the century. The treatment of the bones in such manuals also gives us clues as to what the bones might have sounded like and how they might have been used. The following excerpt is taken from How to Put on a Minstrel Show (1921) by Harold Rossiter:

The end-men using the bones and tambos must be impressed with the idea that they are to make just as much motion with as little noise as possible. Motion is what you want more than noise although, of course, a certain amount of noise is necessary, but the idea is to make just as many grotesque motions while playing the instrument as possible. This feature can hardly be overdone; hitting the tambos on the head, under the arms, and behind the chair all help to make a good flash, from the front. The two outside end-men on either end (numbers 1 and 2) play the tambos and the two inside end-men on either end (numbers 3 and 4) play the bones. This brings two bones opposite two bones and two tambos opposite two tambos.

Walter Ben Hare, in The Minstrel Encyclopedia (1920) instructs the bones and tambourine players to "play the introductions to the endsongs and in the Opening and Closing Numbers, never any other time,"

In Gentlemen, Be Seated (1928), Paskman and Spaeth refer to the clever endman [who] would toss them [the bones] in the air and catch them between his fingers.

More recently, scholar Hans Nathan has, after extensive study of the minstrel show, hazarded a guess as to what the bones might have sounded like. In his estimation the bones produced "single clicks" and "trills" or "shakes" of varying duration within a wide dynamic range. According to Nathan, the bones player usually "followed the meter, but like the banjoist and fiddler, he may have occasionally disturbed it by entering on ordinarily unaccented beats." Nathan has arranged a minstrel tune for minstrel quartet. His realization of the bones part deserves some comment.

When viewed with the technical capabilities and limitations of the bones in mind, the bones part in Nathan's arrangement of "Twill Nebber

Do to Gib It Up So" has some problems. First of all, he has sixteenth notes being played by alternate hands. The tempo marking is allegro: this could be interpreted in a variety of ways. ♩=120 is acceptable by most musicians as an allegro tempo, though some would call it a slow allegro. But even at this tempo, sixteenth notes on the bones by alternating hands would be extremely awkward, at best. Most players encountered during the course of this study would not be able to play the part at all. It would have been much more idiomatic to have one hand (or both hands simultaneously, i.e., without alternating hands on each sixteenth note) play a string of sixteenths ♩♩♩♩, etc.

Another problem with the bones part is the marking for "trill" or "roll" on several sixteenth note values. Even at ♩=120, this is impossible to play. The shortest "roll" which could be played on the bones is a triplet. Nathan's ♩♩♩ (first beat, m. 1) would be played like this: ♩♩♩ At ♩=120, this is physically impossible.

A further problem with the bones part in Nathan's arrangement is that it is extremely repetitive. With the bones being capable of much more variety, it is difficult to believe that the bones followed the melodic line in such an unobtrusive way. Contemporary accounts of minstrel show performances suggest that the music was quite lively. The bones could easily add rhythmic vitality to a minstrel tune; in Nathan's arrangement, however, the bones part acts as little more than a rhythmic ostinato.

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## Beth Lenz's Thesis Copy Available

Russ Myers' copy of Beth Lenz's thesis was donated to RBS by Wilma Myers for loan to interested members. If you would like to borrow the thesis, please contact Steve Wixson (wixson@chattanooga.net.) There are 312 pages to the thesis. RBS will pay shipping, and the borrower is responsible for return postage back to Steve or to the next borrower (\$3.15.)

## Bones Played at Cowett/Cummings Wedding

Saturday, June 16th, was the day for the wedding of RBS member Martha Cowett and Joe Cummings. The wedding was held on the beautiful lawn of the Magnolia Manor in Greensboro, North Carolina under a mostly sunny sky. Pre-wedding music was North Carolina mountain music.

Martha was beautiful in her white wedding gown and her smile was dazzling. The groom and ushers (lots of bones playing Cowett brothers) looked great in their tuxes.

Ev Cowett escorted his daughter down the aisle (see photograph on Page 8.) Brother Al Cowett gave a reading. Following the exchange of vows and rings and the introduction of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Cummings, they processed to *Jeremiah was a Bullfrog*. Not your normal recessional, but it reflected the spirit of the wedding.

There was a receiving line reception with light food and drink immediately following in the Magnolia Manor. This was followed by a dinner/dance at the Embassy Suites Hotel. The band played for the entire evening and could play most anything from jazz to rock. After a quite good meal, the dancing started.

Then people gathered on the dance floor for Martha and her bones playing husband to play them rhythm bones (yes, Joe plays rhythm bones and quite well.) They were soon joined by dad, Everett, and brother, Tommy, (see photograph on Page 8.) Later I got to join in with them. Many of the people at the reception had heard the Cowetts play bones before and therefore they were a receptive and appreciative audience.

As noted in Mel and Maura's wedding story on Page 1, it is unusual to have rhythm bones at a wedding ceremony. In the last couple of months there have been two. *Steve Wixson*

*(Mercier Wedding Continued from page 1)*

non, a small Church which was truly an ideal place for the wedding. The ceremony was befitting of two loving and very talented people, with very personal readings by a number of close friends. Music played a major role with Michael O'Suilleabhain, Professor of Music University College Limerick and long time musical partner of Mel's providing piano both individually and as accompaniment.

As would be expected from a musical renaissance man such as Mel, the program ranged from the UCC Javanese Gadon Ensemble which performed on traditional Javanese instruments to An Phaidir, excerpts from a Mass by Sean O'Raida and sung by the congregation.

As the Bride and Groom exited the church, a blast of reels accompanied them, as played by the Recessional Band consisting of the Rectory Ceili Band, old friends from University College Cork, and wouldn't you know, two old bones players, Steve Wixson and Steve Brown, invited to play along with the group.

This is news members! I wonder how many weddings have the music of rhythm bones as part of the ceremony. In modern times, I suspect very few (read Cowett/Cumming wedding article in this issue), though it would

not surprise us if they were used in earlier and ancient wedding rituals.

Following an outside group photograph of all attendees, everyone moved to the Innishshannon House Hotel located on the banks of the Bandon River and said to be one of the most romantic hotels in Ireland.

The reception began with drinks and cookies, followed by a wonderful dinner. This was followed by speeches by close friends and relatives that roasted Mel and Maura as well as wishing them the best for their married life.

Mel and Maura were the final speakers and thanked many people for helping with the wedding and rebuking much of the roasting that preceded them. Their love, expressed in words, was most touching.

One of the most moving parts of Mel's speech came when he introduced Wilma Myers and told the attendees about Russ Myers, his recent death and what he meant to rhythm bones players and Mel and Maura personally. They both spent a week with Russ and Wilma as part of Mel's research for his PhD thesis. More touching was Mel's comment that Russ had told Wilma they should get passports so they could attend the wedding. Mel said he felt Russ' presence at the wedding.

The Recessional Band less rhythm bones players assembled for some traditional Irish music and line dancing with instruction for newcomers.

Then the moment the two Steve's had been waiting for, when they and Mel formed a rhythm bones trio with Michael O'Suilleabhain on piano (see photograph at the bottom of this page.)

The main band followed with popular music and dancing mostly by the young.

Irish weddings are famous for lasting for days, however, we must admit to being old and leaving at 3 am. We wonder if it's still going on. *Steve Brown and Steve Wixson*

## Wilma Myers Attends Wedding

My son, David, and I were delighted to attend Mel and Maura's wedding and meet their family and friends. The whole affair was beautiful as was Ireland.

They are a delightful couple. We were pleased to spend a day with them in Cork and also see Steve and Jennifer Brown and Steve Wixson. *Wilma Myers*



Michael O'Suilleabhain on piano with the rhythm bones trio of Steve Wixson, Mel Mercier and Steve Brown performing at Mel's wedding reception. Photograph by David Myers



*Above.* The father of the bride, Ev Cowett, escorts his daughter, Martha, down the aisle.

*Upper Right.* Mr. and Mrs. Joe Cummings play rhythm bones at their wedding reception. On the left is Ev Cowett and on the right is her brother Tommy Cowett. Photographs by Steve Wixson. *Lower Right* Steve Wixson wearing BFVI t-shirt and BFIX hat plays rhythm bones to a small group gathered on the Great Wall of China. Note section of the Great Wall on the ridge in the background. Photograph by someone from Denmark.



## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 9, No. 3 2007

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## Executive Director's Column

With the distant sound of bones still clacking in my ears, I attempt to regroup from my sleep deprived experience of Bones Fest XI.

From the natural beauty of the Riveredge Nature Center, to the rain soaked pavement of Irish Fest, we have experienced one of the best bones fests yet. River Edge was cozy, comfortable, and clearly one of the best settings to hang out, jam, learn, and just plain play the bones. Don Gilmore and the staff of Riveredge treated us like family, from the meals to the facilities, you just can't say enough.

Our performance at Irish Fest was perhaps the best public performance we have yet achieved. Given the excellent stage facilities and the extremely receptive audience, you have to wonder how much higher we could have gone if all our members were there.

Truly the focal point for me over the weekend was the band, Lisa Edgar and Razmatazz. I just don't have enough superlatives to express how the music and the bones intertwined and created enough synergy to power the entire country.

And of course, in the center of it all is the architect Dave Boyles. His high powered energy and can do attitude made it all work. You don't have to hang out with David too long to see how well he is respected in his community, and how he used all of his resources to compliment the fest. From our jam session at McCarthy's Bar, to the multitude of attendee's at the Saturday performance, to our performance at Irish Fest, David worked his magic and

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Highlights of Bones Fest XI

"WOW!!!! How do they do that? What a hoot!!! I don't believe it !!! Those people are great !!! That's the most fun I had in a long, long time !!! Etc. etc. etc."

The accolades keep rolling in from folks who came to the evening shows. Most came with not a clue of what to expect, and left as believers in the rhythm bones.

In a few words--Bones Fest XI, held on August 18-20, 2007, was a magical weekend !!! What made it magical? Maybe the setting (Riveredge Nature Center is a special place), the weather, the food/drink, the organization or Irish Fest? Sure all that helped to create the atmosphere needed to make the weekend special, but the true magic was YOU !!

YOU, Rhythm Bones Society people who cared enough to come from all over the country to connect, to play, to listen, to teach and to learn. That's where the magic came from.

Many people gave many hours to make Bone Fest XI happen but a few special and very heartfelt thank yous are in order. First to the Rhythm Bones Society and the Board of Directors for having the faith that we could do this and the freedom to do it our way. Second, to Riveredge Nature Center who co-sponsored the event and provided the logistical support. Special mention needs to be given to Kathy Gordon (brochures, forms, all printing and

kept us moving), LaVonne Suring (registration), Tammy Lorge (accounting), Lynne Bergschultz (t-shirt design), Laura and Tony Kasshin (t-shirt production), Barb Gilmore (food/drink), and all the others who volunteered in the planning, running, and clean-up



Hosts Don Gilmore (left) and Dave Boyles wearing BFX t-shirts. Photograph by Sam Arndt of Ozaukee Press.



## Editorial

I need my annual Bones Fix—I mean Bones Fest!

It is not that I had low expectations for Bones Fest XI, but I was sort of bone(s) tired. And hey, I missed seeing y'all this passed year.

Well, I am again juiced up both for the health of our society and for my own bones endeavors. And you will be to when you read the *Highlights of Bones Fest XI* on Page 1. For some of the attendees, the Fest lasted from Thursday afternoon until almost midnight on Sunday night.

We owe Dave Boyles and Don Gilmore and a host of their friends at the Riveredge Nature Center a big round of thanks. Now that was a Fest!

The Board of Directors meeting at the Fest was very productive. Please read the minutes on Page 6.

As I write this, I am on the airplane on my way home making plans and drafting emails to implement the things I committed to do. We need help to complete the projects, and please volunteer to be on one of the committees mentioned in the minutes. Let's raise the bar for progress this year.

We do not yet have a host for Bones Fest XII. While this is a lot of work, it is also a lot of fun. Check that out with any previous host. If you are at all interested in hosting a Fest, we will send you a copy of the Bones Fest Host Guide that will fill you in on what you have to do. It is very rewarding. But request your copy now!

The outstanding on-stage performances by Bones Fest XI attendees to an almost capacity audience at our Milwaukee Irish Fest tent inspired two people to join RBS on the spot. A big welcome to Sheila Drea and Dan Brunner. Sheila also joined our Congo line finale.

I lost my bones instructor recently. He was 97 years old and could almost still play the bones. He learned from a sailor and since I learned as a one handed bones player, that sailor must have been Irish. He was a butcher and I have only one of the original bones that he gave me. He was my father and I will miss him. He never got to attend a Bones Fest.

Included in this newsletter is the annual dues renewal letter. There is one possible difference for this coming year. You will note in the Board of Directors Minutes on Page 6, that a motion was passed amending our By-Laws so that our fiscal year coincides with the calendar year. If that passes at the General Membership meeting at Bones Fest XII, you will receive five issues of the newsletter next year instead of four and a dues renewal letter that arrives in December.

## Letters to the Editor

Hello to all Bones Fest XI players. I would love to be able to com to the bones fest, however I just had my right wrist replaced on July 30th. I had a half fusion on left wrist January 2005. I expect to still be able to play with both hands after 3 or 4 months recovery, and I am looking forward to being good as new.

Hopefully next year I'll make the Bones Fest. So keep up the good sounds, and keep the e-mails coming.  
*Mel Harvey*

To everyone that I know and love and who were so gentle and friendly with me. My salutation also to all of those who have the chance to attend the Bones Fest XI. Unfortunately, I won't be with you this year as my wife is paralyzed on the left side. She is seriously paralyzed and I can't leave her alone.

I'm sending you pictures of last years Bones Fest. It is with a great pleasure that I give them to you. P.S. My special salutation to Ev Cowett and his wife, to Steve Wixson and his wife and to Steve Brown and his wife and their son. *Gerard Arseneault*  
Quebec, Canada

## Website of the Quarter

[user.senet.com.au/~jimmc/main/art\\_rhythmbones.htm](http://user.senet.com.au/~jimmc/main/art_rhythmbones.htm). On the Acoustics of Rhythm Bones. Replies to an email sent to marimba expert Jim McCarthy asking if marimba bar theory might be applied to understanding how rhythm bones produce their sound. Not a definitive work, but thought provoking.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Recorded Bones Music

**The Gillette Brothers: Many Long Miles to Ride.** If you attended Bones Fest XI, you heard the Gillette Brothers play their old time cowboy music and maybe got to play bones with them as they jammed in the lobby of the Riveredge Nature Center. As you heard, their music is special.

This new CD gives you the opportunity to hear more of that music and more of Guy's rhythm bones playing.

There are twenty songs on the CD including *The Old Chisholm Trail* and *Long Black Veil* to name two. Guy plays bones on tracks 4, 7, 10, 12, 15 and 16, though there is interesting percussion on other tracks.

Check out their website at [www.campstreetcafe.com](http://www.campstreetcafe.com). Click Camp St. Store for ordering information on this and other CDs [Note: another of their CDs was reviewed on Page 3 in the Vol 7, No 1 newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

(Continued from page 1)

the people of Milwaukee and surrounding towns opened their arms to accept us. We can only say thank you to Dave, his wife Peg, Don and Barb Gilmore, and all of our new found friends in the Milwaukee area.

If we've learned one thing, in my opinion, from our experiences of Bones Fest XI, it is how an exceptional band like Lisa Edgar and Razzmatazz can help us to show the true potential of rhythm bones. I believe it should give us pause to think about how we use live music in the future.

While playing in Avoca with dobro legend 86 year old Tom Waddell, he said to me, "boy, you are the icing on the cake." I believe we can all be that icing, but we've got to have some incredible cake underneath, like Lisa Edgar's band, to truly make it work. If that means writing more money in our budget for music, or instilling on each host the importance of live music, so be it.

Our experiences at Milwaukee have only made it clearer that we need to bring our performances to the general public in a professional way. It is the intension of the Board to develop a broadcast quality DVD of a Bones Fest. A committee has been formed to investigate opportunities for grants and other resources which would allow us to develop a quality product which could be shown on public television. Any of you with idea's are encouraged to join this committee.

Ted Goon often talked about his belief that the bones could be recognized by the country as the amazing and exciting instrument that it is. Perhaps a quality professional DVD is the first step in making that idea a reality. *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XII Host

Have you ever thought about hosting a Bones Fest. The Board is looking for a host for Bones Fest XII. If you are interest, send me an email and I will send you the Bones Fest Host Guide that outlines the job. *Steve Wixson*

(Bones Fest XI Highlights—continued from page 1)

for Bones Fest XI. Also, thanks to the bands Finbar McCarthy, Razzmatazz, and Frogwater, who made Friday dinner, Saturday evening, and Sunday morning special happenings. But the real thanks goes to you, the Bone Fest participants, who took the time to come and share with each other your enthusiasm, your knowledge, your skill, your art. Lots of factors make an event special, but the people make the magic. Thank you. Oh yeah, on top of everything else, Bones Fest XI did even make a little money.

Check out Pages 4 and 5 for some pictorial highlights from Friday and Saturday. Check out Page 8 for pictorial highlights from Irish Fest on Sunday where the Rhythm Bones Society had almost one and a half hours of stage time. Photographs by Steve Wixson. *Dave Boyles and Don Gilmore*

## Chance meeting with Joe Birl

After my two and a half years in a Montreal hospital, I was finally released with the promise from my single parent that he would make sure I would do my exercises regularly along with a daily tightening of a back brace I had to wear. I was finally going out to see the real world. I remember jumping up and down on the bed that last day in that hospital as my dad struggled to get me dressed.

I was hospitalized at the age of three with acute Infantile Paralysis, or commonly know as Polio Mialitis. During my years in the hospital, my mother died. My dad obviously had to work, and by the age of seven I had boarded out and exhausted every relative in our family. I was just a kid then, and the only avenue my father had left for me, (and I might add, my older brother as well) was boarding schools, with the Nuns, in many different convents until situations changed in future years.

At the age of seven, and having been moved from a convent in Montreal to another Nunnery convent in Beloeil, some of the Sisters there found that I became very reluctant to

(Continued on page 7)

## Regional Bones Fest

I am planning on hosting another Regional Bones Fest for the fall. I'm hoping it will be on the October 27th week end at Red Apple Farm. Pretty much as we have had them before, about 9am to approximately 5 or 6pm. I'll get Al Rose to provide coffee and donuts and lunch and cost will be \$10-15.

With a public performance at 3pm or so. This obviously needs to be confirmed with Al, but he's been very enthusiastic in the past. I would certainly welcome anyone but it's really intended for the immediate New England area, that's why its one day. I may look into a place we can all have dinner together to end the day. *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest Professional Recording

The rhythm bones playing at Bones Fest XI was terrific and we need to share it with as many people as possible. The Board of Directors established a committee to organize the professional recording of a future Fest. If you have an interest or experience in this area please volunteer to be on this committee. There are artistic, technical and copyright issues that must be addressed.

The video from BFXI will be edited into a short DVD to accompany a grant application to fund this recording. If you know of any agency that would be receptive to such a grant request, please contact me soon. Grant cycles can take a long time and we need to proceed as quickly as we can if we want to record BFXII. *Jonathan Danforth*, Chairman

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XII**, Summer 2008. Looking for a host. Details in next issue.

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest**. August 25-31, 2008 The bones contest was cancelled in 2006 and 2007 due to lack of competitors. This is a 30 year old competition and they need our support if it is to continue.



Jamming on the Riveredge back deck overlooking a beautiful pond are from left Michael Ballard, Walt Watkins, Randy Sepalla (almost hidden), Dennis Redisel, Spike Bones and Gil Hibben.



Jamming in the room lined with animals and native artifacts where dinner was served.



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet rehearsing in the scenic outdoors



Teri Davies and Kenny Wolin perform together. Their Saturday night performance was amazing



Spike Bones with another of his creative routines. This one in pitch black darkness and ultraviolet light where only his bones showed.



Another outstanding performance from professional percussionist Bill Vits



Dave Boyles and his big rhythm bones complete with his scrimshawed 'Black Bart' logo.



Congo line finale on Friday night. Lee Formicola in front and going back on the left ????, Spike Bones, Mitch Boss and all the rest.



Party at the local pub with the Finbar MacCarthy Band. From left, host Dave Boyles, Steve Brown, Dennis Redisel, Steve Wixson and Michael Ballard.





The first public performance of the Mescher Bones as a trio. From left are Sharon Mescher, Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell



Part of the bones market place. Selling on the right are Randy Sepalla in front and Scott Miller in rear.



The Beginner Bones Workshop ended with a group performance. From left, Bill Vits, teacher, Don Gilmore, ???, Lee and ??? Formicola, ??, and Michael Ballard, teacher.



Mitch Boss on left and Walt Watkins with strikingly different styles perform together in what was a great duo.



The unbelievable fast armed Sky Bartlett with Ernie Duffy and the Lisa Edgar Band from left, host Dave Boyles bones and percussion, Joe Aaron, 87 years old on clarinet, Pete Runde on trombone, Lisa Edgar on banjo and ? on tuba. What a special treat to have them on both Saturday night and Sunday at Irish Fest. Tom Los joined in with Sousaphone on Sunday.

## Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 10:00am on August 18, 2007 at the Super 8 Motel conference room, Saukville, WI. Members present were Steve Brown, Gil Hibben, Steve Wixson, Ev Cowett, Jerry Mescher, and Jonathan Danforth. Visitors present were Bernie Worrell, Sharon Mescher, and Dennis Redisel.

Steve Wixson read the minutes from the last meeting as printed in the RBP newsletter. Motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes

Steve Wixson gave a preliminary Treasurer's report. We have about \$6,400 in the bank with commitment for \$400 for the Russ Myer's memorial, \$725 to print and distribute the special issue of the newsletter and about \$1,500 to reimburse Steve Wixson for newsletter and miscellaneous expenses. Motion was made, seconded and approved to approve the preliminary report. After the end of the fiscal year, the Treasurer will submit a final report to the Board.

Gil reported on his ideas for changes to the bylaws putting restrictions on motions at general membership meeting. A discussion followed on the issue. Gill will circulate specific wording changes to the Board via email for review and/or revision.

Steve Wixson reported on the Bones Instruction on the web Committee. The Edmund's Bones instructional video that the RBS holds the copyright to has been transferred to the computer, and a first web version is available. There was discussion about this project and then a motion was made, seconded and approved to put it on our website. The committee will continue to review the progress and get outside reviewers as needed.

Steve Brown lead a discussion as to where the Bones for Kids committee should go. Gil Hibben reported on the results of his gift of 45 pairs of bones to his daughter's school in Alaska. Sharon reported on her and Jerry's efforts with kids in their area. Steve will restructure the committee.

Steve Wixson reported on the spe-

cial issue titled Reflections on Ten Years of B ones Fests. The board has originally authorized \$600 for this project. Motion was made, seconded and approved to spend \$725 to print and bind 100 copies of the newsletter. One copy will be sent to current members at no cost. The Board approved the price of \$15 to non-members and for additional copies to members.

There was a discussion of the memorial for Russ Myers. \$400 was donated by members for this project. Several ideas were discussed. The motion was made, seconded and approved to purchase a television with DVD player for the Madison County, KY, Historical Society. A dedication plaque in memory of Russ from the Rhythm Bones Society will be affixed. A short DVD prepared from old Bones Fest videos will be made for the donated TV showing a living history of Russ Myers.

Gil Hibben wanted to do something more to commemorate Russ. Steve Brown reminded the Board of a CD that he has of a radio show featuring Russ. The motion was made, second and approved to put this CD plus the DVD prepared for the Historical Society on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

The motion was made and seconded to recommend the following change to the By-Laws. In Article 6.10 remove the words October to September of the following year and add in their place January 1 to December 31 of the same year." Discussion. When the society was formed, Bones Fests were held in September and this fiscal year made sense. Now with Fests in the Summer we can reduce confusion by having our fiscal year match the calendar year. Motion passed. This cannot be brought to the members until the 2008 meeting.

A discussion of a host for Bones Fest XII followed. Dennis Redisel discussed his South Texas area as a possibility. He has access to adequate facilities. A summer date would not work and he had ideas on transportation. We will send him a copy of the Bones Fest Host Guide. The Board wondered if the Hibben's would consider hosting again if no other host volunteers.

A discussion followed about professionally recording a Bones Fest and producing a CD/DVD. There are technical and copyright issues involved. The motion was made, seconded and approved to form a committee to investigate this for Bones Fest XII or later. Steve Brown appointed Jonathan Danforth to head the committee.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to purchase the [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) domain name. We are a nonprofit society and should own this name.

The Board serving as the Nominations Committee nominated the current members to serve another the term.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:25pm. Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Minutes of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 4:40pm on August 19, 2007 in the barn of the Riveredge Nature Center.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes of the last meeting as printed in the newsletter.

Steve Wixson presents a brief review of the Board meeting.

The nominating committee presented nominations for next year's officers. The floor was opened for additional nominations. The motion was made, seconded and approved to elected the following by acclamation: Steve Brown, Executive Director, Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board members Everett Cowett, Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher.

There was no old business.

There was a call for a host for Bones Fest XII. Dennis Redisel suggested his South Texas area as a possibility. No decision was reached.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:12 pm. Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary



*(Continued from page 3)*

doing all or any of my daily exercises the doctors had prescribed to strengthen my arms and upper body. One inventive little Nun named 'Sister Marie Angele' came up with a motivational method that would keep my interest as well as get me to exercise regularly. She was a young music teacher from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Understanding music and seeing my needs to exercise more regularly and with motivation, she took it upon herself to teach me the art of playing two handed rhythm bones.

Bones were tough to get in a convent but wooden rulers weren't. I think most Nuns during these times carried a ruler under their habits used mainly for "smacking us around". Sister Marie Angele however, used it for a more constructive purpose. She simply took out two 12-inch rulers, and then cut them in half for me to play instead of real bones.

I took to them like penguins on ice and haven't stopped playing bones since.

In later years, my father always encouraged me to play. At times, he would "show me off" at get-togethers and parties as his little 'bones player'.

Up to the age of eleven I played sawed off wooden rulers. I knew nothing of real bones and knew not of any one else who played, except the little Penguin Nun from Cape Breton who taught me the art of playing bones.

In 1951, for my twelfth birthday, my dad took me to a music store in Old Montreal. Music stores were also pawnshops in those days so it was quite a treat for me to see all those marvelous musical instruments and other junk hanging about the store.

He told the clerk that I played rulers and "Did he have any real bones he could play?" The clerk, or maybe even the owner of the store, moved over a couple of feet behind the glass counter, reached under, slid the plywood panel open, then, abruptly stood up presenting my father with two pairs of black rhythm bones.

"They're Joe Birl bones made special for small fingers. See those grooves! They fit perfect for your fingers!" exclaimed the clerk. Dad handed them to me to test out. What a

thrill I got from playing REAL bones after struggling with cut rulers. Like some little fool, I 'clac-a-di-clacked' those bones all over the store, up and down the aisles. Needless to say the clerk made the sale and I got two sets of Joe Birls' patented bones. The best Birthday present ever.

I played those two pairs until 1961 when I lost them in a flood. After that disappointment, I started getting beef bones from a butcher in the neighborhood and tailoring them to my specks. Never thought much about the Joe Birl bones much after that.

Then came BONES FEST X, 2006, New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Ceo, (My fiddle player accompanist) and I were sitting in the old church hall with our door prize tickets in hand, hopefully waiting for our numbers to be called. "Last three numbers -- 6 2 2" came over the speakers. Darn! I had 621, but Ceo came in just ahead of me and yelled out, "Here!" He went up to get his prize, which turned out to be a set of black bones neatly packaged in a plastic bag with instructions included.

Ceo sat down next to me and passed me the package. "Here, these are for you!" and Ceo handed me the set of bones he had just won. I was astounded to see those patented grooved bones inside and also that pale yellow instruction sheet in the package. They were the same as the package of bones my father had bought me for my birthday way back in 1951!

To my astonishment, 20 minutes later, I sat there actually listening to and watching the designer of these bones right before my eyes narrating how he struggled to have his ideas



Robert Goulet and grandson Cary Junior  
Draconadis Goulet

patented in 1949. Outstanding!

Later in the evening after the Bones fest activities were over, a bunch of us 'boners' (as we name ourselves) gathered on the lawn outside our rooms of Days Inn for a couple of cold ones and a jam session.

I recognized Joe Birl as he happened by, and initiating a conversation, had the privilege of talking with him at length. I recounted my story of getting my first pair of his patented bones in '51, as well as my friend Ceo winning one of the sets he had donated earlier for door prizes.

After listening to my story he got up and left, saying, "Wait a minute, I'll be right back!" He returned a minute or two later and came straight to me. "Here," he said. "Now you can play two handed 'Joe Bones' again!" And handed me another new packaged pair. I was ever so thankful and as well as very grateful. "Thank you, Joe Birl!"

As happens in life, three weeks later I was camping out in the Ontario wilderness giving a Rhythm Bones workshop at a 5-day music festival called Blue Skies. (At the end of my workshop, there are now 51 new Bones players on that site.)

I brought along my 14-year-old Heavy Metal loving grandson. It was an eye-opening weekend for him, which allowed me the opportunity to teach him how to play two-handed bones. He was a natural. He fell in love with those two sets of Joe Birl Bones I got at Bones fest X three weeks earlier.

I listened to him click-a-di-clackating for four hours on our drive home after our long musical weekend. He was so enthused and into playing those bones on the trip home, that I gave him both sets of Birl bones to encourage and keep him playing.

Now, his idea is to introduce bones playing into his Heavy Metal group. Another bones player generation carries on the tradition.

Happy Birthday, Joe Birl, and thanks a whole hell of a lot.

P.S. Jonathan and Melissa Danforth  
--- Kudos for Bones Fest X. *Robert (Bob) Goulet*

## Highlights from Sunday's public performance on the RBS Irish Fest Stage



Steve Brown served as MC for all Fest events. Irish Band was Frogwater with John Nicholson and Susan Jeske. Jonathan Danforth joined in



The Back in Time duo of Mary Lee and Frank Sweet performed in period costume. Frank graciously accompanied other attendees



The Gillette Brothers performing their cowboy music. Guy playing bones and guitar and Pip on banjo and harp. Steve Wixson joined in later.



Everett and Dan Cowett and several others played to the music of the Lisa Edgar band. Finally got Dan, our sound man, on stage.



The energetic style of Don Decamp is always a crowd pleaser. Dave Boyles is in the background. Don also lead jams with his banjo.



Michael Ballard teaches rhythm bones to a young bodhrán player. Michael also played with the Irish band and taught a beginner's class

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# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 9, No. 4 2007

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*How to Make and Where to Buy Real Bone Rhythm Bones*

*John 'Bones' Nobles*

## Executive Director's Column

Uncle Bones Wants You! We are now heading into a new year and have not secured a site for Bones Fest XII. I would like to encourage anyone with strong interest to contact me, Steve Wixson, or any of the Board members to see how you can become a member in an elite group of individuals. There have been 8 sponsors or groups of sponsors over the life time of Bones Fest with two members sponsoring multiple times, Steve Wixson and Ev Cowett.

I still remember the great joy and awe I felt as I saw Bones Fest V take shape and fly high into the sky. It was a tremendous amount of work, I won't ignore that fact, but I have some incredible memories and a pretty good video to overshadow the memories of hard work. I still have people approaching me at Bones Fest to say that Bones Fest

V was their favorite, and of course we always see a number of T shirts from the fest at each meeting.

I was fortunate enough to have had Nicolas Driver come all the way from England to attend that fest. As it was the only one so far he has attended, it makes it a special event for me, along with many other amazing experiences there.

Each fest has it's own unique character and charm, and something you as a Bones Fest Host could reflect on, and in turn create a number of memories for our membership.

One of my regrets is not having attended Russ Myer's Fest, one of the earlier Fests, but I do have the memory of him attending the fest I

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Nacchere Toscare—Tuscan Castanets

[Editor's Note. The title of this article suggests it is about castanets, and while their castanets, shown in the photo below, are thicker than what most of us play, they are played like most of us play rhythm bones.]

**Their origin and distribution** Scientifically defined as reciprocal percussion idiophones, the nacchere are one of the oldest rhythmic accompaniment instruments in Italy. Two principal types are found in popular use: the "castagnette" or "castagnole" used in the Naples area, in Apulia (Gargano) and in Sicily, and the "crotali piatti" (flat bars), also called "nacchere" which are found in other regions of Italy.

The first type consists of two round concave pieces of wood which are hit together (one in each hand). Their name derives from their resemblance to the chestnut. The second type of idiophone, however, has a completely different form from the Spanish castanets: they are the "crotali piatti" (Latin: *crotalum*; Greek: κρόταλον) which consist of two simple bars of hard wood, each independent of the other and not tied together like the castanets.

Even though today the word "nacchere" [from the Persian *nakar*; arab *naqqāra*] refers without distinction to both types described above, in the past the word had a different meaning.

In ancient times, "nacchere" or "naccaro" re-

ferred to a military instrument made of two drums, similar to two kettle drums that were played with sticks, often by someone on horseback.

*Tympanotriba* were the players of the nacchere. Francesco Redi (Arezzo, 18 February 1627 – Pisa, 1697) in the eulogy "Bacco in Toscana" (vv. 398 – 408), gives us a detailed description: "the nacchere are also two copper instruments in the shape of two big pots cov-

*(Continued on page 4)*



Front cover of CD lines notes booklet. See Page 3

## Editorial

I found a new rhythm bones playing friend in Italy—Paolo Casini. He calls them *nacchere Toscane* which translates to *Tuscan Castanets*, and while they are a bit thicker than what we call rhythm bones, they are played exactly like we play rhythm bones.

The Nacchere was once more popular in Italy and then declined much as rhythm bones and related instruments have in other parts of the world. There is a resurgence in Italy by a dedicated group of players. The article on Page 1 tells a part of that story.

Steve Brown has hosted four Regional Bones Fests. How many have you hosted? I must admit to none, though I have hosted BFIV and BFIX.

There are many members, particularly in the western part of the US and in Europe, who have not attended a Bones Fest due to the high travel cost.

A Regional Bones Fest might be just the answer for these people. If you would like to host one, contact Steve Brown and he will help you. These one day events are easy to organize.

For the second year in a row, there was no Bones Contest at the National Traditional Country Music Association's Annual Festival. Such contests help inspire people to achieve excellence with their instrument.

The All-Ireland Bones Competition organizers talk about expanding their contest into an International Competition (which would be great for rhythm bones playing), but not many in the US would be able to compete in that competition due to the high travel cost. If anyone has an idea on how to promote the NTCMA contest, pass it on to a Board member.

## Letters to the Editor

A couple of issues ago as the "elder generation: keeping our craft alive. At home I play my bones with the St Louis Banjo Club on meeting nights and when we perform out. During my five months in Texas, I 'jam' every afternoon at different parks where a lot of good musicians gather. Enclosed picture was taken at a jam in January where I celebrated my 91st birthday (now almost 92.)

I'll never forget that Bones Fest IV. It was great at your house and at the 'show place. Seems like since then I can't squeeze it in between square dancing, Banjot Club St. Luke group and other things. But I'll try some time. *Ida May Schmidt.*



Ida May Schmich Playing three bones in on hand and two in the other..

I hope this find everyone in the best of spirits. I have included money for last years and this years RBS subscription and a copy of our CD which is not yet mixed but it will give you a flavor of what is to come. I will of course, send you a proper CD when we finally get it produced. It was supposed to be ready at Christmas, but the way it is going, I would not even bank on it for next Christmas. There are still quite a few technical problems to be iron out especially with the volume of some of the instruments. In the bones number they also vary quite a bit as I used a variety of bones from various makers, Paddy Sport Murphy, Steve Brown, Nick Driver and Victor Smith (a Shetlander living in Denmark.) of Flatbush Stringed Instruments. He was the one who made me the lovely pair of Brazilian Rosewood Spoons.

I forgot to mention the band I play with (apart from "The B Band") is called Bones Zone. It would have been Boyzone, but they said I did not qualify. They are a great bunch of young guys. The bass, guitar and fiddle players are all classical trained at a Danish Music Conservatory and all teach at the Folk Music Conservatory when

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

required.

They are also talented jazz musicians, the olds of them is about 28. The fourth is the banjo player and he is only 22 and lives in Galway along with Anders (the box player from the B Band.) This banjo playing is now gaining great respect from many of Irelands top musicians. We have only played 5 gigs since we formed the band two years ago.

I am hoping to go to Abbeyfeale again this year, if I can afford it. It's not just for the competition as I get to play with Anders and Jonas (banjo) at the same time which is a rare occasion to be savoured.

I can fly to Ireland cheaper than the train fare to the Danish mainland—Juland. It's ridiculous the price of transport here, although, I suppose that is because it is extremely well organized and efficient.

I close now wishing you the best for the coming year. Slainte Mhath, As Aye, *Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar*



(Continued from page 1)

sponsored. Having been able to spend time with him and see him enjoying himself at the Red Apple Farm is one of my most cherished memories.

So I ask those of you so inclined to think about sponsoring the Fest this year. You would go down in the annals of Bones Fest History by creating an event which not only benefits the organization, but enriches the community in which it is sponsored. And besides, you are creating your own personal memories you will have the rest of your life, Think about it. *Steve Brown*

## Steve Brown's Regional Bones Fest

The Regional Bones Fest went well. It was held on October 27th at the newly completed Red Apple Farm Events Hall which was warmed by a fire in the beautiful new fireplace. Grey skies and occasional rain did not keep our spirits down.

We had about 30 people total, with 17 bones players including Ernie Duffy, Shorty, Skye, Rob Rudin, Phil Brake, Ron Trainor, John Hodgekin, Richard Clifford, Brian Butler, bob King, Al Lemieux, Jeremy Brown, Constance Cook, Daniell, Bill Rose, Jane and Thomas Rose.

We spent the morning jamming and getting acquainted. A beginners workshop was held in the morning with about 5 attendee's. A workshop on how to play to jigs was held in the afternoon with about 8 eight attendees.

Mid way through the afternoon workshop, a loud braying sound interrupted the workshop leader to the delight of the attendees. Many were to speculate if it had to do with the content of the workshop. Both workshops were led by Steve Brown.

The afternoon consisted of individual performances both for the group and general public. the afternoon was concluded with a group jam.

Music was provided by the Reiner Family Band, long supporters of the bones. the general public audience consisted of about 20 people made up of friends and relatives of the partici-

pants, and Red Apple Farm attendees.

All in all it went pretty well and I may not hold another for the next three years. See photographs of the event on Page 8. *Steve Brown*



Bill Rose, owner of Red Apple Farm and rhythm bones player

## Website of the Quarter

<http://pierce.state.nh.us/nharts/artsandartists/tradroster/tradartistinfo.asp?ArtistID=151>. This website is the [New Hampshire Traditional Arts & Folklife Listing](#) which lists Elwin 'Shorty' Boulet as a Franco-American "Bones" Player

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.  
**Bones Fest XI.** August 17-19, 2007. Details in this newsletter.  
**NTCMA AND Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2008.

## Recording of the Quarter

**Nacchere Toscane: Tuscan Castanets.** Everyone knows the Spanish or Neapolitan castanets, but few people these days know of the existence of "nacchere" or "gnacchere" (castanets) in the typical Tuscan shape, two single wood bars (*crotala* in Latin) which have been used in this part of Italy since the time of the Etruscans. Once used throughout Tuscany both as a children's toy and a rhythm instrument for popular music (especially dance music), nowadays their use is limited to very few areas including Maremma. The memory of this ancient percussion instrument is however still alive and thanks to the nacchere players who are still active, the tradition of their use and the techniques for making them have been passed on to a new generation.

Thus, Tuscan nacchere will continue to play for the long run and the sound of their wood blocks will continue to catch people's attention whenever it is needed to counteract the dull global culture that is inflicted on us on a daily basis.

This CD, the first for this instrument, is a collection of sound recordings from the 1970's to present days. *Paolo Casini*

[Editor note. A portion of the liner note from this CD are included in this issue courtesy of Paolo Casini. They begin on Page 1.

This CD is full of fun folk dance like music. I play my rhythm bones along with it, There is bones playing on almost every track. Lots of accordion etc.....

Order this CD from [www.pegasus-records.biz/CD\\_007.htm](http://www.pegasus-records.biz/CD_007.htm). You can listen to audio samples there.

At present it is not possible to buy the CD with credit card from the site [www.pegasusrecords.biz](http://www.pegasusrecords.biz). The best way should be an International Money Order (IMO) like Moneygram. The price your for our Society members is 20 Euros each shipping costs included. Or keep checking the website as they will soon add credit card and PayPal options. ]





Tarquinia, "The lioness tomb" (VI century b.C.). The dancer on the left holds a pair of castanets (crotala).

ered with leather, with the opening of the pots covered in animal hide which are played with two sticks, hitting alternately one or the other of the two instruments, now called taballi, and timballi which were mostly in use among the Saracens."

(...)  
 indi allo strepito  
 di flauti e nàcchere  
 trescando intuonino  
 strambotti e frottole  
 d'alto misterio;

(...)  
 FRANCESCO REDI, Bacco in  
 Toscana, vv. 404-408)



Turkish dancer with crotala. Engraving by Arnold Van Westerhout (1723).

A much older reference to the nàcchere as this type of drum is found in Greek mythology, to be exact, in one of the "Twelve Labors" (attributed to Pisano di Rodi, circa 600 B.C.), the series of episodes which recounts the feats accomplished by Hercules (Ercole). For the fifth labor, Hercules had to drive the bird monsters away from Lake Stinfalo. These animals had feathers, beaks and claws of bronze and were equipped with a sharp sense of hearing. It was this characteristic which allowed Hercules to scare the birds away. In fact, with the deafening roar of the miraculous nàcchere made by the god Efesto and given to him by Athena, the birds took to flight and he killed them with arrows poisoned with the blood of the Hydra of Lerna (a monster in the shape of a snake with nine heads, the middle of which was immortal).

"Nàccherare" or "nàccarare" was the action of playing the nàcchere, meant as drums, or more rarely as castanets, while "nàccherino" or "nàccarino" was the player. In Toscana, "nàchero" or "nàcchero" (dim. "nàccherino") refers also to a short person who limps; or this word can be used familiarly to call a child (Pasini, 1847).

Relying again on Redi in the above-mentioned text (v. 386), we find the crotala which refers in this case to *crotala* (singular *Crotalum*) used by Latins and also by the Etruscans. These were the percussion idiophones used by the dancers (*Crotalistrìa*) to keep the rhythm and they consequently became part of popular music. The *crotala*, predominantly of copper, were also made in clay, wood and ivory. The simplest form was made by cutting the lower part of a branch in half lengthwise and then reattaching the two parts at the end using a ring or piece of cord, which would allow them to turn and hit freely.

Already by 1700 "nàcchere" or "gnàcchere" were used without distinction to refer to Spanish Castanets and the flat type derived from the *crotala*.

Idiophones of this type made of diverse materials (wood, tortoiseshell, bone), but shaped in a similar way, are common in the Middle East, in Africa and North America. Imported perhaps by Irish immigrants in the United States, the flat nàcchere (bones) were made principally of bone and their use



Traditional shape, oak. Manufactured by C. Barontini.



Iroko wood. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Bay oak wood. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Beech wood. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Bamboo and hobnail. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Oak (left), rosemary (right). Manufactured by I. Corti.

is documented until the end of the 1800s when they became used exclusively in Minstrel Shows, in Vaudeville, and generally in many Afro-American forms of music, from the blues to jazz (especially in the style of New Orleans). These instruments are still widely used both in folk (blues and country) and in other musical forms for which there are special organized events (concerts, exchanges of experience for constructing the instruments, and seminars).

In Italy the flat naccchere were common in Lombardia (*tich-tèch*), in Bergamo (*terlèch*) and the Western Alps, especially in Valle d'Aosta (*assette*) (Maragliano, 1962; Gibelli, 1987). Similar instruments made of stone are documented in Liguria (Simeoni and Tucci, 1991). Others made of stone but in rougher shape are in use in Sardinia (Gavoi) and in Calabria (in the Province of Cosenza) (Guizzi, 2002).

Even though wood was the material most often used for the construction of this type of naccchere, in Sicily there are some examples made of flat bones used in a percussion technique similar to that used with a pair of spoons. Such instruments were typical of the musical traditions of the "Orbi", professional musicians educated in orphanages and charity institutions. Here, especially the blind were prepared for the occupation of musician, and some of their bone naccchere players were considered true virtuosos of this instrument (Guzzi, 2002).

The Tuscan tradition of the use of flat naccchere, widely called "gnaccchere" (Barberini, 1995) is very old and probably of Etruscan origin (Von Vocano, 1970). A picture in the "Tomba delle Leonesse" in Tarquinia (520 B.C.) strengthens this hypothesis. Here, in fact, a dancing couple is represented, the feminine figure has two objects in her hand, (the naccchere) and seems to keep the time of her own movements (Dennis, 1848; Pallottino, 1959).

**Their form and use** In Maremma naccchere have been used uninterruptedly up to the present time and, according to oral tradition, they were also used in other areas of Tuscany, in the provinces of Florence, Siena, Pistoia and Massa Carrara. But it is the area of Maremma which has produced the real

virtuosos on this instrument, not only as talented musicians but also as skilled craftsmen (Barontini, 1997).

The "nacccherini" or "nacccherai", the naccchere players in popular jargon were often present at parties and dance events. Traditional dances, such as tresconi, quadriglie, sciortisse, veneziane and manfrine as well as waltzes, polkas and mazurkas look on a new life if their beat was kept by a talented naccchere player. The best of them were able to embellish the accompaniment with sudden stops, uptakes and even "rolls" with supple play of the wrist. These two small pieces of wood became a hobby for the children who took on the task of making them. Referring to this, the Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca of 1612 says: "We also use the word naccchere for a children's instrument made of wood which they play for fun. "More recently both Giovanni Giannini and Amos Parducci, as well as Alessandro Giustarini, in their books dedicated to traditional games of Tuscan children, include naccchere in the chapter on toys and games for young children. In Siena, in particular, until the 1950s, children used to play naccchere especially during the time of the Palio, trying to imitate the drums of the historical procession (Baldi, 1993).

In Tuscany the "classical" form of naccchere was a narrow rectangle with the smaller side sometimes slightly concave for a better grip while the size and weight varied; an average wood bar was 135 mm long, 35 mm wide and 10 mm thick. The average weight for the traditional naccchere varied from 50 to 80 g. Tradition has it that the heart of an oak tree, the middle of the trunk of this plant, is considered the best wood for making them, but each nacccherino maker has his own closely-guarded secrets concerning the preparation and treatment of the wood.

Tuscan naccchere are held tightly between the fingers, for the most part using the index, middle and ring fingers. A naccchere should pivot on the palm of the hand and be held firmly with the thumb which closes the piece of wood between the index and middle fingers. The other naccchere is used for hitting. The sound is produced by the movement of the wrist and forearm. This is the "classical" position, but as we will



Some type of castanet handles and their position. The castanet on the right is the “fixed” while the woodpiece on the left is the “movable” one. Upper left photo is the “classic handles”. Lower right photo: the ‘triple castanets’, an idea by Ido Corti.



see later, there are some variations inspired by the experience of each player.

Among the Tuscan *nàcchere* players, there are those, like Ido Corti (see the following note) who have experimented with the wood and form of construction getting incredible results as far as the timbre (adapted to accompany one rhythm instead of another) and the suitability of the pair of wood bars for a simple rhythm or for the whirling rolls (Barontini, 2002, 2005). It is these variations which can be well-regulated by slightly changing the grip on the bars or their position while hitting.

For example, the *nàcchere* which acts as “hitter” or “mover” can be positioned on its side giving to the sound a “drier timbre” or by keeping the hitter flat but positioned slightly higher, not directly opposite the fixed bar, a “softer” sound can be produced.

The players who are the most discerning can accurately decide, even during their construction which of the two bars is better for being the “fixed” or “moving” one (suitable for bouncing quickly against the other). And thus should always be held in the same position.

Following the second world war, *nàcchere* were used less and less often in Tuscan popular music and almost disappeared. Thanks only to Maremma and its still active players, we can confirm that their use has survived globalization. But more than that, the players in Maremma, even those who aren’t from Maremma, have developed a following.

**Nàcchere players** This part of the text is dedicated to the players presented on the CD, but it is also necessary to mention other players whose music has not been recorded but only reported orally. We are sure that many

Tuscan families remember this ancient instrument; by recovering these memories we would have a way to reconstruct (at least in part) the extent of its use. For example Gino Fanelli (called “I morino”) class of 1896, is remembered as an active player in the area of Greve in Chianti. More recently, thanks to the rediscovery and promotion of this instrument for a wider audience, in the ongoing activities of the “Coro degli Etruschi”, starting in 1975, and of Carlino Penni, other players have made themselves known. For example, Claudio Vergari, still active especially during the traditional May Day activities in Grosseto and Arcangelo Alessandrini who has been a member of the Coro degli Etruschi for many years

**Corrado Barontini** (*Grosseto, 1948*) Since the beginning of the 1970s, in collaboration with Morbello Vergari, the popular poet of



Ido Corti, the most famous Tuscan castanet player in action during the 2007 May Day.



From the left: Ido Corti, Alessandro Casini and Eugenio Bargagli.

Maremma, Corrado has done research into song and music, and has become an authority in the tradition of his land. He was one of the first to study the *nàcchere*, describing their popular use based on the games of times gone by and also their exceptional capacity as percussion instrument well adapted for musical accompaniment. He himself has constructed various types of *nàcchere* following the instructions of Carlino Penni and the same Morbello Vergari. His collection of *nàcchere* counts many examples most of which were made by Ido Corti. He is a member of *Coro degli Etruschi* in which he accompanies some musical pieces playing the *nàcchere*.

**Alessandro Casini** (*Fiesole, Firenze 1993*) It was the evening of 30 April 2003. At the age of 10 it was the first time for Alessandro to partici-

pate in May Day festivities, this is a well – established itinerant tradition in the country around Grosseto in Maremma where people go from place to place to bring greetings of spring with music and songs. Corrado Barontini was the one who put *nàcchere* in the boy hands and showed him how to hit them following the rhythm of the music. Alessandro's passion and particular predisposition worked wonders giving the impulse necessary to accompany the pieces.

With his good ear and interpretative ability Alessandro has become a master of the *nàcchere* in a short time.

**Ido Corti** (*Manciullles, France 1926*) Returned from France in 1939 to live in Maremma, Ido began to play the *nàcchere* as a boy but it has been in recent years that his talent and originality have emerged in full. Ido's

entry in grand style among the Maremma players was like Jimi Hendrix's in to the world of rock guitarists. In order to explain this curious statement, it would be necessary to experience and admire Ido during his performances, but we can without doubt say that his method of constructing *nàcchere* and his way of playing them have been a true revolution in the tradition. *Paolo Casini* Copyright 2007, Paolo Casini

[This article was excerpted from the liner notes to the CD mentioned on Page 3. The complete liner notes include more information about historic and current players, foot notes, and references.

The complete 24 page liner notes are shipped when you purchase the CD. Paolo Casini has made a great contribution to the rhythm bones/*nacchere* world. Thanks, Paolo.]



From the left: Morbello Vergari and Tullio Barontini on accordion, Carlino Penni on castanets.

## Paolo Casini Biography





Ernie Duffy, Shorty Boulet and Sky Bartlett



Rob Rudin, ?????? And Constance Cook



Steve Brown's Regional Bones Fest group photograph with the Reiner Family Band . See article on Page 3. All photographs by Larry Ehrets

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 10, No. 1 2008

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## Executive Director's Column

This issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player* brings the promising news that Bones Fest XII will be held in St. Louis on the banks of the Mississippi River. Great news, which will help us to reconnect with our roots, and the history of bone playing as it was undoubtedly done on the great river boats.

Each time the Fest moves to a new part of the country, it brings with it the character of the history in the area it is based, and the unique possibility of the people of that area.

How the bones have intertwined in the history of this country was one of the things which has always drawn me to them. Whether it is the minstrel shows associated with the south, or the Maritime traditions of New Bedford, the bones are nestled in there, creating a link between us and bone players of the past. Thanks to host Spike Bones

and co-host Scott Miller for getting it done!

As gratifying as this is, it was a difficult process and one that almost resulted in no Bones Fest this year. Since Ev Cowett invited a group of bone players over his house to create the tradition of Bones Fest, it has relied on the members' willingness to put the time, energy, and work into creating that magical experience we have all come to expect over the years.

But for Bones Fest to continue, it will take that special person or group of bone players to take on that responsibility. Of the eight Bones Fest hosts, two have done it multiple times and at least two others are seriously considering it for the future.

I do think, though, we need to take a hard

*(Continued on page 2)*

## John Henry 'Bones' Nobles

Bones Nobles was a legend in Beaumont and around the state of Texas. He played with the likes of Gatemouth Brown and Clifton Chenier. He appeared in three films, and one titled *Bones* is a documentary about him. He was profiled on the Real People television program and by Charles Kuralt in one of his *On the Road* television segments. He was invited to appear on the Johnny Carson television show but did not because he did not like to fly. I suspect that because he would not fly, he never gained national recognition, so that people, including rhythm bones players, who should have heard about him never did.

John Henry Nobles, Jr., was born in Opp, Alabama on April 19, 1902. His father, John Henry Noble, was a preacher, and his mother, \_\_\_\_\_ Beaty, was a Cherokee/Choctaw Indian.

John, Jr. moved to Beaumont in 1922 and married his wife, Virgie, the same year. He was a truck driver and later owned a BBQ restaurant.

I could not find out how he learned to play the bones. His daughters say he taught himself how to play, but I suspect he first saw someone perform.

He could always be found at just about any festival or celebration. He especially loved playing for children, and put in frequent appearances at local schools.

The following is an excerpt from an interview by Alan Govanar, from his book, *Texas Blues: The*

*Rise of a Contemporary Sound* (Texas A&M University Press, 2008.)

"I don't care how much rhythm we had. We didn't have no way to let it out. My dad was making fifty cents a day. Three dollars for six days. There wasn't no money to buy musical instruments. The only way for us to let out our rhythm out was to find us some

*(Continued on page 7)*



'Bones' Nobles and Charles Kuralt during shooting of *On the Road* television program. Photo by Rick Campbell and courtesy of the Beaumont Enterprise

## Editorial

I had never heard of John Henry 'Bones' Nobles. Member Dutch Koop sent me an article on 'Bones' from a book titled *Meeting the Blues: Interviews with Legends and Friends!* by Alan Governar.

I immediately contacted Alan for permission to reprint part of his interview and also the Tyrrell Historical Library in Beaumont, TX who sent me four newspaper article on him from the Beaumont Enterprise. I contacted his daughters, who also play the bones, and learned a lot about Bones. I later found Carol Munday Lawrence who made a film titled *Bones* featuring the story of Bones Nobles. I will try and bring a copy to play at Bones Fest XII. He has a unique sound to his bones playing and you may be able to hear it on the Website of the Quarter. I hope you enjoy his story.

There is a review of member Yirdy Machars's new CD on Page 4. Yirdy had some health problems this past year, but is doing better. He probably will not make it to the All-Ireland Bones Competition, but hopes to make it to the Danish Music Awards where his BoneZone band has been selected to play a short set.

Yirdy Machar taught a workshop on playing four bones in each hand at Bones Fest IX. I asked him to write a Tips & Technique column and as you will read, there is more to it than just banging four or eight bones together.

I tried Yirdy's technique and I'm impressed. I didn't have a lot of trouble learning the basics, but keeping four bones aligned will take some practice. Also the skin between my 3rd and 4th fingers is a bit tender as it has never had a bone pressed against it.

Dennis Riedesel is considering hosting Bones Fest XIII in Texas, so it seemed like a good time for us to get to know him. See his story on Page 6.

This issue is a bit late so we could include preliminary plans for Bones Fest XII in St. Louis in October. It was worth the wait as you'll see on Page 3. Spike Bones is the host and Scott Miller is co-hosting

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

look at the process of how the Fest is created each year. From its inception it was a "labor of love" by people who were so excited by the prospect of the event, that they couldn't wait to be involved in it.

From those sparse beginnings we have grown to a sizable organization which has members in all sections of the country and around the world.

The board can take a more formal approach, create a committee, delegate responsibility, but in the end it requires someone willing to take on the host role, and put in the hard work and dedication to make it work.

Anyone who has attended a Fest has experienced that special event that draws each of us back year after year.

But we will need you, the membership, to step up to ensure this fellowship continues. There is one serious possibility for next year, and talk of a future Fest in Ireland.

I would, though, ask each of you to take a look at how you might be able to make sure this special time continues long into the future. After all, it's your party. *Steve Brown*

## Letter to the Editor

Please find enclosed the promised DVD of Cliff Wood playing the bones at his blind home [Pocklington House] when he was one hundred years old.

The lady who is interviewing is my amazing friend Alison Wood who lives at the same blind home and is in her nineties. She has paid for all the filming and DVD production as she passionately wants a record kept for posterity about this amazing man.

*Jean Wheeler*

[It is great to see a person playing bones as well as Cliff did at 100 years of age, and I will bring the DVD to Bones Fest XII for all to see. Read Cliff's interesting life story in Vol 3, No 3. Cliff died in September 2003 at age 103, and played bones until a few weeks before his death.]

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## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XII.** October 17-19, 2008. Preliminary details in this newsletter.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2008, this year in LeMars, Iowa. For the last two years the bones contest was cancelled due to not enough competitors. If rhythm bones players do not support it, this unique contest might go away.

## Website of the Quarter

**[www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKqzVG2756U&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKqzVG2756U&feature=related)**

John Henry 'Bones' Nobles and Taj Mahal on Utube. There is a 6 minute excerpt from the movie *Bones* reviewed on Page 5. This is an illegal video that may be taken down at any time so look at it as soon as the newsletter arrives. Bones Nobles has a unique and interesting style.

An easy way to find it is to Google "John Henry Nobles."

## Bones Fest XII Preliminary Plans

All aboard for Bones Fest XII, October 17-18-19, 2008 in St Louis Missouri! Just like all of our past Bones Fests, this Fest will be one to remember. Mark your calendars, we hope your bones will be there for the first Bones Fest west of the Mississippi.

Thanks to my co-host, Scott Miller, we have procured the conference center on the south campus of the University of Missouri at St. Louis. This facility includes:

A. THE MUSEUM ROOM: This large room will remain open to the public from Friday noon to Sunday noon and will contain, 1)Registration table for RBS, Bones Fest XII, Bones University workshops, tickets for The Saturday night public concert. 2) Bones Market Place. 3) Bones library. 4) Educational exhibits and Bones museum.

B. A BEAUTIFUL 350 SEAT THEATER, for our Friday and Saturday presentations.

C. CLASSROOMS, for our Saturday morning workshops. We will call these sessions our "Bones University" or for short, "Bone U."

D. A 24 ROOM RESIDENTIAL FACILITY with two lounges and a courtyard for boning. Each room has 2 beds so choose your roommate. The rate is only \$18 per night per person, Friday and Saturday nights only...no alcohol.

E. A LARGE ROOM AND CATERING SERVICE for Sunday morning brunch.

F. A LIGHT RAIL TRAIN STATION; This service is fast, clean, safe and secure commuter service has you at the airport in 10 minutes, Union Station and AMTRAK in 20 minutes and to the riverfront hotel in 30 minutes.

G. LOTS OF FREE PARKING, on the University as well as downtown. The University of Missouri at St. Louis campus, The Crown Plaza Hotel, and the river front are all quickly and easily accessible by auto from Interstate 70.

On the other end of the rail line (overlooking the mighty Mississippi

river front and the majestic Gateway Arch) the Crown Plaza Hotel has offered to be the Bones Fest official hotel and has blocked 10 suites for our members. These \$350/night suites are being offered to us for only \$110/per night. Some suites have balconies and several rooms and kitchenettes. All have great views!

PREFEST EVENT, THURSDAY, October 16, we will have a pre-fest party beginning in the grand lobby and bar of the Crown Plaza, 5:30 PM, opening with a press conference for the local media. After meeting the press and media we will cross the street to an Irish bar for boning, jamming, and celebrating. Then down the hill to Laclede's Landing for more boning fun.

SATURDAY AT HIGH NOON we will gather in mass with a banner and bones at the south campus train station, hop onboard, and train to the famous Union Station. There we will present a public performance and eat. (12:00 to 2:00pm)

Next we take a short march through the park to the Soldier's Memorial for our second public performance. The Memorial will provide us with restrooms and other facilities as needed. (2:00 to 4:00pm)

From the Soldier's Memorial we parade east down the mall, through the famous courthouse (Dred Scott decision), through the Gateway Arch for our riverfront public performance. Then out on the riverboat "Tom Sawyer" for a little excursion. (4:00- 6:00pm)

Everyone will have two hours to eat and return to our campus theater for our Saturday night, open to the public, grand show at 8:00pm. Later there will be lots of jamming. Well that is an overview of Bones Fest XII. Be there or be square. Bring your friends and family, there is something for everyone to do in St. Louis. Contact me with questions or to volunteer at 773-787-7778 or spikebones2002@yahoo.com.

Meet me in St Louis, Bless your bones. *Spike Bones*

## Bones Fest XII

October 17-19, 2008

St. Louis, MO

Host: Spike Bones

*Co-Host: Scott Miller*

Preliminary details  
in this newsletter

Contact Spike at  
**773-787-7778 or**  
**spikebones2002@yahoo.com**  
**for more information**

## Shorty Boulet A Legend



Country Cookin', a brand new summer 2007 musical review, was at Whitefield's Weathervane Theatre, and featured a rocking band with local and company musicians including Dan and Ben Salomon, Ben Natti, Nate Pearson, James Sullivan, David McDonough, Jamie Feinberg and Elaina Cope. They were joined by North Country legend [and Rhythm Bones Society member] Shorty Boulet. Photo copyright 2007 by Mark Winter and used with permission

## Recording of the Quarter

The CD that Yirdy Machar mentioned in his Letter to the Editor in last quarter's newsletter arrived today, and it is one of the best rhythm bones CD that I have heard (and I've heard some good ones.) There are rhythm bones on all but two tracks and those have spoons. One track has one of the best rhythm bones solos I've heard. There is variety in textures and rhythms that are most entertaining.

The CD is titled *BoneZone in Session*, and BoneZone is the name of his new group. The [www.folkshop.dk](http://www.folkshop.dk) website, where you can order the CD, describes them as four young Danish musicians who have joined forces with Scottish singer and bones-player Yirdy Machar. The liner notes describe BoneZone as a musical playground where tradition meets new ideas without changing its original form. I say it's a CD that most rhythm bones players will enjoy.

The other band members are Jonas Fromseier on banjo and mandolin, Christopher Davis Maack on fiddle, Rasmus Zeeberg on guitars and mandolin and Steffan Sorensen on double-bass and piano. They are Danish, but they play Irish and Scottish music.

Yirdy attended Bones Fest IX and taught a workshop on how to play with four bones in each hand (See the Tip & Technique column to the right) He also opened the Saturday night public performance and set a great tone for the evening. He attended the National Traditional Country Music Festival and won the World Bones & Spoons Contest. He is an outstanding rhythm bones player, and plays a variety of instruments. Hi is an entertainer.

There is a bonus track not described on the liner notes. It begins with rain and thunder followed by a music box and Yirdy on rhythm bones. Again a quite nice track.

Go to [www.folkshop.dk](http://www.folkshop.dk) to order the CD. For English text click on the British flag in the upper left corner. Scroll down until you see the Bone-Zone CD. Click on Add to Basket and follow instructions. *Steve Wixson*

## Tips & Techniques Playing Eight Bones Simultaneously or *The Full House*

Firstly, I start by describing how the bones are held 1: ) 2:( 3:( 4:(, i.e., the thumb-bone held with both ends pointing towards you, and the other three bones the opposite way with both ends pointing away from you )(((. This is especially important if your bones (like mine) are not identical.



I have also set small notches on the top of each bone i.e.: v, vv, vvv, vvvv which assures that the bones are always held in exactly the same position every time. You can also mark them, at least one set with a felt marker to distinguish left from right hand.

I have always kept my set that are marked in this way separate, and used only for playing the "Full House". They are Nick Driver Musical Bones which are perfectly suited for this style of playing. Unfortunately they are not available any more. Any other shin bones or wooden ones would suffice as they are generally thinner and normally of an even thickness.

One of the techniques I suggest in my workshops is that you make a small notch on the outside edge of each bone. This is made so you can feel that your fingers are in the correct position (one on each bone). The bones are then released individually by taking the relevant finger off the notch. Starting by holding the first three bones firmly (like the thumb bone in normal playing) i.e. index, middle and ring fingers placed on the notches and slightly pressing them into the palm of your hand so you are

actually playing one bone (under your little finger) against three (stationary) bones. This will give you quite a "light" sound.

The next finger is also removed



from the notch giving you a "rounder" sound with two playing on two bones. The removal of the small, middle and



index fingers gives you what I call "The Full House" effect with the three bones simultaneously playing on the thumb bone.



This is best practiced using rhythmic runs for example: tick/tick/tickity-tick/tickity-tickity-tick and repeating them while changing finger-pressure alternatively, 1-3, 2-2, and 3-1. Running this sequence gives you a nice run-up to a crescendo in the piece you are playing. The real *Full House* is when you achieve the same with both hands playing all eight bones at the same time.





Good Luck, Happy Practicing, and "MAY THE LIGHT SHINE THROUGH YOUR BONES". As Aye, Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar

## Review of the Film *Bones*

*Bones* is a documentary film about John Henry 'Bones' Nobles who is the subject of the feature article beginning on Page 1. It was produced and directed by Carol Munday Lawrence who as an African American artist and independent film maker creates works to empower and celebrate her people.

I spoke with Carol via telephone about her film. She was a producer and wanted to direct a film. A friend of hers in Beaumont, Texas suggested Bones, and she went there to meet him. She quickly discovered he was a real visual character and would be a good subject for a film..

She invited folk/blues musician Taj Mahal to join the project and they went to Beaumont and shot the film. Carol said, "It's a real funky little film, you know, and it's totally unpretentious. It's full of music. I think you will like it."

The film opens with Bones leaving his home and driving through his neighborhood playing bones. The scene changes to three guys and Bones playing dominos and talking about bones and things.

Bones' daddy made 50 cents a day and could not afford a musical instrument. Bones says, "I had a beat in me" and bones was one way he let it out.

The next scene show Bones buying fruit at an outdoor market. He starts playing and gets one man to dance. He then teaches a couple of people how to play the bones.

At one time he was a sort of foot doctor and the next scene shows him working on the foot of a friend and

talking about life. He comments about himself, "Everything I do is unique."

One of his daughters remembers that he played bones all of his life. All of his children and many grandkids play the bones.

He then goes fishing which he had done every Tuesday for thirty years noting that when he was a kid he used bent straight pins—a hook was a luxury.

He then drives to the airport again playing his bones. A plane lands and Taj Mahal exits the airplane. They introduce themselves to each other and then drive to Bones' house where he is introduced to Bones' family.

They play a song together and Bones plays a great combination of taps, duples and triplets. He also occasionally uses his other hand to slap the bones together (Bones play bones one-handed). They play a second song together and it is better than the first with Bones playing a nice break.

Taj Mahal tells Bones that one of the things that he's been doing in his life is trying to preserve some of these traditions. He says, "I've heard about people like you, but this is my first time [seeing a bones player]."

The scene moves to the backyard where Bones is barbequing some of his homemade sausage. His family of children and grandchildren are gathered. There is eating, playing and talking going on. Taj Mahal brings out his guitar and they collaborate on third song, Stagger Leaf.

Originally a 16mm color film, it is now packaged as a video about 30 minutes in duration. It was illegally bundled with a film titled *Blues Like Sunshine in Rain*. I found the film *Bones* in a few libraries. A six minute except with the three songs is now illegally showing on Utube. Carol holds the copyright to the film, and it may be possible that she will re-release it. I hope we can show it at Bones Fest XII. *Steve Wixson*

## Review of the Film *SNO-LINE*

This is a 1989 B-movie shot in Beaumont with John 'Bones' Nobles in a unique role.

It tells the story of small time New York racketeer trying to setup a drug operation in a Texas Gulf Coast town. About 20 minutes into the film, there is a brief cameo of Bones dressed in his colorful African clothes playing bones as the camera pans from a boat to the shore.

About one hour into the film the lead character, played by Vince Edwards, travels to the deep bayou to make a deal with the local drug lord. As the scene begins there is the faint sound of rhythm bones in the background. Bones is then seen playing his rhythm bones around the characters as if he is invisible to them He speaks a few words that are difficult to understand. A gun fight breaks out and the New York guys leave and Bones' bones playing fades out. He plays solo bones to no music. This is a rather unique and interesting scene from a music point of view.

He gets on-screen credit as the character 'Bones.' This film in video format is available on the internet. *Steve Wixson*

## Dave Boyles Makes the Front Page

Dave Boyles, member and Co-Host of Bones Fest XI, made the front cover of Milwaukee's *Lifestyle Magazine: Northshore*, March 2008 edition. He is shown in a headshot wearing a grey derby hat. The article on Page 68 titled "The Bluegrass is always greener" shows him with rhythm bones and washboard. It profiles his career and civic jobs, and then his music. Bones was his father's instrument of choice, and, he says, "I almost got obsessed by it." He added the washboard and plays with Liza Edgar and Razzmatazz. "I played on the circus train for 10 years. We played so many different venues because we were unique," he said. "Through all the things I've done, I've always stayed close to the music."

Again a big thanks to Dave and Don Gilmore for hosting Bones Fest XI.



## Dennis Riedesel In His Own Words

I have been involved with the mountain man and living history hobby since 1984. We participated in all the activities in the mountain man rendezvous camps and marched in all of the battles at the living history re-enactments but as we got older our bodies no longer allowed us to participate as we had in our younger days.

So we had to find a way to be involved in the reenactment camps but not march in the field. Since many of us played musical instruments during the evening hours' get together around the campfires, three or four re-enactor friends of mine researched whatever information they could find on the old medicine shows. They were able to keep the format of the old medicine show intact and we were familiar with the "Authentic Americana Folk Music" genre, however, the jokes were not funny! Something happened with the set up of the joke and the punch line that seemed to be funny for the 1800's audience but we did not see any humor at all. So we started with the problems the City Slicker had with the Country Bumpkin's homonyms and double enterers in the Arkansas Traveler skit and, during the years of performing the show, the homonymic gags have changed.

Our group is called the Dr. E. T. Bushrod and Tanner Family Medicine Show (see photograph on Page 8.) We perform throughout Texas at festivals and other civic events as well at many re-enactments. The Tanner Family is a motley collection of individuals: Rosco (AKA Dr. Bushrod) on mandolin; Unkle Jimmy on spoons and dancing jack; Tiny (that's me) on "one string bass banjo", bones and mouth-bow; NotNo on tambourine; Banjo Joe on banjo; Bisket on washboard; Little Lucky Tater on tambourine (and, yes, his son's Tanner name is Spud); Peach on penny whistle; Bingo on fiddle and his wife Sissy on fiddle or banjo; Pudge on fiddle; Toby on guitar; Lumpy on the "shovel-ally", Puddin as a heckler in the audience; and a host of others too numerous to mention.

One very curious thing about the

Tanners is that our family tree looks like a telegraph pole! All of us hail from Strawberry, Arkansas except for all of Peach's parts which comes from Burnt Mattress-which is right above Hot Springs!!! *Dennis Riedesel*

## Real Animal Bones Where to Buy How to Make

I originally conceived this as a major front page article. As I researched it, it became clear that there are not many people making good animal rhythm bones for sale. And as you will see below, Scott Miller has a booklet with all of the information you need to make them yourself.

My father was a meat cutter and he made my first rhythm bones from what he considered the hardest bone—an old ox. I later bought four pair of cow shin bones made by Nick Driver. I found a buffalo carcass behind a slaughter house and gave most of it away to Ev Cowett. I bought a pair of Dave 'Black Bart' Boyles rib bones held together with a rawhide lace, and later cow shin bones from Steve Brown.

Over 240 people have completed the Questionnaire section of our Membership Application Form. Eighty people say they play animal bones from cow, buffalo, whale and goat. Several of these people contributed to this article.

**WHERE TO BUY.** From our Questionnaire we find; Lark in the Morning, House of Musical Traditions (made by Dave 'Black Bart' Boyles), Andy's Front Hall, Elderly, Tim Reilly, Steve Brown, David Landreth, Scott Miller, Malaghy Kearns, and Nick Driver. Several people said Ireland without naming a store. Nick Driver no longer makes rhythm bones

Walt Watkins has a set of goat bones sold by Aaron Plunkett. Aaron says they come from Ireland.

I've made three trips to Ireland and each time went into every music store I could find. To my surprise, I found no good bones—that is bones that I would buy. Custy's in Irealnd sells Steve Brown shin bones, but they were out the day I was there.

Member Guy Gillette makes and sells cow bones.

Steve Brown notes "Paddy Sport makes his own bones and one of his son's sells them, I think Jack. There was an article that I found on the internet where he talked about making them, getting the bones of a heffer 2-3 years old and setting them by the fire. Ronnie McShane has been making his own. There's a guy from the North, Eamon, Maguire, I think, who makes his own. The Bourque Family from Ruby South Carolina also.

There was a guy from Vermont who made them for a while, Robert something, If I remember the name I'll tell you. There was also a guy from New Orleans that made them, both of those guys used the shin. there's the Quebec people Benoit mentioned. Ray Sharier occasionally would get some ribs and clean them up."

Fionnuala Shaw from Essaness Music responded to an email. "We have a local man here in Kilkenny who makes bones. His name is Lorcan Bergin. "

Member Mary Seel had the most unusual suggestion. She found rib bones for sale at Petsmart stores. These are smoked beef ribs by Dentley, product #27099. They requires some cleaning before use, and not all are the right shape for playing. But at \$1.50 each, you can't go wrong.

**HOW TO MAKE.** From the Questionnaire, twenty-five people make their bone rhythm bones. One really good way is to find a carcass in a field. Those bones are already cleaned and dried and all that is needed is to cut them to length and maybe polish.

Cowboy and storyteller Bud Bartram's technique was described in Vol 4, No 3. "The only useable bones come from the upper back part of the rib cage next to the shoulder. After cutting to length, he would break a coke bottle and use the sharp bottom to scrap the bones until he got the sound or the pitch he wanted. This could take hours and hours."

Scott Miller has prepared a booklet on how make your own rib bones. Its sections include; Start With Good Bones, Which Ox Ribs Are Best, Step-by-Step Instructions with 1. Select a

*(Continued on page 8)*

bones, but the fact is we didn't use bones at first. We cut our rulers at school at the six inch mark and made us two little sticks to knock and that would give us our vent.

"Well, after a while, some of them boys got a little combo going and I wanted to play with them. One boy had a jew's-harp, a rub board, and I was the bones player.

"See, I found this old cow and the buzzard done cleaned him up and the weather had done cleaned him up and had done them bones white. I went and got me a saw and sawed me off some bones. That put me above them boys who only had sticks. They kept asking me, "Johnny, where'd you get them bones?" And I'd say, "A man done come through here from up the country and gave them to me.

"I went out there and cut me a bunch of bushes and covered up that old cow so that they couldn't find it, and I was kind of unique. So they had to use me in the band.

"I process these bones, I put a salve in them. It takes about two months to get a set of bones where they'll give you the right sound.

"I can play myself or with a band. You have to follow that beat."

His daughter, Ethel Franklin, tells a similar story. Her father didn't have toys as a child, so he frequently played outdoors in a field. One day, he stumbled across a dead cow, extracted a couple of ribs, and discovered he could make music with them. Thus began a career that attracted national attention.

Bones said, "I began playin' the bones at the age of 9." When he was older he began playing with other musicians at dances.

Bones could play every kind of rhythm you could imagine; African, Latin, country and western. He loved zydeco. He said "You know, I've played a lot of blues and I don't prefer to play a lot of blues: it's too slow." He always had a style of rhythm that was a little different from what others were puttin' down. He played bones one-handed.

Bones played piano, but his favorite instrument was the ever-present pair of bones, which he always kept in the nightstand beside his bed, Ethel



Bones Nobles and his bones. Photograph courtesy of Beaumont Enterprise.

said. "They sounded like magic."

Daughters Gloria Beasley and Ethel Franklin both play bones, but their playing is not as polished as their father. Gloria said, "We all could play them, me and my brothers. My brother that died [George], now he really could play them."

Bones died in 1997 at the age of 95.

In the early 1980s, Bones was profiles on two popular television programs; *Real People* and Charles Kuralt's *On the Road*.

In the *On the Road* segment, Kuralt asks Bones, "Do you ever go out without your bones?" Bones replies, "No, if I put my pants on without my bones they'd fall off. I'd have to go back and get my bones to make the pants fit."

Kuralt asks, "Are they just ordinary cow bones?" Bones replies, "They're cow bones, but they're not ordinary."

Bones appeared in two movies, *SNO-LINE* (see separate review) and *Vasectomy A Delicate Matter* where he was a butler with a few words of dialog. It is a bit interesting to note he is credited as 'John Henry Nobles' in *SNO-LINE* where he played the bones and credited as 'Bones Nobles' in *Vasectomy* where he did not play the rhythm bones.

In 1975, Carol Munday Lawrence produced a film titled *Bones*. One summary said this: "Introduces John Henry Nobles of Beaumont, Texas, who creates percussive rhythms for jazz with dried beef bones held between his fingers. Nobles devised this unique method because he could not afford a musical instrument. 29 min-

utes." This is an important film and it is reviewed separately on Page 5.

He played occasional shows with another Beaumont secret, bluesman, singer/guitar player Richard Earl. Richard said, "He played rhythms the way we play them on the guitar. Also the rhythms that you hear drummers do today, he could do on the bones. You could recognize what he was doing."

People used to hire him to come into different venues and play by himself. He would get up and make the music with his bones. These were bones solos. He was special, real special. People in Beaumont enjoyed him immensely. He and Richard Earl are two of Beaumont's best kept secrets.

Daughter Gloria added these comments.

"Some of the white people around here would call him when they were having a dinner to come and play for them, like at lunchtime.

"He would go to all of the schools and make talks on drugs and different things. He liked that—being around the kids

"He played with all of the bluegrass bands. They would come and pick daddy up because he did not ride planes.

"They called him their Daddy. They'd come up there looking for Daddy Bones.

"Daddy was number one at the Folk Festival in San Antonio for 4 years. "He played at Spindletop all the time.

"My daddy used to tap dance and play the bones. He could really tap dance.

"My daddy would get the cow bones, cook them up however he do them. He only had one pair left—somebody stole the rest—and I have them. He sold bones."

My thanks to Gloria for sending the two color photographs of Bones. The front page photo was from the newspaper, and they no longer had a copy.

Bones would go to many events where he was not on stage. He would take out his bones and play along, something we tell rhythm bones players not to do. But from everyone I talked to, he was so beloved that this was all right. I wish I could have known him. *Steve Wixson*



John Henry 'Bones' Nobles

(Animal Rhythm Bones—Continued from page 6)  
90Rib Bone, 2. Mark where to cut bone segment with template, 3. Cut, 4. Sculpt, 5, Sand, 6. Buff and Polish, 7. Ends: To Seal or Not to Seal, That is the Question. There are side-bars with other information and lots of photographs. Contact him at [www.rhythm-bones.com](http://www.rhythm-bones.com) and ask for a copy. It's



Dr. E. T. Bushrod and Tanner Family Medicine Show with Dennis Riedesel on the right

really good.

Check the Letters to the Editor column in next quarter's issue for what I hope will be additional places to buy and techniques to make contributions. *Steve Wixson*



Top part of Page 1 of Scott Miller's Rib Bones Making Booklet

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910



# Rhythm Bones Player

Volume 10, No. 2 2008

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## Executive Director's Column

Although I wasn't at Bones Fest III, the event will always be vivid in my mind. Held on the deck at Russ Myers' house the excitement generated that day was conveyed by anyone who attended to those of us who were on the side lines cheering.

Mel Mercier meets Joe Birl, Spike Bones and Dave Boyles having a "bone off" Russ Myers recounting the history of bones to an avid audience.

But the proverbial "shot heard round the world" for me was the formation of the Rhythm Bones Society. Long a dream held by Fred Edmunds, Ev Cowett, and Russ Myers, the realization of this dream was to see the potential of our little instrument to be recognized and preserved around the world by the general public, and to give the far flung fanatic who had kept it alive a chance to con-

nect with each other, and come to the ultimate realization, we are not alone!

As we look back, I think we can be proud of what we have accomplished, an informative publication of the highest caliber, yearly meetings held through out our vast country uniting players from it's four corners, and beyond, a web site and discussion group that reaches out all over the world on a daily basis.

And yet if we look at our membership numbers we see great fluctuation. From a high in 2002-3 of 116, our current membership at 66, is almost 50% less. In comparison, the Yahoo discussion group has 151 members, with continual fluctuation of about 3% in any given month.

This is really an unfair comparison because

*(Continued on page 2)*

## How Much Money Do Bones Players Make?

Do you get paid to play rhythm bones? Do you want to get paid to play rhythm bones? Well, this article might inspire you to promote yourself as a paid rhythm bones player.

I have played rhythm bones for over sixty years and until a couple of years ago, I never made a penny playing them. I was having fun, teaching a few kids how to play and occasionally performing on-stage. The thought of getting paid never entered my mind.

That changed as a result of belonging to the Rhythm Bones Society and attending Bones Fests. I practice now because I perform in front of our most critical audience (ourselves) who also are our most supportive audience wanting us to succeed. Like most Bones Fest attendees, my skills dramatically improved and I have experience performing to an audience. Most of us now can entertain people. In my case, I am not a true professional, just a really good amateur.

I sent email to our members asking them to share their similar experiences. I received a variety of replies and my first conclusion is few of us perform exclusively with rhythm bones. Most members have other musical skills and play rhythm bones on occasion. Good examples are Mel Mercier, Steve Brown, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Donnie DeCamp, etc. Notable exceptions are the Jerry Mescher's and Bernie Worrell trio,

Barry Patton, Walt Watkins and Vivian Cox.

The late Vivian Cox had more playing time than anyone I've talked to. She played rhythm bones at the Boggstown Cabaret. After seating guests, she would join the performers in a 2 to 3 hour show with 20 minutes of featured playing time and was paid \$75 a night.

Back to my own experience. I hosted Bones Fest IX and two leaders from the local music

*(Continued on page 4)*





## Editorial

I made some money last year playing bones and got to wondering about how much money rhythm bones players make. I asked other members for their similar experience, and received some surprising replies for which I and I hope you are most appreciative. See what you think of the article, and consider writing a short Letter to the Editor with your paid experience.

If you attended Bones Fest V, you heard Adam Klein sing opera and play bones. He recently performed for kids in a school and tells us about it on Page 3.

Mary B. Seel learned about the RBS on the web. She contacted Steve Brown who forwarded her email to me. She lives in Birmingham, AL, where I used to live, and we finally got to meet on one of my trips back there. She is a delight and quite a good bones player. She also hopes to make it to BFXII. You will like her.

Lastly, the rising cost of fuel and transportation has the Board pondering about Bones Fest XII attendance. I sent email to all former Bones Fest attendees asking if they were attending or if they were hoping to attend. If you did not get the email or have not responded to it, please let us know your plans. We need that information to finalize the registration fee. You will receive Bones Fest XII registration forms in the next month or so. Thanks.

## Letter to the Editor

Had a nice bones highlight again this year to represent our Society. I'm now the music advisor for "The Pres. Own" Irish Ensemble, and got to play concertina, bodhran and bones at the White House for the Prime Minister of Ireland! All the best, *Kenny Wolin*

*(Executive Director —Continued from page 1)*  
in the first place there is no member fee for the discussion group, and what could be easier than sitting in your own home and entering a little information into a computer to join, but it does show a number of people interested in bone playing which is almost 60% higher than our membership.

Another interesting note, though, is

## Bones Fest XII

October 17-19, 2008

St. Louis, MO

Host: Spike Bones

*Co-Host: Scott Miller*

Preliminary details in last  
**quarter's newsletter**

Contact Spike at  
**773-787-7778 or**  
**spikebones2002@yhoo.com**  
**for more information**

that out of the 151 members of the discussion group, only 26 of them are RBS members.

Which brings me to another point, our membership, while an accomplishment, represents a very small number of bones players around the country and around the world. I have witnessed my self a large number of bone players in the North East alone who are not members, and yet remain committed players.

The reality of our situation, I believe, is that we are going to rise or fall on our membership. It is you the membership which allows us to produce this fine quality newsletter, it is you the membership which allows for an exciting Bones Fest each year, and whether we continue to grow over the years will largely depend on the membership.

So how can we bring some of those "uncommitted" bone players into the fold which will allow us to continue and further what we do? Should we focus on making more of a connection between the discussion group and the organization? Will further development of the web site bring more bone players?

Just food for thought as we prepare for our trip west to St. Louis in the fall. *Steve Brown*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## NTCMA Bones Contest

"The NTCMA festival, now in La Mars, Iowa, is one of the country's greatest and pure fun country music festivals! I would encourage any bones players to attend and enter the bones contest which will be on Saturday, August 30th. This contest has not been held the past two years due to the lack of competitors. If we don't support it, it might be discontinued. I would like for Sharon to enter the contest, but the decision is hers. It's time for a new World Champion. See you at the festival!!" For more information email me at [sjmescher@gmail.com](mailto:sjmescher@gmail.com). *Jerry Mescher*

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.  
**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2008 See short article by Jerry Mescher in next column.  
**Bones Fest XII.** October 17-19, 2008. Details in the last newsletter.



## Website of the Quarter

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5o69rxh5I10&feature=related>

### Young Bones Player

Recently, I started teaching in the Norwood, MA Public School system, where there seems to be a strong interest in bones playing. The music department has invested in a set of bones for the Celtic Strings Program, and is augmenting my set of teaching bones with some larger size bones for children with larger hands. Look for great things to come! But now read Adam Klein's article below. *Constance Cook*

### Bones Infect Another School

NORWOOD, MA, May 2008: A short assembly concert featuring me singing an opera aria and four Appalachian songs, accompanied by piano, banjo, jaw harp, bones and (again) banjo, elicited the usual response from the kids later when their classes came for Music: "How do you play those stick things?"

So we showed them. I watched Miss Cook (the originator of the Young Bones Player Column) use her new improved bones teaching method to kids from grades 1 through 4. (I didn't see all grades this trip.) Make a Peace sign, put one bone into the V, press the bone against the palm, press the middle finger against the bone as if you have a big long fingernail, make sure it can't move, practice the doorknob twisting motion, add some side to side action of the arm, make an analogy between the stationary bone

and the side of a bell, then talk about the wiggly bone and where it goes, THEN we pass out the second bone and as soon as they put it in place they forget everything they just learned about the first bone: their fingers straighten out, instead of the doorknob twist they try a guitar strum, they complain that the bones aren't working, and bones fly all over the place.

However, with two of us there to show them individually, a class of 16 can get a decent bones lesson in about 15 minutes, partially because we send the successful ones out to teach classmates. Of course many kids would keep playing with the bones for an hour or more but School Time doesn't work that way. Depending on the grade, from a quarter to three quarters of the students are getting a decent click before Bones Away is called.

I learned (again, since this isn't my first bones in school experience) that it's very important to repeat over and over that the wrist has to be tilted "up" instead of down, and enough repeating will eventually sink in and they'll give up the guitar strum approach. But much faster than that is just reaching out and holding their hand in the right position and either moving it in the right motion or telling them to mirror your hand as you do it. This teaching technique is something I first did at the Croton River (folk music) Revival around 1982, the year after I met Percy D there and he taught me 2 handed style. I wanted to show Percy all the bones I'd made, but he wasn't there: in fact I was the only bones guy there and soon a crowd formed around me and I think I sold out my stock. If they can learn it, they will buy a pair, generally.

Which brings us back to the next thing the kids say, after they have mastered either the click or the roll or both: "Can you buy these? Where do you get them?" Now, the idea of selling stuff at a school must be handled properly. You're not there to make money selling bones. You have to see how the climate is and whether anyone would object. One school I was in was fine with it, another was not. This being my first time in the Norwood school system, I didn't want to risk any disharmony. In terms of what

bones we had the kids play, I made about 20 pair in a new shape (new for me, anyway) intended to fix the problem of low mass in small bones made for small hands. This was done by having one end about one eighth inch thick (between the fingers) and the other a half inch (the clapping end). Also, to minimize the risk of breaking they are not curved, but straight and along the grain. The design is very successful, a very good click can be achieved and the rolls are easier than my previous uniformly overly thick ones. Of course most of the kids put the thick end between their fingers, because that's what kids do.

What most drew the kids in to what I was doing in the concert with the bones was not the clicking or rolling themselves but the flashiness of some of the more florid or boisterous moves I did. In other words, it looks cool. A few of the more facile students were trying to master one of these moves by the time I left the school.

And now a little coda: the day after I was done at the school, I met and jammed with two Boston musicians/instrument makers. We were there to discuss minstrel style banjos and an african banjo-cousin (or ancestor) called ekonting, but Jay Moschella brought along his maple bones he made from scraps gleaned from baseball bat making. As he picked them up and started to play, he said he hadn't learned correctly yet, and to my utter amazement he got a respectable lick while using the guitar strum motion! It sounds similar to a spoons lick where you roll the spoons past your fingers on the way to your lap. Paul Sedgwick (the other musician, a friend of Ms. Cook and our host) and I later taught him the conventional roll and he was ecstatic about that, but I came away with some very unexpected knowledge, and I can no longer tell a kid that the guitar motion won't work. But I can still stay it's a lot harder and you can't get a continuous roll that way. I implored Jay to come to a Bones Fest and share this lick he developed, but by then he may have abandoned it for the regular motion. Meanwhile I'm going to try to master it.

You learn something new every day. *Adam Klein*

*(How Much Money Continued from page 1)*

scene attended our Saturday night public performance. The Bones Fest attendees were smokin' and impressed the visitors. A few weeks later I was approached to perform and teach at a Folklife Festival. I was approached for an elementary school festival (2 hours for \$50) and a fall festival where I was asked to walk the aisle and play and teach (this one for free.) ?????? Add my fees??????

After the later experience, I contacted the booking agent for our nine day Spring music festival and was hired for three days (\$100 a day for three hours work) as a street musician (hard work by the way.) This was followed by a return engagement to the Folklife Festival (3 days at \$150 a day), and a half day at our Children's Discovery Museum (?????). All in all I was paid almost \$1000, not enough to live on, but I was amazed that anyone would pay me to play rhythm bones. This experience gives me a base that I can use for future gigs.

Below are a few replies I received on the subject from members.

Bill Vits reports. "I've been paid to record just the bones in the past. I'm on a few Michigan CD's (Country & Bluegrass) just playing bones. (\$100-300/session) However, most of the time I'm playing bones along with other percussion. I consider bones my "secret weapon" as few working percussionists actively play them. On country gigs I'll play bones at the drum set with one hand while using a brush in the other while playing bass drum & hi hat. I also demonstrate them in my "Percussion Discussion" school program where I get the audience to snap & clap to Sweet Georgia Brown. I do this 45 minute program (which includes conga, xylophone, electronic drums & theremin) in schools, libraries and church basements for \$350 a show.

When I've soloed with the Grand Rapids Symphony I've been paid nicely for playing the bones (\$400 plus). I often worked in the bones on breaks in xylophone numbers. I made a duct tape holder in the rails of my xylophone so I could pick them up quickly.

I plan to start advertising myself for bones/alone programs, lessons &

workshops. Just a boom box & bones would make for a quick trip loading in! [This is what I, Wixson, uses too.]

I often joke that when I retire from the symphony I'll sell my pole barn full of noisemakers and travel around in a RV just playing the bones. One can dream, can't they (if I can afford to ever retire!).

Sharon Mescher replied: "In the fall of 2006, I created brochures that focused on telling Jerry's learning and experiences of playing the bones.

"Then, I did two things: First, I contacted the music director for all the western Iowa schools and told him about the bones and our playing as a team. He offered to send out our cover letter/brochures to 400 music teachers. This he could do free of charge as he would send the information on the traveling "mail" van.

"Second, I sent out our information to the surrounding counties' civic organizations and church groups. Because this was new territory for us, we decided to negotiate fees for playing. We continue to do this, as entertainment budgets vary according to each group. The church and school groups will tell us that their entertainment budgets are quite limited to what they can/will pay.

"Here is a brief history of our playing for 2007 - 2008. Local elementary school - \$50; 'Cultural Day' at a Catholic school - we played for free as the priest is our friend; middle school in the area - \$75; Presbyterian church group - \$50; Cattlemen's Annual Banquet - we asked for \$150 and the director told us we were too cheap! The first time we heard that!; played at a nursing home for free because our 97-year old aunt is a resident, and she had wanted us to play for some time; and played for Hy-Vee's "Spring Days" - \$100. (Hy-Vee is an Iowa supermarket store.)

"Our experience in playing for festivals has been that we are given entrance and parking tickets and, sometimes, meal vouchers.

"Jerry is quite confident in his playing; I am becoming more confident the more I play for others. So, my advice is that bones players take chances and play whenever possible."

Mitch Boss, who also only plays rhythm bones says; "Basically I make

a little money playing with The Snow Creek Old Tyme Band. We started 20 years ago practicing every Tuesday night (guitar, stand-up base, bingo, fiddle and bones) for our own amusement. We gradually started playing a couple of retirement homes, churches and other freebee stuff. Then people started asking use to play at private parties, birthdays, chicken stews, family gatherings, and political rallies'. It just seemed to grow a little at a time. Now the band gets \$200.00 for most gigs. Our band can make a total of around \$10,000.00 a year; that's \$2000.00 each.

"We have a following of Flat Foot dancers in the Western NC foot hills. Annette and I do a thing together once in a while; she teaches Tia Chi and I play a few numbers on the bones, wow, how wired can you get.

"In my humble opinion, unless you create some sort of one man show (see Spike Bones ) I'd say find or start a band playing what you like to play and stick with it. If you're looking to make a living playing bones I'd say you may be looking in the wrong direction. But, you can pick up a few bucks now and then and have a great time doing it."

Greg Burrows writes: "There are many ways to make a buck or two playing our favorite folk art instrument, the rhythm bones. The pay for bones playing varies as much as that for any other instrumentalist. From busking (playing on the street and then passing the hat) to a concert hall gig, the range of possibilities for professional engagements are huge. But in some ways, nothing beats playing for a bunch of kids free-of-charge and seeing their faces light up. Priceless.

"In my own experience, I have made \$10 and dinner/beers playing in Brooklyn restaurants, to about \$200 on good, crowded nights playing with bluegrass mandolin/Chassidic clarinet master Andy Statman in a great Brooklyn music venue called Barbès. I played a lot of bones with Andy (mostly extreme uptempo bluegrass/jazz blend--boy, did I get my endurance together there); but also performed on bodhran (non-standard technique/style), berimbau and other sounds.

"My biggest financial coup (for

which I'm still waiting for the check...I'm told it's in the mail) was recently earning [hopefully] \$600 for an advertising agency pitch for Campbell's Soup Co., in which an ad geek had envisioned a trio of us playing spoons, soup tins, pots, pans and yes, my prized Black Bart cow rib bones [made by BFXI host, Dave Boyles.]

"We rather gently clattered and grooved on this hodgepodge of sounds for a group of well-dressed Campbell's exec's. If the pitch is taken up by Campbells, it could lead to national TV commercials and other broad exposure of the instrument...fingers not-crossed but hopes are high! But I'm not quitting my day job just yet.

Mel Harvey reported what may be more typical for most of us, "I have played at several nursing homes, churches, AARP chapter meetings and a wood carver's meeting. When I play at local nursing homes I do not charge. If I go out of town 35 miles or more I charge \$35 which isn't much, but it pays gas and mileage

"The residents really enjoy the music and watching me play. I generally play for a hour or more. It is great to see residents that are some 80 or 90 years young enjoy that music and bone playing. They all thank me for coming, and that is worth more to me than to charge a lot for my playing."

Dutch Koop had this dream reply: "Three years ago while playing bones at a fiddle festival in Pennsylvania a director for a large folk festival asked if I would play bones for a 9 day festival and teach bones playing as the fest was about having fun and learning. I was paid \$2000 plus lodging. I put on at least 3 stage performances a day, gave lessons in a tent and worked as roving musician playing bones. Mostly I taught kids

"The second year I decided to play spoons and bones and have a big following on performing on spoons. My shingle (sign) reads Spoons & Bones.

"When you are a performer it is important that you play a variety of instruments, but I often play the bones against spoons and spoons like bones.

"I usually play Senior Citizens Homes and charge \$150 for an hour. If a band ask me to play I usually charge \$25.

"An important note here: I always

play for free drinks at bars.

"This year I had a gig with Artis the Spoon Man in Seattle WA and was paid \$70 for a 10 minute performance with him. "

Dave Hare reports; "I get paid between \$100 and \$25, when I get paid, to play the bones and percussion. The usual arrangement is that I get the same share as everyone in the band.

"The higher paying gigs are with mid 19th Century Band I play with called the Camp Lincoln String Band. I play bones and also play snare drum and tambo . I also play bones and various percussion instruments with a folk singing group by the name of The Pumpkin Hill Singers and a contra dance group The Parsnips and usually that is about \$2. I play rhythm bones five to ten percent of the time."

Here is Glenn Maxwell from Albuquerque, NM. "I play bones as a second instrument to my bodhran in a Celtic Group. Their are 6 of us total, and we play about 12 gigs per year from the International Balloon Fest to the Folk Fest, Zoo, Highland Games, concerts, bar gigs, and once in a while a wedding. We charge from \$300,00 to \$1000.00 plus hotel rooms for out of town gigs. Split by 6 and a sound guy and we don't make much as individuals. Bottom line—I bet I didn't make more than \$1300,00 last year. That's why I have a day job."

Michael Ballard shared this. "Perhaps the most important note is that I'm not trying to make a living as a musician. I make a pretty good living as a computer programmer and that lets me accept gigs that I might not otherwise. Also, I'm not only a Bones Player. I also play the Bodhràn (an Irish frame drum) and dabble in other kinds of percussion. When I get a paying gig, it is often with the expectation that I will bring an assortment of percussion with me.

"My best sources for getting gigs have been music festivals, renaissance faires and local jam sessions. People see me playing or teaching somewhere and ask if I would be interested in or available for a music festival, a party, a campaign event, a parade or whatever else. I do have a web site which includes a musician page but I don't get much action from that.

"I will often spend a few minutes

teaching an individual or a small group and I don't charge for that. If I'm hired to teach, the standard rate I ask for is \$25/hour plus travel expenses. From what I've heard, this is on the low side of typical for music lessons.

"For playing gigs, I've been known to play for just food and drink if the gig is local and I think it will be fun or might lead to other, more remunerative gigs. When I play as part of a band, often the band sells their services to whomever for a fixed price for an afternoon or evening of music. When I was playing regularly in San Diego, \$500 was a typical band price and we were usually four or five people so I'd get \$100 - \$125 for, typically, 4-6 hours of playing time.

When I play with Silverwood, our standard rate is \$50 per hour per musician. Now that I live on the north side of Los Angeles, I'm getting far fewer calls than I did in San Diego. There seems to be much less interest in traditional music in L.A. than there still is in San Diego.

"When I started working as a musician at the Southern California Renaissance Pleasure Faire, I got \$20 per day from the company plus whatever I got as a share of the tip basket playing on the street with other musicians. Over the years, the company budget has been slashed and slashed and slashed again. For the last few years, I've gotten nothing from the company and even the tips have been drying up. This year on good days I covered my lunch and dinner costs. There was only one weekend of the run that also covered my gas and motel costs.

"I know a few people who are struggling to make their living as musicians and their experiences in recent years have been at least as bad as mine. Some are finding it necessary to go back to doing other kinds of work at least part time just to make ends meet. I don't want to sound negative but I do want to paint an accurate picture. A lot of people are finding it necessary to tighten their belts to make ends meet and the expense of a live band vs. a DJ vs. just some recordings playing in the background is more and more a factor in

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*(How Much Money—Continued from page 5)*

party planning. Becoming part of a "house band" at a local pub may mean less dollars per night but it means a regular gig you can count on provided that the pub doesn't have an exclusivity clause in any contract you sign.

"I've been playing in public settings for about 25 years so I don't have any doubts about my level of skill or whether I'm worth the money I ask for. On the other hand, I am willing to negotiate, especially if I see a possibility the gig might lead to other gigs.

"Bottom line, you need to decide for yourself what you're worth and whether there may be times when you would be willing to accept something less or something different. It can be hard to put a dollar value on the food and drink you might receive at a gig and even harder to put a dollar amount on the PR value of a gig. These should be factors in your decision to accept or decline a gig.

"Don't be afraid to say no if someone offers you hot dogs and soda and expects you to spend five hours on the road to play for an hour. I've had this offer. I accepted the gig, not because of the food and drink, but because it was sponsored in part by the Irish Consulate in San Francisco. After the official festivities were over, I spent some time teaching Bones 101 to a group of guys in nice suits. It wasn't until after we were finished that I found out that those guys in nice suits were the Consul General and several of his staff."

Here are a few other ideas from members. Hire an agent who will take 10 percent if you get work, but they can get you work. Or, start out playing for free and if you are good, you could work into a paying gig.

More conclusions: In my experience, you get to play for a lot more people when you get paid. That's good exposure for yourself and the rhythm bones. Hosting a Bones Fest has unexpected paid gig side benefits. Things happen when you promote yourself. Contacting a booking agent worked for me. Performing at Bones Fests builds confidence.

The great flute/whistle player, Joanie Madden, performed in Chattanooga and after the performance I

asked her why she didn't have a rhythm bones player. Her response was interesting, "There are so few good ones." That is a challenge to us to reach a standard of performance such that musicians, like Joanie, invite us to play with them.

Joanie then said I should have joined her on-stage (can you believe that.) I would never do that cold, but I could have arrived early for the sound check, introduced myself and showed her what I can do. I'm betting she would have invited me on-stage for a song or two. I'm told that also works with the Chieftains.

For most of us, playing for money is not what our craft and Society is about. We play for the sheer joy of playing and to get people interested in rhythm bones such that they continue with the next generation. We are at our best when we teach. If we get paid doing what we love, well then, that's a bonus! *Steve Wixson*

## Recorded Bones Music

Here is a different kind of recorded rhythm bones music. Kay Cahill sent me a DVD titled *Dr. Horsehair's Old-Time Minstrels: Live at the Opry House*. It features member John Cahill on rhythm bones

The liner notes say: "Dr. Horsehairs' Old-Time Minstrels performed this concert at the Opry House near Williamson, GA in 1996. The group consisted of Old Doc Horsehair, Troy Weldon on guitar, Fiddling Toby Denhan on fiddle, Uncle John, John Wise on bull fiddle, Mr. Bones, John Cahill playing bones and manager and banjo player Sandy Bob Lee, Bob Flesher.

"The group performed for years in the Atlanta area and the old South which included 25 performances at the 1996 Olympics. During this, Uncle John was suffering with terminal cancer but made every show. Shortly after he went to be with his Lord.

Uncle John always played the part of Jenny in "Old King Crow." A few months later the four remaining members performed this live show at the Opry House. This was the first time Fiddling Toby portrayed Jenny and as you can see, gets his wig on crooked, not that anyone cared at this point in the show.

"This performance is also the first time this hard core bluegrass audience had ever been exposed to the likes of these characters, their music and antics. They were received extremely well and talked about for weeks afterwards. In 1998, the group disbanded."

From the back of the DVD; "Old Doc and his rowdy band on minstrels perform before a live audience. Dressed in authentic clothes of the 1850s, this long-time band from the Atlanta area performs 13 authentic minstrel songs with a fiddle made in the 1870s, an authentic minstrel banjo made in the 1850s, a replica 1840 Martin guitar with scroll peghead, and authentic minstrel bones.

"This show is upbeat, fast and raucous. They sure don't let the grass grow under their feet! It has all the humor and skits of an original minstrel show and a little history thrown in to boot. This is a show you will

watch over and over.”

The songs on the DVD are; Camp-town Races/Oh! Susanna, Angelina Baker, Circus Jig, Ober de Mountains, Nicodemus Johnson, Old King Crow, Boatman’s Dance, Old Rosln the Beau, Get Along Josie, Who Dat Knockin’ at de Doe!, Dixie’s Land and Shortin’ Bread.

John Cahill suffered a stroke a few years back that slowed down his rhythm bones playing. The complication included hearing loss and dementia, however, he attended most of the recent Bones Fests. Kay says his condition has worsened and he hardly plays bones anymore. You can contact John at bones6300@bellsouth.net.



John ‘Bones’ Cahill caricature by ??????????.  
See real photograph on Page 8.

To buy the DVD, contact Dr. Horsehair Music Co., P.O., Box, Moreno Valley, CA 92552. Check out his website (DrHorsehair.com) for related items. The DVD costs \$15.

## Mary B. Seel A Boone for Rhythm Bones Playing

Mary Batchelor Seel, is glued or screwed together because her bones did not come with connective tissue; thus she has had four back fusions, both knees replaced and both shoulders completely replaced—one in

January 2007; so no wonder at almost 83, she says her bones rattle, but it does not keep her from “playing the bones”.

This fascination with bones began when she was in the fourth grade and heard a fellow from Rock Hill, S.C. named Jimmy White playing the bones. She went home and carved two pairs out of flooring. From that time on, Jimmy and she would have jam sessions every summer in Montreat, N.C. He could imitate a train in a way that she never quite mastered.

They swapped ideas until she left the US for South Korea to serve 37 years as a medical missionary with her beloved violinist surgeon husband. They called him the “sublime” and she was the “ridiculous.”

Her Dad was from the Ramsay Clan from Bo’ness, Scotland, and the first of his family to be born in the United States; thus he encouraged her to dance the fling and compete with the bones.

Her mother was a direct descendent of Daniel Boone. She was required to memorize several pieces on the piano, after which they let her study drums using instruction from Haskell Harr. Gene Kruppa was one of her favorites in the Big Band era having heard him in person. Percussion study led her to the tympani and other noise makers.

She was featured on the bones in Ravel’s Bolero--dropping one of 4 bones in each hand or changing the pitch on each movement to keep the same beat from becoming boring. Every Christmas, she delighted in playing the tympani in Handel’s Messiah.

While in high school, she played in an all-girl swing orchestra, the orchestra and marching band and used bone playing to raise money for selling war bonds.

Her first radio appearance was for WBT in Charlotte, NC, after winning a competition. Her first TV experience was on CBS in Korea.

She played ping pong with either hand, so why not the bones; so she tried different rhythms with each hand. Then she used all four slots between her fingers for four bones in each hand, just for a change. She even knows how to rattle one bone.

She rode horses in Tennessee and realized how closely you could come to the sound of a canter or a gallop and invented routines around this.

When she heard the cicadas at night in her mountains, she reversed the bones, and there they were singing, “Katie did” and “Katie didn’t.”

She developed techniques for teaching the bones which she had fun sharing with children around the world and with Aaron Plunkett.

She found she tended to give away too many bones to prospective players. She also plans to carry her bones with her in the future, rather than having to use “soup spoons” to demonstrate the sound.

While interning in Medical Technology at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, she was interviewed by the Times Picayune newspaper, thus was asked to make some real cow-rib bones which she still has. She loves the sound, but not the feel. Her favorites are rosewood.

In Korea, where they were privileged to build a 660-bed hospital, they employed a young cripple boy as a helper and apprentice in the Limb Shop (prostheses) in their Rehabilitation Center. He made her last sets of bones from blocks of hardwood she brought from the States.

Recently she decided to see what she could find on the Web about bones other than replacements and learned about the Rhythm Bones Society in which she is now a member.

She said that just buying bones for a program in April, she has met some outstanding percussionists and bone players which has been a delight and wants to express her gratitude for the warm welcome. She doesn’t plan on quitting “rattling dem bones” in any rhythm any time soon.

Mary told me about the just mentioned program in April.

“Let me start telling of our unique day with elementary grade students by saying, ‘I had the most fun!’ My accompanist, Gayle, and I arrived at this lovely new elementary school at the invitation of Sharon August, the head of their Music Program, really not sure what we were going to do. Sharon was very organized and the children exceptionally well mannered.





Rhythm Bones on display at the Exhibit Hall of Musical Instruments of Chinese Nationalities Museum in Shanghai, China

*(Continued from page 7)*

They filed in promptly sitting on the floor in about 4 rows of about ten to twelve. Gayle and I treated them to a bit of bone history and a little rendition of fun rhythms and imitations (such as horse gallops) with the bones.

“The first row stood up front with a pair of bones in each hand. I had Home Depot cut long strips of wood into seven inch lengths so each child would have two pairs of bones. They had their instructions as we had practiced waving both hands good-bye with elbows by their side and then bringing their fingers down on the

bones, but not their wrists. It was highly emphasized that the #1 secret was <sup>3</sup>Don't let that bone next to your thumb move AT ALL! Then everyone waved good-bye again and I went down the row placing my hand over their predominant hand to be sure they had the feel. You would hear an occasional, “I've got it” and more, “Show me, I want to do



Mary B. Seel playing her rhythm bones



John Cahill performing in costume with Dr. Horsehair's Old-Time Minstrel Band at Six

that” and the rare but beautiful triplet. The next row came up with Sharon keeping time. It was constant ‘Pete and Repeat’ at 30 minute intervals for over 3 hours. One little round faced boy looked up saying, “That was awesome!” I knew we had a future bone player.” *Steve Wixson*

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 10, No. 3 2008

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## Executive Director's Column

As Bones Fest XII approaches we are again faced with the glorious possibilities of a new Bones Fest in a new location. In the thriving metropolis of St. Louis, in the 'Show Me' state of Missouri, Bones Fest XII promises to be a great celebration of our nation's history, with the bones firmly in the center of attention. We have an opportunity like no other, to ride the great Mississippi in a River Boat, and play the bones under the spectacular arch of St. Louis.

But this bones Fest represents more than just another great party, with lots of bones playing opportunity, it's a chance for us bone players to relive a part of our own history, and show the people of Missouri that rhythm bones continue

to live and thrive in our modern world. It's a chance too, for rhythm bone players in the central part of our country to experience the camaraderie of brother and sisterhood we have all come to expect of Bones Fests.

But it also represents a bit of a gamble. We're betting that we can step outside the comfort zones where we have held bones fests in the past, into a completely new area and environment, and you the membership will respond with the fervor we have come to know from Bones Fests. We're betting that the rhythm bone players who live out in Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nebraska will be as excited about our foray into their

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Bones and the Chieftains: a Musical Partnership

What must surely be the most recognizable traditional Irish music group in the world, The Chieftains, through their travels, have spread their music and instruments across the globe. Traditional Irish instruments such as the harp and Billycan Pipes are now recognizable instruments in many countries, and nestled firmly inside the group of instruments associated with the Chieftains, are the bones.

Bone playing can be heard on a great number of Chieftain recordings, and even seen on the cover of one of their albums. Great bone players like Tim Riley from Mystic CT., and Rob the bones' Coppard, street performer and musician living in Bantry, Co. Cork Ireland were inspired to play the bones from listening to their albums.

I list myself as someone inspired to play the bones by Chieftain recordings when I impulsively purchased Chieftains 5 in 1976, never having heard the music, but seeing the bones on the cover, I had to hear what they sounded like (see photograph on Page 8).

It's true that the bones are not featured on every track, but rather are sprinkled through out the recordings like sugar on your morning cereal, or parmesan cheese on spaghetti. Bone playing can be found on over 30 Chieftain recordings, some to a greater extent than others, but all with their signature taste and dynamics.

The musical architect responsible for forging the Chieftains and their musical arrangements is

Paddy Maloney. In 1962, Paddy, an uilleann piper from Dublin, along with Martin Fay, fiddle, Seán Potts, tin whistle, Micheal Tubridy, flute, and a friend of Paddy's, bodhrán player, David Fallon met to record a one-time album for Garech a Brún's Claddagh label under the title of *The Chieftains*. The musicians were already familiar

*(Continued on page 7, Column 2)*



Chieftains 3 CD cover. From left in front, Peadar Mercier, bodhrán and bones, Martin Fay, fiddle, Paddy Maloney, uilleann pipes, Sean Keane, fiddle, and in back, Sean Potts, tin whistle and Michael Tubridy, flute. Produced by Shanachie Records Corp. Photograph by Claud Virgin

## Editorial

The lead article in this issue is on the Chieftains and their rhythm bones playing. As Steve Brown writes, he was seriously influence by their rhythm bones playing. A list of their CDs with rhythm bones is included. Wouldn't it be great if we could get them to release a CD compilation of their rhythm bones tracts.

One of my personal favorites is *Crowley's Reel* from the album *James Galway and the Chieftains* which showcases Martin Fay's clean and crisp playing style.

A few words for this article were taken from the Website of the Quarter.

Another installment of Beth Lenz' thesis on the History of Bones in the US is included in this issue.

We've made progress on completing the Russ Myers' memorial project and you can soon view the result on your computer.

How many of you remember the Frazier clan at Bones Fest VII in Louisville. Norris Frazier died last year and his daughter sent his obituary and some personal notes.

There are two reports on this year's NTCMA Festival and Contests. The Mescher Trio performed and taught two Bones Workshops. Dennis Riedesel attended his first National Traditional Country Music Festival and competed in the Bones and Spoons Contest. Yes, after two years there was again a contest. Thanks to Dennis and others for competing and making it happen. I asked Dennis for a short article, but as you will see, he had so much to say about it that a few words did not work for him.

## Letter from Norris Frazier's Daughter

[Editor's note. Norris and his wife attended Bones Fest VII in Louisville and a dozen or more of his family came early and surprised them as they entered the doors of the Kentucky Theater where the Fest was held. Most of the family played rhythm bones and performed for Fest attendees. The DVD mentioned below will be shown

at Bones Fest XII in October.]

I am so pleased and touched that you cared enough to include Dad's obituary in your next newsletter.

Also, I already had in mind sending you the memorial DVD I put together for the funeral service. It's all video clips of him in action, no photos, just action footage with lots of "bones" clips. I thought you and whoever else wants to see it would really enjoy it. If you could email me your address I'd be glad to send you the DVD.

There's one clip of him doing the drum part for the song "Wipe Out" on his bones that will show you how good he really was.

When he came to the bones festival in Louisville, he had slowed down quite a bit and I've always felt that you all didn't really get to see what he could do! He sure enjoyed the festival and I wish I could have been there along with everybody else.

I'd also like to mention that at Dad's memorial service we opened it with our family members performing *I'll Fly Away*. We included three bones players, the jews harp, fiddle, piano and two singers. You should have seen the heads turn! It was great, and we were told by some that it was the most upbeat funeral they'd ever attended. It was truly Dad.

Thanks for thinking of Dad and God bless.... *Sandy Riggers*

*(Executive Director Column - Continued from page 1)*  
part of the country as we are to go there. And we're betting that even though the country has a bit of an economic downturn, it's not going to stop us from doing what we always do, play the rhythm bones.

Spike Bones and Scott Miller are working tirelessly not only to make a festive event, but to make sure its affordable for all our members.

And while you hear about the woe's of the airline industry, I was able to book the cheapest flight of any bones fest I have ever attended.

So practice those rhythm bones, pack that suit case, and prepare yourselves for the wonder's of a state placed smack in the middle of our great country, because it's time for us to 'Show Me' and all of the great mid-west what the rhythm bones are all about. *Steve Brown*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Notice of Vote to Change By-Laws

At the Board meeting at Bones Fest XI, a motion was made to amend Article VI of our By-Laws so that our fiscal and tax year co-insides with the calendar year. Currently our fiscal year runs from October to September of the following year. For this motion to be adopted, it must be voted on by the membership at our General Membership meeting at Bones Fest XII and passed by at least a three-fourth vote.

The original October start date was selected because our Fests were in September and it made sense to start the new year right after the Fest. More recently Fests have been held in the summer making the October date not relevant and confusing to members.

If the amendment passes, one result will be five issues of the newsletter this year only instead of four.

This is the formal announcement for the vote as required by our By-laws. *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

# Norris Frazier Obituary

Norris Frazier, 80, a longtime Kamiah, Idaho resident, passed away on Sunday, Dec. 23, 2007, at the Grangeville Health and Rehabilitation Center after a long, hard-fought battle with congestive heart failure. He is now "rattling the bones" at heaven's ongoing jam session, leaving us with a lifetime of loving memories and a legacy of courage and stubborn determination to survive in spite of the health challenges he faced.

Norris was well known in the region as a talented musician, playing his banjo and bones to the delight of many audiences. He shared this talent by teaching bones classes to adults and children. He was also a talented woodworker and made sets of bones and many other creations for his family and area residents.

His talent as a bones player is perhaps best summed up with this quote from his niece, Deanna's eulogy:

"I loved the way he played music. What most set him apart as a musician was what he could do with a pair of rattle bones--nothing more than carved hardwood -- often carved by Uncle Norris. At first glance, they would appear to be the last instrument a person would select for the purpose of making music. But in the talented hands of Uncle Norris, the result was an incredible and intricate rhythm of clackity clack in time to a song or even by itself that was amazing enough to stop you in your tracks."

## Bones Fest XII Update

The Bones Fest XII Announcement and the Registration Form was emailed to members a few weeks ago. There is a paper copy enclosed with this newsletter for you procrastinators.

The are suites still available at the Crowne Plaza Hotel and dorm rooms at the University. Check the back of the enclosed Registration Form for details. Our host, Spike Bones, has lots of details on [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com).

Spike is introducing some new things Bones Fest XII. Come help make it happen.

Bones Fest XII, October 16 to 19, 2008 in St. Louis will be a celebration of our 12 great Bones Fests. Since you receive the "Rhythm Bones Player" you are also a Rhythm Bones Society member and enthusiastic bones player. You are the faithful and will be at the heart of our presentations for the public. My wish is that you all can attend. Whether you attend or not, please put the word out about BFXII on your personal networks (in person, phone call, E-mail or Snail-mail). Tell everyone go to [www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com) for details and registration information. If you know anyone that does not have web access please forward us their address and we can mail them information. If you are unable to attend, send Steve Wixson a 3 to 5 min video that we can play at the fest.

For those that can attend, here are a few notes from the Captain:

1. In October Missouri may be hot or cold or both. Bring a Jacket, comfortable shoes, and a small back or fanny pack for our march to the arch. For anyone not wanting to walk too far, there will reserved parking close to all venues.

2. We encourage any costuming Saturday afternoon for our march to the arch and riverfront revelry! We are choosing the era around 1870 when all the performing bones players would have to walk the 18 blocks from the train station to the riverboat. But remember we are bones players and not reactors! So have fun, be comfortable and anything goes.

3. There are still special bones suites available at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. The Plaza has now offered to extend the special rates to include Oct 16 and 19Th for anyone wanting to attend the pre or post fest events. We are hoping that at least 5 of the 10 suites will be the 2 room and a kitchen suites, and can participate in a round robin receptions, Saturday 5-7 PM.

The Captain's suite will feature a chance to meet Queen Madaline (my mom), Mark Twain and Lewis and Clark. The volunteers will deliver all supplies and refreshments to the hosts suites. These Suites are large enough to party, play bones, and watch bones videos.

4. If you fly and need to make a hasty departure Sunday you may want to check out the airport hotels. The METRO train has two stations at the airport and only 5 minutes to the UMSL south campus stop site of our venue. It takes 30 to 45 minutes to take the train on to the riverfront. Also you can get special deals for both hotels and air fair on sites like [Obitz.com](http://Obitz.com). The Airport Dury Inn has offered us a deal similar to AAA or AARP discounts.

5. Remember to bring a T-shirt, vest or any other garment you would like a BFXII logo affixed to.

Register now so you will receive one of our 50 gift bags.

All aboard Bones Fest XII, *Spike Bones*, (773) 787-7778, [spike-bones2002@yahoo.com](mailto:spike-bones2002@yahoo.com)

## Bones Fest XIII Proposals Requested

Your Board of Directors is seeking proposals for Bones Fest XIII next year. If you are interested, please email me and I will send you a *Bones Fest Host Guide* that will explain what is required. Talk to any previous host and they will tell you how much fun and rewarding it is.

Please respond quickly so your proposal can be discussed at this year's Fest. At this stage, a verbal proposal is all that is needed. *Steve Wixson*, [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net)

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XII.** October 17-19, 2008. Details in this newsletter and at [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com).

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest.** August 31-September 6, 2009

## Website of the Quarter

There are many website where you can learn more about The Chieftains. One good website is [members.shaw.ca/chieftains](http://members.shaw.ca/chieftains) where you read their history, see a complete list of their albums and more.



## NTCMA 2008 Update

The results of the 2008 NTCMA Bones and Spoon Contest are in. Kenny Myers, who accompanies the Mescher Trio, won first place. Kenny, inspired by the Meschers, started playing after last year's Festival.

This rhythm bones playing inspired Magdalene Biesanz to write a story for the Friday, August 29, 2008 issue of their newspaper titled *No strings, no mallets -- musical bones make simplicity sound good*. Below are some extracts courtesy of the Le Mars Daily Sentinel.

"He's not a doctor. He doesn't study dinosaurs. But Jerry Mescher likes to play with bones. The musical instrument that is.

"Mescher, his wife Sharon and his sister Bernie Worrell are clicking and clacking away at the Old Time Country and Bluegrass Music Festival this week at the Plymouth County Fairgrounds in Le Mars.

"They're preserving a tradition, Mescher says, and they're passing it on to others. On Thursday they taught a group of about 30 people the bones basics (see two photographs on Page 8.)

"If you can hold the bones, you can play the bones," he said, positioning two small flat wooden sticks in each hand. "And playing them is all in the wrist."

"The bones are probably one of the oldest instruments at the old time music festival. Versions of them were found in graves dating as far back as 2000 B.C.

"They used to use real bones," Sharon said. "Some people still do use cow shinbones or rib bones."

"In the Middle Ages, the bones were used by people for spiritual music and by lepers, warning others of their approach.

"The instrument was likely brought to the United States by the first settlers from Scotland, England and Ireland, Sharon said.

"Jerry Mescher and his sister, Bernie, grew up hearing their dad Albert play. [See Volume 8, Number 4 for a more complete story on the Mescher Tradition.]

"Albert kept it in mind, then finally found a fellow who knew what the bones looked like, so he made Albert strips of wood out of old pitchfork handles.

"Later, he met a man that knew how to hold the instrument, but not play it.

"From there, Albert taught himself.

"He'd sit down with the old self-player piano -- there were no CDs or record players back then, but every home had a self-player piano," Jerry said.

"Jerry also taught himself.

"I made my bones out of peach crates -- my mom canned peaches -- and I'd play them to the polka music on the radio, three times a day for 15 minutes," he said. "It takes the three Ds. Desire, determination and discipline. But if you don't have the love for it, you're not going to have the discipline."

"Most sets of bones wind up in the drawer after people buy them, Jerry said.

"Don't let frustration set in," he urged the crowd, then he and his wife and sister took the crowd step by step through how to hold and play them.

\*Make a fist, and bend your wrist up at about a 90 degree angle.

\*The first bone is stationary, held between the index and middle finger, right down the middle of the palm, and squeezed tight.

\*The second bone is held between the middle and ring finger, with the ring finger acting as a spring when the wrist moves, moving the second bone to click against the first.

\*Turn the wrists out and down, letting the second bone hit the first.

"Mescher Bones has more information and songs on their website, mescherbones.com.

"People of all ages joined the workshop to learn. Jerry's wife said she learned just a few years ago.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm missing out on all the fun,' so during harvest, out in the tractor, I practiced by myself," she said.

"Now she's got it down.

"Lori Cloud, a visitor at the music festival from Anthon, stopped in at the workshop after she heard the trio -- dubbed Mescher Bones -- play.

"I think I'll get it," she said, holding

two of the wooden strips in her hand. "It's kind of like snapping, the way you move your wrist."

"The sound, she said, is like tap dancing.

Cloud said she was glad she came to the lesson.

"I think," she said, "it's a lost art."

## Dennis Riedesel's Reports on his NTCMA Experience

I cannot attend Bone Fest XII this year because of a board meeting I have to attend. So I used my Bone Fest funds to attend this year's NTCMA festival in Le Mars, Iowa.

I arrived Friday afternoon and spent the afternoon and evening setting up my backpacking camp (tent and camping gear small enough to carry in my luggage aboard the plane) and then visited the different stages and jam sessions. There were two outdoor stages and five indoor stages with a new 'act' every 15 or 30 minutes on each stage.

As I was walking around the different venues, I heard bones rattling so I made a beeline straight to that building. I said to myself, "Self, I know that bones routine; that's the Meschers!" Sure enough, as I entered the building, Jerry, Sharon, and Bernie were putting the finishing touches to a Bones Workshop. We visited and then joined several jam sessions the rest of the afternoon and evening.

The first thing I did when I got to the festival was to enter the bones competition. I was a bit concerned because I was only the second one to sign up. That held true for most of Saturday, but Jerry insisted that he could get the minimum of five bones players to sign up so we could have the competition Saturday evening.

Through out the entire day Saturday, I boned in on various jam sessions whenever there were not any stage acts I wanted to watch and listen to.

For the bones competition, we had to find our own 'live' music accompaniment and in one three hour long jam



session I was interested in a young, excellent banjo picker. I asked him to play for me and he agreed. At a later jam session he was joined by a young friend of his that played a very, very, very good guitar and I asked if he would also join me on stage for the competition.

I happened to pick the number that made me the first to perform so I got on stage with my two 'pick up less than an hour before' players. However, the guitar player came on stage with a mandolin and I thought to myself, "OK, Lets see what this kid has on the mandolin." Talk about being lucky and picking up two of the better players at the entire festival!!!

But just a couple of problems, I had to bone to three songs and we had not picked out what songs to play!. We settled on a bluegrass version of *Red-wing*., but I don't know what I did--I was boning on automatic--don't know how many of my licks I was able to demonstrate.

The second song was (again a bluegrass version) of *Grandfather's Clock* and I think I did OK--at least I was able to catch the 'Tick-Tocks' in the song and do that on the bones. Also for this piece, I played my stone age bones which I had made from the ivory of a mammoth tusk (I know these are stone age because the mammoth has been extinct for 10 to 12 thousand years.)

For the third piece, I asked the players to play a waltz so I could demonstrate the three bone waltz rhythm I have developed.

The organization would not release the results of the competition until the final performances on Sunday evening but I had to leave to catch the plane back to Texas. I know I came in at least in sixth place because that is how many bones players were in the competition.

I want to finish this with a short description of a 'musical moment' that I experienced after the bones competition Saturday evening. I went back to the jam session and found some of the best players at the festival playing. Jerry was jamming along so I just sat on the sidelines and watched.

I started my music career learning to play cornet while in the fourth

grade. In between the Sophomore and the Junior year of high school, I taught my self to play tuba and played that the rest of my high school and early college years. In college, I taught myself to play string bass, played that in the college band and then played bass violin in our local symphony for the next ten years.

Since then I have been playing a wash tub bass with a lever at the top of the neck to change the tension of the string for the different bass notes. So I have had some experience in the bass playing world.

Remember my guitar, mandolin player--he was playing the bass but Oh how he could play the bass. The players were passing around the melody line and they passed it to this bass player. The song was "Grandfather's Clock" and this kid played a bluegrass version of the melody of *Grandfather's Clock* on the bass!! This made my trip to Iowa worthwhile!!!

Steve wanted this to be short, but I had to tell the story. One good thing for me--it has taken me so long to write this that hurricane Ike has turned away from us and seems to be heading north with landfall above Houston--hope he doesn't turn South and take aim at me again! *Dennis Riedesel*

## Russ Myers' Memorial

A memorial for Russ Myers was established after his death (See Volume 5, Number 2 for a story on him.) The Possum Ridge String Band gave us copies of their CD with Russ playing bones and telling stories asking only that recipients donate toward this memorial. About \$400 was received.

The Board approved the purchase of a TV/DVD that will be placed in the Historical Society building in Madison County, VA where Russ lived. Mel Mercier and I are working on a video that will be played on the TV/DVD as well as on our [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. This video highlights Russ' bones career and includes lots of video, photographs and audio of him playing bones and telling stories. I will bring a draft of the video to Bones Fest XII. *Steve Wixson*

## History of Bones in the US—Part 4

[Part 1 of this thesis appeared in the Vol 8, No 2 issue of the newsletter. Part 2 appeared in Vol 8, No 4 along with the Table of Contents for the entire thesis. Part 3 appeared in Vol 9, No 3.]

The final musical context involving the bones to be discussed here is the instrumental dance music of Appalachia. Documentation of this tradition, especially documentation which mentions the bones, is difficult to find. There are several reasons for this. First of all. This music is part of an oral tradition. Information has been passed from musician to musician through word-of-mouth, not through the use of written materials.

Secondly, instrumental dance music of Appalachia seems to have escaped the notice of music scholars. What limited materials do exist touch only briefly on Appalachian instrumental dance music of this time period; their main focus is on the commercial development of "hillbilly music" or the "old time string bands" of the 1920's and '30's, a genre which gradually evolved into what is now known as country and western music.

The accounts that do exist mention the repertoire of Anglo American dance tunes only as part of the repertoire of "old time string bands" recorded by record companies in the early 1920's. Although some features of Appalachian dance music are preserved on these recordings, most often the recorded performances feature a more elaborate instrumentation than one would have encountered in the Appalachian area. Furthermore, the introduction of the guitar to dance music in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century brought a shift from a non-harmonic style to one harmonically based. Recordings made during the early 1920's tend to catch the emergence of the new harmonic style rather than preserve the older non-harmonic style.

Thirdly, there is a lack of information about instrumental musical practices in seventeenth-, eighteenth-

*(Continued on page 6)*

(Continued from page 5)

and nineteenth-century Appalachia due to its isolation from mainstream American culture. As has been pointed out earlier, the Appalachian Mountains were populated primarily by the illiterate lower classes of British society and their descendents. They tended to avoid urban centers where they might face the same problems encountered in Great Britain and settled in remote areas, keeping to themselves. Musical styles I present in the rural South, including Appalachia, did not become widely known by the rest of the country until the early 1920's when the recording industry stumbled onto them.

Despite a lack of indisputable evidence that the bones were a part of Appalachian instrumental dance music in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the use of bones in the performance of Appalachian dance music today suggests otherwise. Tunes found in Appalachia include those that are pentatonic or modal in character and imply a non-harmonic style. Less common are hornpipes, reels, and jigs, whose melodic outlines clearly imply ties with common-practice harmonic style. Both types of tunes are of British origin and have been performed in Appalachia since British immigrants settled there. Today both types of tunes are ~ performed on the fiddle and/or banjo, or in combination with one or more of the following instruments: guitar, hammer dulcimer, bones, and string bass. The fiddle and bones are still commonly used in the British Isles for the performance of the same basic repertoire found in Appalachia today.

It is evident that the music of black slaves, minstrel performers and Appalachian musicians have something in common:

The similarities between the early minstrel song and some of the oral-tradition music of the southern Appalachians are so numerous and striking as to be unquestionable. Less clear is the sequence of events: whether the minstrel song was the progenitor of this sort of "mountain music," or vice versa; and just when the banjo passed from black American to white.

The bones, triangle, and tambourine were part of the caricature of

blacks that white men created to entertain other white men. The supposition that the early minstrel theatre was modeled on improvised slave entertainments is credible but not yet proven.

The above quotes by prominent musicologists suggest possible ties between the music of minstrel performers, Appalachian musicians and black slaves. On closer examination, one finds similarities in repertoire, instrumentation and playing styles in the music of these three groups of people.

Musicians in all three contexts mentioned above played many of the same tunes; one need not look far to find an example. "Turkey in the Straw" was the tune most often cited by ex-slaves in the narratives collected by the W.P.A. in the 1930's, Charles Hamm points out the use of the same tune by minstrels and Appalachian musicians:

Recent research has identified most of these tunes [i.e., minstrel tunes] as coming from oral-tradition Anglo American music [i.e., that which is found among musicians in Appalachia]; "Zip Coon," for instance, was sung by both Farrell and Dixon in 1834 to one of the most venerable of all Anglo-American melodies, best known in the present century as "Turkey in the Straw.

While many early minstrel tunes had Anglo-American roots, later performers used songs composed explicitly for minstrelsy such as Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" and Dan Emmett's "Dixie. Both types of tunes have been recovered from Appalachia and were also known by southern blacks in the mid-nineteenth century.

The instrumentation used by black musicians, minstrel performers and Appalachian musicians also had something in common--the use of bones with fiddle and sometimes banjo. The earliest references to blacks playing bones are from the mid-nineteenth century. The bones were probably played with fiddle in Appalachia as early as the seventeenth century when British immigrants settled there. When the banjo reached Appalachia in the nineteenth century, it was often used with the bones-fiddle combination.

In addition to the use of bones,

fiddle and banjo in the standard minstrel quartet, the hammer dulcimer was sometimes used in minstrelsy with banjo and bones. It has also been present in Appalachia since the eighteenth century and used in combination with various instruments, among them fiddle, banjo and bones.

The three musical contexts under discussion here also have playing styles in common. The oldest style of banjo playing in Appalachia, known as "frailing" or "clawhammer" style, utilizes the same techniques and achieves the same sounds as early minstrel banjo playing. Following is Charles Hamm's description of this style of banjo playing:

There are no chords; the style consists of melodic elaboration of a tune, or patterns of running notes acting as an accompaniment to a melody played by a fiddle, sung by the banjo player, or played on the banjo itself.

The fiddle in both Appalachia and in the context of minstrelsy was played in a style similar to the banjo style described by Hamm above. As with the banjo, techniques used by fiddlers in both traditions were quite similar and produced the same type of sound: the upper strings were used to play the melody while the lower strings acted as drones.

Pinpointing the playing styles of black musicians is more difficult to do than for the other two musical contexts already discussed, but may still be done with a certain degree of success. By the end of the seventeenth century, black fiddlers commonly played for the entertainment of both whites and blacks. Dances included European dances associated with the cultured classes--the minuet, waltz and cotillion--as well as "country dances" done to music adapted from that of Great Britain's lower classes. This same class of people included immigrants who settled in Appalachia. Thus black slaves in the New World knew some of the same tunes as did British immigrants in the Appalachians. Although no documentation exists, one can reasonably assume that the tunes blacks were taught to play, at the very least, slightly resembled the playing style of Great Britain's lower classes, where the music origi-

nated.

There is little documentation on the banjo style of black slaves. Yet one may reasonably assume that it had elements in common with the banjo styles of Appalachian musicians and minstrel performers since the banjo was first brought to America by African slaves. Initially, any contact whites had with the banjo would have been through contact with black slaves.

The presence of common factors among the music of Appalachian musicians, southern blacks and minstrel musicians suggests interaction among the three groups. Although all groups experienced change due to interaction with each other, the traditions associated with southern blacks and Appalachian musicians had been in existence long before the birth of minstrelsy. An examination of southern black and Appalachian traditions reveals what musical resources were present in each tradition, and suggests what components of these two traditions might have been borrowed by minstrelsy.

Black musicians in the South had access to the banjo (from Africa), the fiddle (from Europe), and music brought from both continents. *Beth Lenz*. Copyright by Beth Lenz, 1989. Used with permission.

## Bones Fest XII

October 17-19, 2008

St. Louis, MO

Host: Spike Bones

*Co-Host: Scott Miller*

Registration Form Included  
in this Newsletter

Contact Spike at  
773-787-7778 or  
spikebones2002@yhoo.com  
for more information

*(Chieftains and Bones—Continued from page 1)*

with each others from playing together in Seán Ó Riada's folk orchestra, Ceoltóirí Cualann, and from various sessions in and around Dublin since the late 1950s. The album reflected a new approach to playing traditional Irish music through interpretation and arrangement. An album featuring just instruments playing music was considered a rarity in the 1960's.

I caught up with Paddy as he finished lunch on a bright, and beautiful (at least in New England) Labor Day afternoon. He graciously agreed to reminisce about the bones and his musical journey.

Paddy's earliest memories of the bones were as a child, "I must have been 8 or 9, we used to make them out of slate, find two that went together." He does remember seeing them played in early films, but not at sessions. Paddy was drawn to percussion instruments, and remembers "an old character playing two spoons on a tin milk can", and, later, when he was about 13 he played the drums.

Ronnie McShane was the first bone player he played in a group with, and he remembers Ronnie as a "very good bone player". Ronnie played both in Ceoltoiri Cullenann, and later with the Chieftains on "5" and Bonnapart's Retreat. Ronnie toured Australia with the Chieftains, "He was a very funny guy, quite a character" Paddy remembers. [See Volume 7, Number 1 for a more complete article on Ronnie.]

Peadar Mercier was the first bones and bodhran player with the Chieftains, recording #'s 2-5 with the group, and the ground breaking recording "Tin Whistles" with both Paddy, and Sean Potts.

Peadar was born in Cork, Ireland in 1914, and did not begin to play the bodhran and bones until the 1950s. His son, Mel Mercier, said, "Unfortunately, we don't know how my dad started playing the bones."

He was invited by the composer, Sean O Riada to join his m folk orchestra music ensemble, Ceoltoiri Chualainn, in the early 1960s. In 1966 he joined The Chieftains. He performed and recorded with the group until 1976, becoming the first ever

professional bodhrán and bones player. His compelling motor rhythms added great drive and color to the Chieftain's sound and his influence as a bodhrán player is unmatched to this day. His one-handed style of bones playing is heard to great musical effect on the Chieftains early albums.

During these early recordings, the bones were often used as a punctuation point to the music, as they attempted to create a musical atmosphere. "the bones had a sensual sound" Paddy described, "an eerie sort of feeling" like during the Battle of Aurling on Chieftains 4, or on counter point on the Morning Dew on the same recording. Paddy remembers Peadar as being able to play bones with both hands, quite an aberration in Ireland, although on recordings he would always play with one hand.

Bonaparte's Retreat, a musical retelling of Napoleon, effectively uses the bones as a counter point to the bodhrán, similar to Paddy's use on the Morning Dew. This recording received much acclaim, and Paddy has recently completed an Orchestral version which is slated for performance in several venues.

Martin Fay took over bone playing duties with the band from Chieftains 7 until his retirement in 2002.

Martin was born in Dublin in 1938. He played classical violin but was always drawn to traditional music. He played in Sean O Riada's Celotoiri Cualann orchestra and became a founding member of the Chieftains. I plan to research and write a more complete article on Martin and his bones playing for a future issue.

Paddy said "he was a very good bone player, and he still is." He describes his playing as very precise.

Paddy relates liking the sound of the bones and feels they are particularly good for creating atmosphere in the music. He related being particularly impressed with Mel Mercier's work with the bones and how he has really, "gone to town" in his development and use of the bones. He does want to use the bones in the future, and sees a place where this percussion instrument can continue to flavor and enhance traditional Irish music. *Steve Brown*



Bernie Worrell in the left photo and Sharon Mescher in the right photo from the Meshcer Trio teach one of two Bones Workshops at the National Traditional Country Music Festival. Also in the left photograph on the right is Kenny Myers who won the 2008 Bones and Spoons Contest. See story on Page ????????. Photographs by Magdalene Biesanz and courtesy of the Le Mars Daily Sentinel.



The Chieftains 5 CD showing their instruments. The rhythm bones in the lower left were Peadar Mercier's and were passed to his son, Mel. CD produced by Shanachie Records Corp. Photograph by Angus Forbes.

## Recorded Bones Music Index to Chieftain Albums with Bones

Below is a list of Chieftains albums with the names of the rhythm bones players. It is not a comprehensive list as we could not find all of their albums to preview.

Chieftains 2 [1969] Peadar Mercier  
Chieftains 3 [1973] Peadar Mercier  
Chieftains 4 [1974] Peadar Mercier,

Martin Fay  
Chieftains 5 [1975] Peadar Mercier,  
Ronnie McShane  
Chieftains 6—Bonapate's Retreat  
[1977] Ronnie McShane  
Chieftains 7 - [1977] Martin Fay,  
Sean Potts  
Chieftains 8 - [1978] Martin Fay  
Chieftains 9: Boil the Breakfast Early  
[1979] Martin Fay  
Chieftains 10 - Cotton-Eyed Joe  
[1981] Martin Fay  
The Year of the French [1982] Martin  
Fay

The Chieftains in China [1985]  
Martin Fay  
James Galway & The Chieftains in  
Ireland - [1987] Martin Fay  
Celtic Wedding [1987] Martin Fay  
Irish Heartbeat [1988] Martin Fay  
Reel Music: The Film Scores [1991]  
Martin Fay  
Another Country [1992] Martin Fay  
The Essential Chieftains [2006]  
Martin Fay, Sean Potts

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# *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 10, No. 4 2008

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## Executive Director's Column

Let me be the first to sing the praises of Bones Fest XII. Despite a low turnout due to the economy and the change to the Fall, that old Bones Fest magic came through loud and clear. Although we had around 20 registrants (unofficial number) there were 12 states represented including California, Texas, New Mexico, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Missouri.

With last minute cancelations due to illness, and several of our events cancelled due to the security requirements of the Obama rally, lesser folks might have packed it in, but led by Scott Miller, and the inimitable Spike Bones, we forged on. We started the week end with a Mayor's Proclamation declaring Bones Fest Week end, and after looking

down at the magnificent St. Louis Arch from Spikes hotel room, most of us went off to pub crawl to the local Irish pub. On Saturday afternoon we were Performing in front of the Soldiers Memorial when the Union Station cancelled out, conducting the workshops spontaneously, and performing in the museum room when we were mistakenly locked out of the theater. We had several new participants, and a whole lot of veteran bone fest players. Once we got into the theater, the Saturday night performance shined, Spikes black light day glow bones really took the cake! I had a great time, and a great big thank you to Scott Miller and Spike who worked tirelessly to ensure the week end a success.

(Continued on page 3)

## Bones Fest XII Highlights

We raised and lowered the flag on BFXII and carried the RBS banner forward, through the Arch and back again. And now, onward to BFXIII!

It was an honor to serve with co-host Scott Miller in bringing our great Bones Fest to St. Louis, Missouri. It was a mighty big city for a wee group, but we were welcomed, honored and graciously served by the folks at the Mayor's office (see the Proclamation on Page 2), the Crowne Plaza Hotel as well as the faculty and staff at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

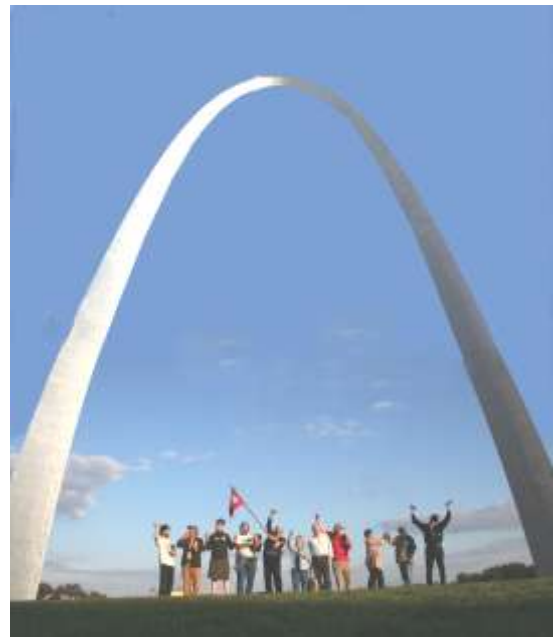
Our group was small, but we carried our bones high and left a large historical footprint in the gateway; along side footprints of Lewis and Clark, Mark Twain and now President-Elect Obama, who stepped right on top of our riverboat cruise and arch-riverfront celebration. I am referring to the last minute cancellation of our riverboat cruise because of security concerns for the Obama-Biden political rally. "What happens when you plan a party for 50 and 100,000 show up and they are not there to hear bones?"

I guess someone thought a boat load of bones players could be a dangerous thing. We are reminded that rhythm bone playing is a part of our history and continues on in spite of history.

In the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter, we promised that BFXII would have these four elements, 1) Lots of bones playing, 2) Reunion of old

and new friends, 3) the teaching and learning of all things bones, and 4) lots of bones playing. That we did thanks to all the support, creative input, hard work and hard play by the RBS Board, its members and all the BFXII participants

(Continued on page 6)



A few hearty Bones Fest XII attendees showed up after the 100,000 Barack Obama rally at the St. Louis Arch



## Editorial

The adopted motion to make our fiscal year run from January to December (see minutes of the General Membership meeting) means that you get this fifth issue of the newsletter as part of your 2007-8 membership. From now on our year starts in January and the dues renewal form for 2009 is included in this issue. Membership was lower this year and if you know of any reasons for this, the Board would appreciate knowing about them.

We owe a big round of thanks to Spike Bones and Scott Miller for hosting Bones Fest XII. It was a smaller Fest due to the tight economy and the October date. Smaller, however, gave it a more intimate feel as we had more individual time with other attendees. Read Spike's highlight's article starting on Page 1.

Spike organized one of the most complete historical displays of any Bones Fest. During his planning, he found a minstrel marionette that he tried to bring to the Fest. That was not possible, but you can read about it in a Page 6 article by Sonie Joi Ruffin. She outlines the racial implications in a objective and positive manner.

I am amazed at the quality of the articles published in this newsletter. Steve Brown's article on the Chieftains in the last issue is just the latest example. That said, I am laying out the newsletters for the 2009 year, and would like to know what subjects you would like presented. Please email me your ideas. Better yet, write the article and send it to me. You can say what you will about our little newsletter, but a copy goes to the Library of Congress where you will be immortalized.

A note on preserving the history of rhythm bones. I talked to Bob Goon, son of deceased rhythm bones player Ted Goon (see RBP, Vol 2, No 2 for a story about Ted), and he is sending us some items from his dad's collection. We need to preserve and make available as much of the history of rhythm bones as we can. Do you have anything or know where any is? We don't necessarily need the item, just a good copy (photograph, recording, etc.) that we can share with others.

## The BFXII Proclamation



### The Text of The BFXII Proclamation

Office of the Mayor, City of Saint Louis: Proclamation:

Whereas, it is my pleasure to welcome everyone attending Bones Fest XII. We are extremely pleased that the Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) has chosen St. Louis as the host city for this annual gathering of rhythm bones players from around the world; and

Whereas, rhythm bones in some form date back almost as far as recorded civilization. Early English and Irish settlers introduced the bones into North America, and over the years, bones have enjoyed popular revivals in the United States; and

Whereas, it has been estimated that there are tens of thousands of bones players in the world, and that many of them can trace their bones playing to the end of the minstrel era or from a relative who learned from a minstrel show; and

Whereas, the Rhythm Bones Society was formed for the purpose of the continuation, promotion, and improvement of rhythm bones and other related musical instruments; and

Whereas, the City of St. Louis recognizes the RBS in its efforts to pass

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 10, No. 4  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

on bones playing to the next generation and encourage today's students, musicians and teachers to discover the ancient art of bones playing and to take advantage of all the workshop, exhibitions and performances that Bones Fest has to offer.

Now therefore, I, Francis G. Slay, Mayor of the City of St. Louis, do hereby proclaim October 17 through October 19, as:

"Bones Fest XII Weekend" in the City of St. Louis.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and cause to be affixed the seal of the City of St Louis, this 17th day of October, A. D. 2008.

## Website of the Quarter

There has been an explosion of videos posted of my favorite bones players! Here is one and you can find many more with the related videos links: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-17dBuOpUo>. You go Don!

*Mike Passerotti*

(Continued from page 1)

Next year is not finalized, but returning to the summer should help attendance. *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 7:30pm on Friday, October 17, 2008, in the lobby of the Provincial House of the University of MO at St. Louis. Members present were Steve Brown, Jonathan Danforth, Gill Hibben and Steve Wixson.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the BFXI meeting and these were approved as read.

Steve Wixson presented a preliminary Treasurer's report. We have \$7,200 currently in the bank with \$440 committed to the Russ Myers Memorial and about \$1,000 in reimbursements to Steve Wixson mainly for the newsletter costs.

The Board met as the Nominating Committee and recommended continuation of the current officers and Board Members.

Jonathan noted that his new job has given him little time to keep our website current. He gave a brief summary of a presentation that Scott Miller would like to make. We will ask him to do that at the General Membership meeting.

There was a brief discussion on how to increase our membership that has declined to about 75 members this year. Ideas included having a membership table at Bones Fests, and giving a pair of Birl bones and a DVD with Bones Fest highlights to each new member. There was not time to fully discuss this issue.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:00. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown on October 18, 2008 at 7:45pm in what host Spike Bones

called the BFXII Museum Room.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the BFXI General Membership meeting and these were approved as read.

Steve Wixson presented the report of the Nomination Committee; Executive Director, Steve Brown, Assistant Director, Gil Hibben, Steve Wixson, Sec/Treasurer and Board members, Everett Cowett, Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier, Jerry Mescher. With no additional nominations from the floor, the motion was made and approved to elect these people by acclamation.

Steve Wixson presented the Board motion to change our Bylaws such that our fiscal year coincides with the calendar year. The specific wording which will replace Article VI, line 6.10 is, "The fiscal and tax years of the Association shall be from January to December." The motion passed unanimously.

Scott Miller made a presentation on Club Express that we could use to handle many of our administrative functions as well as keep our website up-to-date. Gil Hibben noted that his business website is maintained by Mike Carter who shot the video for BFXVII. The Board will follow-up on this item.

There being no old or new business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:06pm. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Clif Ervin Obituary

Known to fellow musicians and adoring fans as the "Ambassador of the Bones," Clif Ervin died Tuesday, September 23, at the age of 77. News of his passing was reported by his son, Eric on the Black Banjo forum.

Clif was not a computer person or contributor to the Black Banjo forum. But numerous friends, musicians and well-wishers on the forum expressed their admiration for Clif. "Clifton's gentle, graceful style harkened back to a bygone era," said Laura Love of the black bluegrass group, Harper's Ferry.

Born on April 11, 1931, Clif was raised in the East Texas town of Tyler. He later made Everett, Washington his home.

An earlier story in the Seattle

Times reports that Clif was a graphic artist for the Air Force during the Korean War and studied fine art at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. Over the years his interest changed from painting to woodworking, the article explains, which eventually led to his carving bones for sale in 1980.

Clif and I talked on the phone just two times. I called him last Fall about selling his products at my online store. And in January he called me back to talk some more. And talk is what we did. Clif was an absolutely delightful person and on each occasion we talked "bones" for nearly an hour. This probably comes as no surprise to most of you, because as you know, bone players do go on and on and on about bones.

Clif specialized in making teak, yellow cedar and cow rib bones. His personal favorite were the thick (9/16") bones made from yellow cedar.

As a historical note, Clif explained to me that the six v-slots he characteristically carved into his instruments were inspired by William Sidney Mount's 1856 painting, "The Bone Player."

<http://rhythm-bones.com/assets/bonesplayer-mount.jpg>

No, we never did get his instruments into my online bones store. I guess it wasn't meant to be. But we did share quite a few stories and for that I will always be grateful.

Below is a YouTube video of Clif Ervin accompanied by Chris Coole at the Midwest Banjo Camp in 2008.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnUjERsFLlo>

You might be able to get Clif Ervin bones here at Elderly Instruments:

[http://www.elderly.com/new\\_instruments/items/CEB.htm](http://www.elderly.com/new_instruments/items/CEB.htm)

*Scott Miller*

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XI.** August 28-30, 2009, Louisville, KY. More details in the next issue.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 31-September 6, 2009. This is one week after Bones Fest XIII.



## Photographs from Bones Fest XII



We received a Proclamation from Ann Chance (right) and Cathy Smentkowski representing the Mayor of St. Louis. Spike Bones is teaching Cathy how to play the rhythm bones while Steve Brown holds the Proclamation.



Jamming at Tigin Irish Pub on Thursday night for those who came early to the Fest. From the left are Mitch Boss, Spike Bones, Walt Watkins, Michael Ballard, Gil Hibben and Spike's son Truman.



Jonathan Danforth on fiddle and Michael Ballard leading a workshop. On the right are three students from the university's percussion department plus Ida May Schmich. Instruction by percussionist Bill Vits is on the television.



The Saturday afternoon show at the Soldiers' Memorial. Seated in front are representatives of the Mayor's Office. The Fest videographer, Charlie Lee in the dark shirt, videoed this and all major Fest events.



92 year old Ida May Schmich, not seen since BFIV, is performing with Jonathan Danforth. She is about to drive herself 1200 miles to her winter home in Texas



Jonathan Danforth leading a group session in what Spike Bones called the Museum Room. This is where people registered and gathered. There were many historical exhibits and t-shirts from each previous Fest.



Bones Fest XII had the most complete historical exhibits of any Fest. In addition were historical books on tables and bones videos and vinyl records.



Saturday night finale starring Spike Bones and his family. There were live performances and Bones Fest XII highlights and memorial videos shown.



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet performing at the Soldiers' Memorial. On Saturday night they performed in costume.



Dennis Michel, Brian Allee and Scott Miller performing at the Soldiers' Memorial



Steve Brown and Michael Ballard with his bones at the top of the 630 feet Gateway Arch



The view of St. Louis downtown from the top of the Gateway Arch



Bones Fest XII Host Spike Bones



Bones Fest XII Co-Host Scott Miller



(Continued from page 1)

and Show-me Bones Family volunteers. The bad news for all of you who could not attend is that you missed a great festival. The double good news is that "Bones Fest XII: The Movie" will soon be coming to a DVD player near you. This DVD will not only document BFXII events but will also include greetings and boning by members who were unable to attend. If you have any video clips you would like included please forward them immediately to Steve Wixson, for our editing has begun. RBS members who pre-order this two DVD set will pay only \$25 plus shipping. (\$20 for production cost and \$5 for the RBS to off-set some Fest costs). As our clock strikes 12, BFXII will always be a celebration of twelve great Bones Festivals.

The other part of the double good news is that you are all invited back to St. Louis for Bones Fest 17, 2013, not an election year.

The photographs on Pages 4, 5 and 8 tell more of the story. *Spike Bones*

## Bones Fest XIII

Louisville, KY

Gil & Linda Hibben, Hosts

**August 28-30, 2009**

**Clifton Center**

[www.cliftoncenter.org/about/](http://www.cliftoncenter.org/about/)

### Special Event

Professional recording of  
The Fest with the  
Intent of producing a commercial  
Bones Fest Live CD/DVD

Live Music—No copyright  
problem if in public domain

If you play to recorded  
music, you must get  
permission from the producer of the  
recording who holds what is called  
the Mechanical License.  
Email Steve Wixson for details and  
start working on this now.

## Blackface Minstrel Marionette

As a theatrical art form, 'Blackface' was invented in the United States in the 19th century. Perhaps it's better to say adapted rather than invented. Referencing the institutional racism of the day, it draws on ancient theatrical genres ridiculing the lower classes and the disenfranchised. The blackface minstrel marionette in the Kansas City Museum collection emerges from a period when blackface was in full flower in American theaters. A well-made and provocative object, its origins are loathsome and bigoted, and deeply historical. Properly interpreted it has much to offer a contemporary museum-going audience.

'Blackface' minstrelsy was a merging of aspects of 'European Punch and Judy' puppet characters and itinerant musicians. Live actors began to emulate the traditionally dark faced Punch, blackening their faces to depict fools and other inept characters. As American slaving practices became widely publicized and critiqued in England, dark-colored characters became prevalent in the theater. When reintroduced to America in the 18th and 19th centuries, physical exaggerations common to clowning in some minstrel acts began to pick up references to unashamed racism in American views of the enslaved. It became habit for white actors to transform into black caricatures using shoe polish, burnt cork or greasepaint to darken their faces. They would exaggerate lips and eyes with light greasepaint. Their appeared in gestures and costumes elements that were loose, gangly or physically unconventional. Costumes included ragged clothing simulating cast-off finery of the higher class. Wigs and gloves concealed true racial identity while concentrating the effect of the misfit and the downtrodden.

'Blackface' proper in puppet theater technique has been documented to 1810. Because puppetry often mirrors live theater, blackface minstrels appeared regularly on puppet stages, and were unsurprising or standard by 1850. Presentations by puppeteers

were elaborate, and children and adults alike were mesmerized by the wooden company. Stages and props were elegantly designed; costumes depicted the period of the script. The timber and cloth performers were skillfully enlivened often by two puppeteers, and sometimes a third spoke and sang from the wings. Plays were staged wherever they had a ready audience: in churches, on riverboats, at carnivals and in open markets. These fabulous wooden performers were always draped in skillfully tailored fine fabrics: silks, organdy linens, and the best quality cottons and wools. Puppets and marionettes are often seen in closer proximity than live actors, and therefore their costumes must be better fitted and made to withstand intimate scrutiny. [Original Ed. note: in English usage "puppets" are generally operated from below or behind by rods or hands, while "marionettes" are operated from above by means of strings or wires.]

Minstrel puppets rarely appeared individually. Rather, they were portrayed in well-known pieces readily recognized by their contemporary audiences. These performance conventions were widely established by two popular troupes, the 'Royal Marionettes' of Liverpool, England and the 'Celebrated Christy Minstrels,' of America. In fact, the Christys were so popular and widely duplicated that most such acts came to be referred to generically as 'christy minstrels.' The puppet performers took their name from live counterparts, the 'Christy Blackface Players' who had performed in London during the 1850s and became beloved as Negro impersonators. Their puppet counterparts were publicized as the 'Automatic Christy Minstrels.'

Echoing ancient Greek theatrical traditions and Italian and French operas, the main characters of the puppet minstrels shows, Mr. Tambo, Mr. Bones and Mr. Interlocutor, would appear in front of or at the ends of a line of supporting cast puppets. The 'Royal Marionettes' featured 16 puppets that performed side by side, strung in tandem rows of 8. Tambo and Bones would be on separate ends of the line allowing free movement





‘Blackface’ Minstrel Marionette from the Union Station/Kansas City Museum collection, Accession No. 1981.27.1. Photograph by Roy Inman

during performance. The ‘row of darkies’ sang and danced in the background while the lively, often racy script was performed by the featured players. They would cut jokes, dance a jig or two and act in pantomime. The ‘Royal Marionettes’ were particularly well-known for their pantomime performances of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Words of the Songs* and many other plays.

The Kansas City Museum's blackface minstrel marionette dates to about 1850. It features an egg-shaped head painted black with dyed sheepskin affixed to represent black fuzzy hair. It has typically distorted painted white eyebrows and red mouth, and black eyes with white grounds. The head is attached to a block serving as a torso. The loosely-jointed arms and

legs are carved wood and are attached with cords tied through holes drilled in the ends. The character, perhaps a Mr. Bones, is costumed in a black suit coat with blue, white and red striped and ruffled shirt and red vest (all one piece) with red and blue ruffled cuffs on the sleeves. Black and white buttons of painted metal are interspersed. Black pants cover long skinny legs. The shoes are represented by black-painted oversized slipper-shaped feet that are likely thus exaggerated to allow for comically embellished dance steps. Both hands hold white ‘bones,’ elongated shaped sticks representing the folk musical instrument of the same name. It is believed that this puppet was part of a troupe that traveled the Mississippi River on a steamboat performing onboard and in towns on shore. The marionette was loaned to the Kansas City museum in 1977 then made a gift in 1981, by Hazelle Rollins. Rollins was a popular Kansas City puppeteer from the 1940s through the 1970s. She provided no information about the origin of the piece. It is known however that she gave two others, likely from a group, to the Nelson Akin Museum of Art, one to the University of Kansas, Museum of Anthropology, and one to the Smithsonian Institution of American History.

Blackface entertainment may have seemingly benign philosophical origins, but we cannot help but view the art form, and this marionette, with 21st century eyes. Blackface actors as we know them, and later puppets, always portrayed roles of the happy-go-lucky ‘coloreds’ subservient to the desire of a dominant white culture. A mummified character of slurred speech and inhuman movement is filled with mischief and pain, all the while echoing a plaintive “Yaws,sa Massa.” Truly, satire and mockery are time-honored in the theater, but with a tacit peer acquiescence of the ridiculed. We can hardly consider a blackface actor or puppet a benign clown when those who were degraded in performance were not admitted to the auditorium, nor recognized as whole persons, nor given voting rights.

Blackface projected a highly racist

depiction of African Americans as ignorant, inhuman buffoons that justified, to dominant whites, institutionalized negativity towards blacks. The blackface minstrel can be viewed as a tool of social rationalization of slavery and oppression of those believed to be “primitive” or uncivilized. Thus, through their racism and enslavement, such whites—not all by any means — could be understood as embodying a typical 19th century mythos of man as steward of the natural world.

It would be comforting to imagine the 21st century legacy of 19th century blackface minstrelsy merely as historical text. But the dehumanizing exaggeration of physical form and mental attributes can be readily viewed in contemporary art and culture: see some contemporary African-American comics, and some aspects of urban black and hip hop culture. Blackface here could be viewed as having become a kind of internalized oppression or socially promulgated self loathing that has parallel presentation in the stereotypical presentations of women in ‘Sex in the City’ and gays in ‘Will and Grace.’ It is important that an institution like Kansas City Museum keep this artifact on exhibit, in front of the public, as a reminder to our society of how far we've come and how far we have to go.

References: Benjamin Fisler, PhD, 2005, *The Phenomenology of Racism: Blackface Puppetry in American Theater, 1872-1939*.

Mike Joly, 1994, *Hazelle and her Marionettes*.

Christine Klepper, 2008, *Prominence of the Smithsonian's Mr Tambo*.

This article was written by *Sonie Joi Ruffin* and used with permission. She is a renowned fabric artist with lectures and exhibits in many major institutions around the country. Her quilts are bold, intuitive and contemporary, and they are accompanied by masterly written prayers, sharing her life experiences, the African American culture, life's hardships and the courage to triumph.

The article was published in a Kansas City Museum *Community Curator* pamphlet from which the photograph was taken with permission.



Executive Director, Steve Brown (left) and Bones Fest XII Host, Spike Bones, at the window of Spike's room on the 27th floor of the Crown Plaza Hotel. The scene on the right is the 100,000 person Barach Obama rally that canceled a couple of Saturday afternoon Bones Fest events.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 11, No. 1 2009

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## Executive Director's Column

It was just about 10 years ago that I received a transcript of the interview of Steve Wixson's conversation with Ted Goon. Ted was truly the forgotten bones player, one who had transcended to heights unheard of for a bones player. His professional recordings placed him solidly on the charts in the late 40's and early 50's.

As I read through Steve's conversation with him both my fascination and admiration grew leaps and bounds. I was thoroughly entranced by Ted's story, and eventually gave in to my urges, and called him around noon time from my place of employment. He was slightly taken aback, but warmed up quickly as we talked bones, and told me details of his story, and then asked me about my experiences.

I was thrilled, sent him some recordings, and dreamed of visiting him in California, something I

knew wouldn't be possible. About three weeks later, while working around the house on a Saturday afternoon, the phone rang, it was Ted. He was returning my call, we chatted a bit, and then he said, "Got your bones handy?" He wanted me to play, which I did, and then he played for me, in that Ted Goon style, from 3000 miles away. I don't think my feet touched the ground for a week. We would have those conversations every few months, and then they faded away.

I called him after winning the All Ireland bone Playing Championship my first time, and he was thrilled. When he passed away, I was truly saddened though I know it was his time.

In this issue Steve Wixson has commemo-

*(Continued on page 3)*

## The Memorabilia of Ted 'Mr Goon Bones' Goon

In the last issue, I mentioned that Ted Goon's son, Robert, sent us his father's scrapbook titled *Goon Bones Braggin' Book* which contains all kinds of memorabilia about his recording career, i.e., news articles, photos, recording charts, letters, and the like. This is a real treasure as it documents the state of rhythm bones playing in the 1950s time period when both Ted and 'Brother Bones' were recording and popular. It also shows how much hard work it takes to be a full-time professional rhythm bones player.

You can read Ted's story in RBP, Vol 2, No. 2. His recording of *Ain't She Sweet* was seventh on the Jukebox Billboard Chart in 1949 and sold a million 400,000 copies at a time when 200,000 was a hit. It went international and he received royalties on it for 25 years.

His rhythm bones called *Goon Bones* were made of northern Wisconsin maple which Ted found by experimenting produced the best recorded sound (we are the first to know about this wood.) Ted said that *Ain't She Sweet* was the first record to use the new electronic echo chamber.

Ted spent as many as 80 hours working out the arrangements for his recordings. His last Mercury recording, *Tiger Rag*, is extremely fast and was made to challenge future rhythm bones players.

I look at Ted Goon differently now than when I wrote the original article. We've had several years

of collecting information about rhythm bones players, and I now see him as a much more important figure than I did in 2000. He and later his

*(Continued on page 6)*



Mr. Goon-Bones Trio. From left, Barney Lantz on organ and accordion, Harold Fisher on banjo and guitar and Ted Goon on rhythm bones.

## Editorial

Randy Seppala called me with the news of John Perona's passing, and followed that with an obituary he asked me to email to all members. That is followed by the article on John in this newsletter. Many of us were touched by John's sweet personality and by his special way of playing ringing silver spoons in rhythm bones style. While I write this, I am listening to the Finnish CD reviewed in newsletter Vol 7, No 1. John is not on it, but it has John's apprentice, Randy, on rhythm bones. The accordion and bones remind me of John's playing, and in particular Track 9, *Yo Lintu*, a song he played bones along with in my home at Bones Fest IX. (I've got to stop now and get my bones out.)

The story on Ted 'Mr Goon-Bones' Goon beginning on Page 1 continues a story in newsletter Vol 2, No. 2. As I look at Ted's memorabilia, I now view him as one of the more important figures in rhythm bones history.

Those who attended Bones Fest V got to meet Nick Driver, another important rhythm bones player. He sends us a nice note.

Another historic rhythm bones player is Frank Brower, the first minstrel bones player. An article on Frank appeared in RBP, Vol 6, No 1, and here is more information in a review of a book by Bob Carlin.

Adam Klein shares his experience making real animal bones (see *Animal Rhythm Bones* in RBP Vol 10, No 1.)

My church choir director has finally accepted me as a musician, and I play rhythm bones on occasion to hymns and anthems. A few Sundays ago, we had an African version of *Alleluia* with a wood block line in the sheet music that I played with rhythm bones. It took a bit of practice to play what was written instead of playing by instinct. I need to try more of that.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XIII.** August 28-30, 2009, Louisville, KY. More details in this issue.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 31-September 6, 2009. This is one week after Bones Fest XIII.

## Letters to the Editor

Sad news. My lovely wife, Ethel, passed away suddenly last month. A great shock for all the family we have lost a gentle and kind lady. Kind regards to all. Tony Humphreys [From England and attended BFX.]

This is too weird--or is it really? I'm just starting to accept these things as the norm, and all the other stuff (what we hear daily on the news, for example) as delusional weirdness.

On Saturday, the day before Johnny Perona passed over to the jam session of the angels, I was working my part-time temp office job on Manhattan's East 42nd Street and perusing rhythm bones websites (tough day at work). I found the site that featured Johnny Perona, [playdembones.com](http://playdembones.com), and remembered with great joy the time I met him at the Reston, VA bones fest (VIII) and his pal Randy Seppala. To this day I have a crisp, clear memory of those two playing these celestial-sounding hammered-flat silver spoons and bones, one of the highlights of the fest for me. RIP, Johnny. *Greg Burrows*

Greetings from the not too distant past. Sorry that I have let life's practical realities keep me from much more important things like music and soul fulfillment! LOL!

Say, I just saw the Russ Myer's video and thoroughly enjoyed it. In fact, by the end of it I had dug out my far too dusty bones and was playing along with Russ in the closing segment. I hope that he appreciated my humble tribute and ability.

As a man with financial responsibilities, you will be much gladder to hear that it has stimulated me to renew my membership and throw myself on the mercy of the group for my temporary insanity.

Reality calls so gotta run. But, thanks for the video and thanks, God, for people like Russ.

All the best for continued success down there in Bonedom. *Bill Burdette*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Websites of the Quarter

From Mike Passerotti. There has been an explosion of videos posted of my favorite bones players! Here is one and you can find many more with the related videos links: You go Don!  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-l7dBuOpUo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-l7dBuOpUo)

Mike is designing wireless electric bones and posted his own Youtube video at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=txfOSIlopkk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txfOSIlopkk)

From Michael Satterwhite. I found a video of a two-person bones impromptu jam it would be nice to share with members. It's titled "Dom Flemons and Rowan Corbett jam on bones." Dom Flemons from the Carolina Chocolate Drops and Rowan Corbett from Tinsmith met for the first time at the Folk Alliance artist showcase in Memphis, Tennessee.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLazWX8uxPU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLazWX8uxPU)

(Executive Director-Continued from page 1)

rated Ted in a special way, and one that I think will help you all to feel as special about him as I do, and those of us privileged to have known him.

Also, this issue marks the passing of one of our true characters, Giovanni "Johnny" Perona. I met Johnny for the first time in 2002, when we competed against each other at the Avoca Country Music Festival and Contests in Avoca, Iowa. He not only was a gentleman, he was a true artist, and I will remember his spoon playing, like angels, to the day I die. RIP Johnny.

And a final note, Steve Wixson is working hard on a number of projects to improve the web site and the position of bone playing in the world at large. I hope you will all respond as best you can when he sends out those emails requesting your opinion about bone playing and bone players. After all, he's doing it all for you. *Steve Brown*

## Note from Nick Driver

I made thousands of bones in my life time often at the peak 2 to 3 thousand a year in bone alone. I have no idea where they have all gone, but it's very rewarding to know that some at least are in the hands of serious players. I'm just amazed that an art that was almost dead on both sides of the pond has now been revived in so many places.

You in the States owe a great debt to the tireless crusading of Percy, I just feel that beyond the correspondence that Percy and I had in the dark days, I had the enormous pleasure of meeting with him on his visit to Eng-



Aubrey Driver on bones and Nick Driver on Bodhran.

land.

One of the things that people forget about the States, when there is often so much negativity going around is the real passion that some of you guys bring to something once you get your teeth into it. There is nothing like the Rhythm Bones Society outside of the States. Nothing that keeps alive and promotes this amazing little pocket instrument that has so much percussion versatility with so many kinds of music, lending that special, unique lift.

My visit to that Fest in New England was a truly memorable time in my life, not only the warm and genuine friendship but the amazing passion of experienced and novice players alike. What a true buzz that I took away with me.

If only I could have taken my father with me! Only today I was looking at some old pictures of him on the bones and me on the bodhran not long before he died, and it brought back some memories of him tossing them in the air as he played. I attach the picture for your interest. As I said, I hope make it back for a visit with some old friends and some playing one day.

Give my best to them all. *Nick Driver*

## Adam Klein on Real Bones Making

Here is my experience turning the ribs of dead bovines into playable percussion paraphernalia.

All the rib bones I have made have been from skeletons of cows I found in fields or on hikes. Farm country is a great place to look, and also range country out west. The cow dies, the vultures pick it clean and the sun bleaches the bones. No need to boil the marrow out or anything. Only drawback is you don't know how old the bones are. In any case I was able to make playable bones sets out of all but the last two cow rib pairs, if memory serves. They get smaller toward the back, but those are great for making kid bones.

My favorite part to use is very close to the spine, where the bones have a nice compound curve. I cut the two knobs off the end, about 2 inches

worth including the knobs, and then cut them again anywhere from 7 to 9 inches long, depending on the sound I want--longer is deeper-- so that when I'm playing them the bones curve like reverse parentheses and also curve inward such that if you hold the palm of your hand straight out from the forearm the tips of the bones touch your wrist-- but we play bones with the hand flexed back, so the curved part follows the curve of the bottom or inside of your wrist while you're playing.

Depending on how wide the bones are, you can usually get another, straighter pair of bones from the next 7 to 9 inches. The limiting factor is how wide the marrow part is. You can't really make bones that will last and that are playable if the marrow is more than about 3 centimeters or 1.25 inches wide. (I'm talking width here, not thickness. 1 cm or 3/8 inch is the thickest a bone should generally be.) Because if you sand it or cut it to be a max of 3 cm wide to make it playable, you cut past where the outer rind of thick bone is and your finger will be resting on hard marrow bone lattice, which is uncomfortable and will lead to early breakage of the bone. But my favorite set of bone bones is actually two pair from just 2 ribs: I hold the spine-side piece stiff against the palm (the position near the thumb) and let the further out, flatter one swing free (near the pinkie). Those babies really sing.

I have also found that eventually the thinner or more weathered bones will start to crack and fall apart with play, and when this happens, or better yet BEFORE this happens, you can coat them with high-strength clear epoxy and then they'll last till the end of time as we know it.

I have several pairs for sale if anyone is desperate. They are all matched pairs, meaning in this case that they came from opposing ribs so they look like mirror images of each other, or close. Most of them are from the spine end of the rib. They can email me.

Cheers. *Adam Klein*, bones maker (among other pursuits that don't pay the bills either)



## John Perona Obituary

Johnny B. Perona (Giovanni Batista Perona) passed from this life early Sunday morning February 1, 2009 at "Our Lady of Mercy Nursing and Rehab Facility" in Hubbell, Michigan where he had been a resident for the past 18 months. Born to Italian immigrant parents in the copper mining and cultural melting pot of Calumet, Michigan, Johnny was exposed to many cultures and their music which he had a very keen ear for.

He gave his first musical performance at the school Christmas program at the age of 12 on the accordion. He is regarded a virtuoso on the concertina, accordion, violin, mandolin and guitar, instruments on which he played old-time dance music for Italians, French, Finns, Slovenians and Croatians at local house parties, community dances, taverns and many music festivals for over 75 years. He has been referred to as a "one man Yooper (resident of Upper Michigan) multi-ethnic music festival" because he plays so many instruments in such a diversity of ethnic musical styles. But it is his mastery and performance on the rhythm bones and his own original spoons playing style that is most widely appreciated.

Johnny was introduced to the bones in 1948 while playing his concertina in a local tavern that an alcoholic bones and spoons player often frequented, playing to the music on the jukebox or to Johnny's concertina for drinks. He showed Johnny how to hold the bones but was reluctant to teach him too much, fearing competition. "You'll never learn I can see that right now" he told Johnny. Johnny became obsessed with the bones and learned to play them impeccably and also created his own unique "chiming" spoons playing style. Beginning in 2001, Johnny was awarded three apprenticeships teaching the bones and spoons by the Michigan Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program through the Michigan State University Museum, which named him as a master folk musician. He was also honored with a Michigan Heritage Award in

2002 for his bones and spoons playing. On December 15, 2007 while playing at a Christmas party he was given an award honoring him for 75 years of performing live music in the Great Lakes Region by the Upper Peninsula Ethnic Music Alliance, which puts on the Annual Finnish Music Festival in the tiny village of Covington, Michigan. At the 10th Annual Finnish Music Festival on June 28, 2008, though he was bound to a wheelchair, Johnny showed his great stamina, playing his bones and spoons relentlessly for both days of the anniversary event.

We will miss our dear friend and fellow musician greatly. He has inspired and delighted so many people with his soft spoken nature, inventiveness, charismatic aura and authentic presentations. After a long illness may you finally rest in peace partner.

*Randy Seppala* [randyplaydembones@jamadots.com](mailto:randyplaydembones@jamadots.com)

Memorial contributions can be made in Johnny's honor to: 11th Annual Finnish Music Festival, c/o U.P.Ethnic Music Alliance, 26217 Korpi Road, Watton, Michigan 49970

[There are three photographs of John and Randy on Page 8. ]

## Russ Myers' Memorial Dedication Set

The dedication ceremony for the Russ Myers' Memorial at the Madison County, Virginia Historical Society is set for Sunday, June 28, at 2:00 PM.

Rhythm Bones Society members donated \$440 towards this memorial which consists of a video presenting Russ' life from a rhythm bones point of view and a combo TV/DVD player for the Historical Society.

Russ' band, the Possum Ridge String Band, will attend and perform. After the dedication, there will be a Mini-Bones Fest where rhythm bones players will play to this great string band and dedication attendees can enjoy rhythm bones played live.

If you plan to attend, email me for more details which at this time are not complete. The event is free to everyone. *Steve Wixson*

## A Boban Spoon Sculpture



I ran across this sculpture in a new museum on Bathhouse Row in Hot Springs, AK. The artist is Boban and the sculpture is titled *Horn Blower*, (c) 2009 Masterpiece Publishing Inc. Check out website [masterpiecepublishing.com/Artists/Boban](http://masterpiecepublishing.com/Artists/Boban) for other works. The sculpture is made almost entirely from spoons, and immediately reminded me of John Perona and his ringing silver spoons. *Steve Wixson*

## John Hennessey Obituary

John P. Hennessey's licks on the rhythm bones enlivened the popular Irish music sessions at Brighton's Green Briar pub for years. Mr. Hennessey, known to bandmates as Mr. Bones, died of heart failure April 6, 2008. He was 88.

"That was what he was living for - those Monday nights," said one of his daughters, Erin Collings of Waltham. "I know he loved it."

He picked up the bones about 10 years ago and became something of a pub celebrity. He could play with a pair in each hand until an injury forced him to play a single pair.

Mr. Hennessey was the son of Irish immigrants from County Cork.

"He believed in Irish music, only Irish music," his daughter said. "Everything else was just noise."

## Review of the Book *The Birth of the Banjo:* *Joel Walker Sweeney* *and Early Minstrelsy* by Bob Carlin

I am proud of my article on Frank Brower, the first minstrel rhythm bones player. It appeared in Vol 6, No 1 of our newsletter and summarized considerable research.

My favorite part was one no one else had written about, and it graciously came from Bob Carlin, who at the time was researching this book on banjo player Joe Sweeney. Here it is reprinted again.

"But what shall [we] say of the castanet player? It is almost in vain to describe the manner in which Mr. Brower makes this [supply sic] the place of every other instrument necessary to complete a full band. Every limb, muscle, feature, and nerve is brought into operation while he is performing—sitting, lolling, standing, throwing out the arms, legs, head, and tongue, alternately, drawing up the extremities, tossing the arms about in every direction, at one time giving his neighbor's head a rapid succession of imaginary fatal [lumps/bumps], now commencing a serious attack upon his own breast, with an apparent view of quickening the flow of blood through the arteries, at another time measuring himself, with extraordinary determination and celerity, for a coat of unknown magnitude, and repeating similar movements over the head, under the legs, behind his back, and below the soles of his feet. While indulging in these fierce performances, the castanets, or rather a couple of rib bones, inserted between the fingers, sustain a continuous rattle in correct time with the melody." *Liverpool Mail*, May 27, 1843.

With a photograph of Frank Brower from the previously mentioned newsletter in mind, the antics of our own Spike Bones and this quote, one can almost picture Brower performing.

So why is this book relevant to us? Rhythm bones player Frank Brower and banjo player Joe Sweeney were friends and performed on and off together for several years. Carlin gives us a broader picture of Brower and of the background of 'blackface' minstrelsy that preceded the formation of the Virginia Minstrels with Brower as its rhythm bones player. While the main thrust of the book is Joe Sweeney as a banjo player who "introduced mainstream America to a music which had its roots in the trans-

planted black culture of southern slaves," there are plenty of interesting tidbits about Brower.

Carlin begins by tracing the African American roots of the banjo and origins of 'blackface' minstrelsy. His chapter on the 'Virginia Minstrels and the Dawn of the Minstrel Show' is the most complete I've seen, and includes biographies on each member. He then outlines minstrelsy and minstrel shows that followed after the Virginia Minstrels. And lots more on Sweeney.

The following are some Brower quotes, and in the book facts are meticulously referenced though the references are not included here.

From Page 41. "When the Birmingham's Theatre Royal reopened on September 23 [1943], Sweeney and Brower were back on the radar. From Monday, September 25, until Wednesday, October 4, "the Virginia Banjo and Bones" were a featured attraction. Their act combined elements of Sweeney's solo performances and the routines featured by Brower's former ensemble the Virginia Minstrels the previous spring."

From Page 42. "[In March 1844] Frank Brower rejoined Sweeney with his dancing and bones playing, drawing the comment that "But of all the amusements which the Amphitheatre now teems withal, commend us especially to the Nigger dance of Brower, accompanied by the banjo playing of Sweeney...Half-a-dozen encores... nightly inflict their pleasurable pains on Brower."

From Page 42. "After a spring tour with the reconstituted Virginia Minstrels in Ireland and Scotland, Brower and Sweeney returned once again to Liverpool, the city of their biggest success."

From Page 46. "[in May 1845] Sweeney accepted an engagement with the familiar confines of the circus with his old partner Francis Brower. Since the previous fall, when Frank Brower had been in New York City, the bones player had toured up and down the East Coast..."

From Page 55. "One of the major downfalls in the minstrel business was a performer's dependence on circus and theatre owners for employment...Regardless of whose idea it

was, using fiddle, banjo, tambourine and bones to present songs, dances, imitations and skits in a freestanding program revolutionized the blackface business."

From Page 55. "Brower, who performs upon a pair of Bone Castinets equal to the divine Fanny."

From Page 58. "The two other Virginia Minstrels, fiddler/banjoist Dan Emmett and bones player/singer/dancer Frank Brower had met as performers in the Cincinnati Circus...Francis Marion Brower was hired to provide blackface entertainment as a singer, comedian and all-around performer."

From Page 59. "Mr. Ferguson will play upon the Banjo...Accompanied by Brower wid de Bones."

From Page 62. [1841] "For Sweeney's song "Old Tar River," Frank Brower joined Dan Emmett on the bones, an instrument which Frank had used as early as the previous fall."

From Page 74. "...and ex-Virginia Minstrel Frank Brower. This partnership continued until 1858, at which time George Christy reformed the Christy Minstrels."

From Page 69, a reviewer of his performance [as a Virginia Minstrel] in London "emphasized Brower's playing of the bones, a feature popular among English audiences, while suggesting that the dance numbers might well be eliminated."

From Page 93. "By 1851, Brower had resorted to playing clown rolls with Robinson & Eldred's New York City Circus."

Short Quotes. "Brower defined Bankruptcy Laws." "Brower gave his Locomotive Lecture." "Brower wrote songs such as 'Old Joe.'" "Old Dan Tucker, sung by Frank Brower."

There are extensive chapter notes, selected bibliographies and a good index. Published by McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2007, 193 pages. Soft cover. ISBN13: 978-0-7864-2874-8. Quoted text used with permission. The Rhythm Bones Society thanks Bob Carlin for sharing this information with our members.

Member Norm Conrad donated a copy of this book to the Rhythm Bones Society. Thanks also to Norm. *Steve Wixson*

## BFXIII Preview

Linda and I are proud to host Bones Fest XIII. Thanks to a dear friend, Mike Carter, we were introduced to the Clifton Center and discovered it is a perfect place for the Fest.

The Clifton Center is an exquisitely restored 1930's performance and meeting complex located 2 miles east of downtown. It is an anchor piece for the Frankfort Avenue historic business district, encouraging vitality and welcoming groups of people from across the Greater Louisville area. It is bursting with restaurants and shops, all within walking distance of the Clifton Center. Visit: [www.franfortave.com](http://www.franfortave.com) to view all of the restaurants and shopping in the area. Check out [www.fatfridayhop.org/about.html](http://www.fatfridayhop.org/about.html) for part of the Friday program.

The stage is better than can be imagined. The Eifler Theater has 366 plush seats on the main floor and 120 plush seats on balcony. The theatre is also equipped with a modern sound system and modern lighting.

We are planning to video this Fest for a DVD and this is the perfect opportunity for all of you bones players to be featured on the DVD. Steve Wixson will have more information on this project.

More information regarding our host hotel will be forthcoming as soon as we firm up a great location. *Gil and Linda Hibben*

### Bones Fest XIII

Louisville, KY

Gil & Linda Hibben, Hosts

**August 28-30, 2009**

**Clifton Center**

**[www.cliftoncenter.org/about/](http://www.cliftoncenter.org/about/)**

**Special Event**

Professional recording of the Fest with the intent of producing a commercial Bones Fest Live CD/DVD

(Ted Goon—Continued from page 1)

trio, shown in the photograph on Page 1, had what appears to be the biggest catalog of recorded rhythm bones music of all time. He recorded at least 36 songs with a variety of performers whose instruments included piano, Hammond organ, harmonica, banjo, etc., and one vocal group.

The chart of top artists below tells

POSITION	ARTIST	LABEL
1.	Andrews Sisters	Decca
2.	Mills Brothers	Decca
3.	Ink Spots	Decca
4.	Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan	Decca
5.	Dinning Sisters	Capitol
6.	Ames Brothers	Coral
7.	Mr. Goon Bones and Mr. Ford	Crystal

Chart of top artists from Ted Goon's scrapbook.

us a lot. Not only did Ted rise to seventh on the list, but look at the company he is in. The chart probably dates to 1949, and likely reports on jukebox artists. Another chart had him twentieth overall.

The following article was found in Ted's scrapbook. It had no author or newspaper name, but appeared to be a local newspaper.

"Tuesday, January 30, 1950, Corona Del Mar, CA. Few of his neighbors are aware that Mr. Goon-Bones lives in Corona del Mar. In fact, even the name will mean nothing to a vast majority of people ... this despite Billboard magazine having recently rated his records as having been played more than any other (of the instrumentalists) throughout the nation for a year on the juke boxes.

"He might well be called the least known big name of the popular music world. Chances are very good, that you have heard the contagious toe-tapping rhythm that he creates with his "bones" if you have ever turned on the radio, watched television or listened to someone's choice of a juke box number.

"In a contest last week, disc jockey Hawthorne featured each day Mr. Goon-Bones' rendition of "Goofus." Red Barber, sports announcing for one of the big games, remarked how much

he enjoyed Mr. Bones and paused so that the listening audience could hear a portion of a number being played over the loudspeaker system.

"From a childhood pastime of playing with musical bones, Mr. Goon-Bones (real name is Ted J. Goon) has parlayed a hobby into an institution, Although: he was considering vaudeville in 1929, the stage business collapsed before he started. Consequently, he entered business instead.

"*Entertains Patients.* Hospitalized in 1944, Ted was once again drawn to his hobby. Encouraged by his fellow bed. patients when he entertained them, he set about to work out a modern technique of the old minstrel art. He and his wife experimented with hundreds of materials for an improved "bone." Using woods from all over the world, ivories and ebonies, all of which were coated with various substances, each was electronically tested. Finally, an American wood was selected which they specially treated.

"Ted's first recording "Ain't She Sweet" in 1949 was responsible for the revival of this old favorite and sold nearly a million platters. Since this recording, Mr. Goon-Bones has recorded, eight numbers, two of which he wrote with Barny Lantz of Santa Ana.

"Ted is neither a musician nor a professional recording artist. He says that he has merely taken a short leave of absence from his insurance business and expects to return to the field shortly.

"*Inspired by Trains.* Listening to the plaintive sounds of the freight winding up way through the rolling hills down to Capistrano gave him the idea of writing "Fast Freight Blues," a highly successful record used by numerous disc jockeys throughout the country as signature music for their programs.

While waiting at a crossing in Santa Ana, he got the inspiration for "Diesel Drag," a number which begins with the actual recording of a diesel engine starting at the Santa Ana Station.

"He is a soft-spoken man who lives quietly with his wife, son and daughter, going about Corona del Mar as

Ted Goon, business man. To the rest of the country he is Mr. Goon-Bones, the rhythm king who dares you to listen with your feet standing still.”

In addition to recording, Ted performed frequently, both with his trio and by himself. That included television such as his trio performance on the Steve Allen show.

Several years after he stopped recording, he and his wife went on a road tour to high schools and colleges and finally with the USO touring military bases outside the country.

Ted’s son, Robert, remembers his father’s *Mr Goon-Bones Rhythm Show* this way. “He created--and constantly worked on changing and improving--and performed an act that invariably captivated audiences. It included costumes, discussion of the history of rhythm, percussion, and the bones, humor, playing the bones with a variety of recordings, and some plain old showing off of his amazing skills.”



Ted Goon performing in costume

Ted explained his success this way. “Prior to making records, I recorded every single show where I performed regardless of what it was or what the audience was. Then I studied the reaction of the audience using the applause to learn what sort of tunes, melodies were preferred over others and that sort of thing.” As you can see, his success was no accident.

So how could someone as apparently important as Ted be so overlooked. Beth Lenz, in her master’s thesis on *Bones in the United States*, doesn’t mention him, and she had access to Percy Danforth’s library suggesting Percy didn’t know of him.

I was young and playing bones at that time and I never heard of him. The only other bones player that I recall was ‘Brother Bones’ playing on television during halftime at Harlem Globetrotter’s basketball games. Because of the Globetrotter connection, Brother Bones is more well known.

I don’t know the answer to my question, except that his recording career was short and he did not go on record promotional tours which were a great way to promote oneself. As the above newspaper article says, even in his own time “he was the least known big name of popular music.”

However, if you met Ted or heard him play the rhythm bones, you might be influenced. Here are a couple of stories.

Recording partner Del Wood was a regular on the Grand Old Opry and one of the best country piano players of her time. Their partnership began after she wrote Ted a letter saying that, “the entire technique I had adopted in playing the piano was based on studying your records.”

Mel Mercier met Ted on two occasions and here is an excerpt from *The Irish Echo* by Earle Hitchner that shows Ted’s influence.

“...That left Dublin-born Mel Mercier and Abbeyfeale, Limerick-born Michelle Mulcahy to take solos, and a form of musical levitation took place on stage for each. A Board member of the Rhythm Bones Society, Mercier was spellbinding in a rare demonstration of two-handed Irish bones playing, backed by Mulcahy on piano. He drew inspiration for his performance from an American two-handed bones virtuoso named Ted “Goon” Bones in the early [actually mid] 20th century.”

I wonder how many untold stories like these are out there.

This Goon-Bones unawareness is about to change, and rhythm bones players at least are going to hear about Ted Goon. All of Ted’s collected

memorabilia has been packaged on a Memorabilia DVD and sent to the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress for future historians fulfilling a promise I made to Ted and forgot about until I reread the transcript of our telephone interview. It includes his scrapbook scanned to an Adobe Portable Document Format (.pdf) file, his recordings converted to digital audio, his interview done back in 2000 both in digital audio and transcribed to text, the original and this follow on article, photographs of the labels of his known records, a brief history by his son, Robert Goon, and a live recording of one of his performances titled *Mr Goon-Bones Rhythm Show*. An abbreviated version with 29 seconds of each of his released records is available for purchase.

In 2002, I sent Ted some video from our Bones Fests and he was impressed. He said, “They [us] could go down that same road I did. Study and analyze these modern rhythms that I don’t understand because I am out of touch. Do like I did and concentrate on getting something going. Believe it or not, if you get it and its smooth and fresh and clean, there isn’t any sound in the world, I’m convinced, as the sound of rhythm when its clean like the bones can make it.

“There were drummers in orchestras accompanying me on personal appearances that were just ecstatic at getting to hear while they were performing— that sound with that music - that pure rhythm. I hadn’t become surprised at that because back when I started I’d considered the fact that rhythm, clean pure rhythm is the essence of the whole universe. Everything in the universe is in a rhythm. Human beings, when they hear clean, fresh, precise rhythm, they feel it.

Who will be the next Ted Goon? Not me, too old—so, maybe you!

This article would not have been possible without the help of Ted’s son, Robert, who dug out, packaged, mailed, scanned labels, etc, items including Ted’s original recordings. Sincere thanks, Bob. *Steve Wixson*

P.S. I will present a workshop on Ted and the DVD at Bones Fest XIII. A copy of this amazing DVD will be sent to all current members.



Three photographs of the late John Perona extracted from a Mary Barnett video recorded at Bones Fest IX. Shown are a smiling John, those wonderful ringing silver spoons played rhythm bones style, and Randy Seppala with John playing his concertina. Randy was an apprentice to John and wrote his obituary.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 11, No. 2 2009

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## Executive Director's Column

With 25 out of 30 days of June rainy ones, the prospect of dry summer weather in the months ahead seems like the only thing prompting me forward. And as I dream about what's to come, thoughts focus on the return to Louisville in August for Bones Fest XIII.

The first Louisville Fest was a true delight as witnessed by one of the best Bones Fest videos. The old Kentucky Theater was the perfect location which saw several new Bones Fest attendee's like the Fraser Family from three Western states, and Sandor Slomovits, a protégé of Percy Danforth, delighting us with his bone playing and songs.

This time in Louisville is sure to be a real treat. Although the old theater has now been

turned into condo's, Linda and Gill Hibben, our hosts, have found the perfect location, the Clifton Center for the Performing Arts, which includes a 500 seat auditorium, and a number of rooms perfect for workshops or jamming. Located in the heart of Louisville's restaurant district, with many shops for browsing, it boasts a picture perfect thorough fare which plays host to street musicians just begging for bones accompaniment. Check it out yourself at [www.cliftoncenter.org](http://www.cliftoncenter.org).

And while our location is truly supreme, this Fest will feature an opportunity for participants truly unrivaled in Bones Fest history: the opportunity to play on the first professionally recorded compact disc and DVD produced by the Rhythm

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Russ Myers Memorial Dedication Ceremony

It was a beautiful day in Madison County, Virginia. The Possum Ridge String Band was playing Russ Myers' favorite song, St. Anne's Reel, under the covered bandstand. The sun was bright, so people gathered under a large shade tree a bit off to the side of the bandstand. More than 50 people were remembering Russ.

In the background was the Kemper Residence, a stately old home now owned by the

Madison County Historical Society. In a basement room was a brand new television with built in DVD player with a narrow plaque along the bottom of the screen with the words; *In Memory of Russell Bordley Myers, 1934-2006 by the Rhythm Bones Society, June 28, 2009.*

Tables in the room were full of Russ memorabilia on loan from Wilma Myers and arranged by

*(Continued on page 7)*



Front row is the Possum Ridge String Band. Back row from the left, Scott Miller, Sharon Mescher, granddaughter Katie, grandson, Colman, Wilma Myers, daughter Jennifer, son David, Mary Lee Sweet, Kenny Wolin, Steve Wixson and John Davis.

Photograph by Helen Miller.

## Editorial

The Russ Myers Memorial ceremony was a grand event, and it was heartwarming to see so many RBS members help celebrate Russ' life. It is the feature story that begins on Page 1. For more information about Russ, see RBP, Vol 5, No 2. For his obituary and related articles, see Vol 8, No 3.

I share Steve Brown's excitement about Bones Fest XIII as I have such vivid memories of Gil and Linda Hibben's Bones Fest VII. I'm back to practicing regularly, and trying to select a song to perform for the *Bones Fest XIII Live* CD/DVD. Wouldn't it be something if it would catch the public's eye like, say, the Hula Hoop.

I write about my trip to the Greek Islands and Turkey and my rhythm bones research. Am I the only one who researches rhythm bones on vacations? I challenge you to do the same and report your findings in our newsletter. We still have a lot to learn about our instrument, and who knows when or where one of us might find an important piece of its history.

There is a nice article reprinted from a local newspaper on rhythm bones maker and player, Clif Ervin. I wish that I could have met him.

## Letter to the Editor

Hi all, Hope you've all been well! Steve Brown and I had our usual great time at the New England Folk Festival teaching and selling bones. I just finished hosting a small local musicians' tent at the New Bedford Summerfest Folk Festival with my band, the Jethros (with whom I play fiddle and bones). The Jethros released a new album in May, which features two tracks with bones -- one of these can be heard online at <http://www.myspace.com/thejethros> (click on the track "Why Not" for bones).

You should also check out Tim Reilly's band at <http://www.myspace.com/ribarnacle> -- they also have a new album out, and you can hear Tim's great bones on that web page if you click on the Polkas track.

See you in August! *Boney Jethro* (a.k.a. Jonathan Danforth)

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

**Bones Society.** You can be a part of history documented at this fest and preserved for posterity! So book your flight and hotel, August is truly just around the corner.

Gil Hibben invites members to submit idea's for workshops that they would like to lead for this year's Fest. Workshops will be held during the course of the Fest. Some of the workshops from previous events include beginner workshops, advanced workshops, Scrimshaw and bone making. Submit your idea's in writing to [gil\\_hibben@bellsouth.net](mailto:gil_hibben@bellsouth.net) before July 31<sup>st</sup>. Workshops will be chosen as space allows, and based on appeal to the majority of the attendees.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Steve Wixson for all of his hard work, not only in the newsletter production, but for the Russ Myers Memorial Project and Memorial Celebration recently held in Virginia. Russ was a corner stone in our organization, and most deserving of this tribute.

In closing I would again like to invite all of the members to participate in what promises to be a ground breaking Bones Fest in Louisville this August. It surely will be a Kentucky Derby of a different kind! *Steve Brown*

## Website of the Quarter

**earth.google.com.** This is an amazing website that shows satellite photographs of the world. Some images are higher resolution than others. Put your own address in and see what your house looks like from above.

As for why this website is included in this newsletter, enter 2117 Payne Street, Louisville, KY and view the Clifton Center, the location of Bones Fest XIII. If you zoom out a little, you will see some restaurant symbols. Click on any of them to see the tremendous variety of restaurants.

## Goon-Bones DVD Update

Bob Goon searched without success for bones playing video of his dad, Mr. Goon-Bones to add to the DVD. The project is now complete and DVD is being professionally duplicated. See Vol 11, No 1 for details.

## Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XIII.** August 28-30, 2009, Louisville, KY. More information and Registration form is in this issue.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 31-September 6, 2009. The festival begins right after BFXIII. The bones contest is on the following weekend.



Turkish Kashik or spoons played like castanets

## Abbeyfeale 2009 Bones Competition

The bones competition in Abbeyfeale is amazing. The women of the committee are some of the hardest working, most welcoming people I have ever met. There were plenty of sessions to play in to get warmed up for the competition and the level of musicianship was very high.

Despite the turn in the weather, people filled the square for the competition. They were enthusiastic and cheered loudly for the players. Rob Coppard and I were the only 2 handed players. The committee arranged for a banjo and box player to accompany the players, and 1 competitor brought his own band. We each played 2 sets.

It was marvelous to hear all of the different styles and interpretations of the music. The adjudicator, Tommy Hayes, gave feedback to each of the bones players before he announced the winners.

Consider the trip - it is well worth the experience. I have video of my playing. If you are curious, contact me. *A. Lakin* <a\_lakin@yahoo.com>

## Wixson Plays Bones in Ephesus Theatre

My wife, Janet, and I took advantage of recent discounts and booked a cruise in the Greek Islands and Turkey. Since rhythm bones passed through this area many years ago, my secondary purpose, other than having fun, is to research rhythm bones which translates to visiting museums and historical sites, finding someone who speaks even a small amount of English, demonstrating rhythm bones, and asking if they know the instrument or someone who might know it. Most of the time this results in failure, but occasionally there is a connection.

In Istanbul, I discovered they play *Kashik* which are spoons played in a castanet style shown in the photograph on Page 2. I found a CD titled *Turkish Folklore Music* that has many great examples of this style. I'll bring it to Bones Fest XIII.

Ephesus, also in Turkey, was one of my highlights. Restoration of this ancient city has been underway for many years and there is much to see, and the library and theatre were the most impressive. I had to take the theatre stage and play rhythm bones to a large collection of appreciative tourists. See the photograph below.

I assume rhythm bones were played here a few thousands of years ago, and I wondered if I was the first to play them in modern times—or has someone beat me to it.

While I found no other bones being played or anyone who had ever heard of such an instrument, I did return with the names of three academics who I will correspond with and will report if I learn anything. *Steve Wixson*.

## Bones Fest XIII Update

The Bones Fest XIII Registration Form is included in this newsletter, and it has preliminary program and hotel information.

Due to the difficulty of securing permission to use CDs as backup for the BFXIII Live CD and DVD recordings, we have obtained permission to use CDs from the following bands; Possum Ridge String Band (Russ Myers), Liza >>>>> and Razamatazz (BFXII) and Dave Reiner (BFV). If you have a friend or contact that would give us permission

## Bones Fest XIII

Louisville, KY

Gil & Linda Hibben, Hosts

**August 28-30, 2009**

**Clifton Center**  
[www.cliftoncenter.org/about/](http://www.cliftoncenter.org/about/)

**Registration Form  
and Hotel Information in  
this Newsletter**

**Special Event**

Professional recording of  
The Fest with the  
Intent of producing a commercial  
Bones Fest Live CD & DVD

to use their CD, please let Steve Wixson know so he can share this information with other attendees.

Please note that performances selected for the CD and DVD will be based on musicality and not raw rhythm bones skill. If you want to practice before the Fest, order one of the CDs. This is one way to say thanks to the people who are letting us use their recordings. Ordering information is on the Registration Form.

For those performing to live music, there will be some practice time.



Steve Wixson playing rhythm bones in the theatre of the ancient city of Ephesus in Turkey



# Photographs from the Russ Myers Memorial Ceremony



We were in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains.



The Kemper Residence, attendees gathered under a shade tree and the bandstand with the Possum Ridge String Band and rhythm bones players



Wilma Myers, standing by the red car and many friends and neighbors who attended the Memorial celebration. She is looking at her son, David.



Sharon Mescher on the left shooting photographs of the ceremony. Other photographs on Pages 4 & 5 were taken by Helen Miller and Frank Sweet.



Steve Wixson presenting the Russ Myers Memorial Video to Penn Bowers, Vice-President of the Madison Country Historical Society.





John Davis (left) and Kenny Wolin jam with the Possum Ridge String Band after the ceremony.



Peter Bramley from the band. Peter works for Crutchfield Electronics and helped us buy the memorial television/DVD player.



Playing with the band as a musical tribute to Russ from left Kenny Wolin, Mary Lee Sweet, Scott Miller, Steve Wixson, Russ and Wilma's daughter Jennifer, Sharon Mescher and John Davis



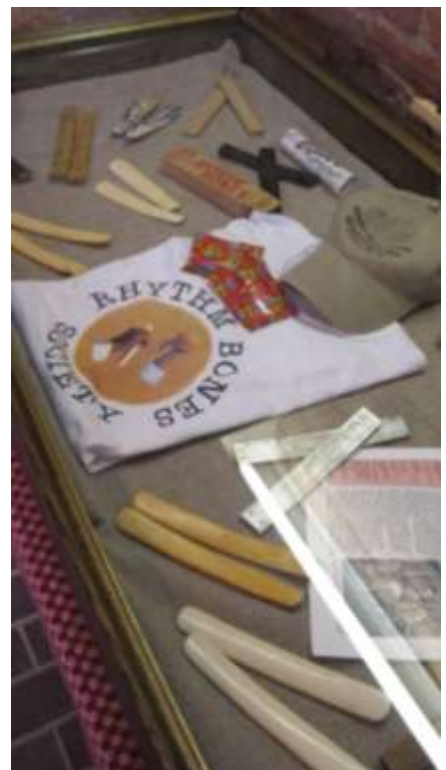
Mary Lee Sweet during her tribute to Russ



Russ and Wilma's son, David, playing bones



Scott Millers during his tribute to Russ



Some of Russ' memorabilia on display



# Clif Ervin Ambassador of the Bones

[In the Vol 10, No 4 issue of the newsletter, Scott Miller reported on the death of rhythm bones player and bone maker, Clif Ervin. I wanted to know more about him and contacted his widow who sent this article from Seattle Times, Snohomish County Edition, November 27, 2002, along with some of Clif's memorabilia.]

The 71-year-old Ervin, of Everett, sometimes plays wooden African drums to attract customers to his Knots and Things booth. But his treasured instruments are the bones — flat sticks made from golden wood that sound like castanets when struck together.

"Every country in the world has a clapping instrument, and bones are probably the oldest," Ervin said.

When Ervin was a young boy in the East Texas town of Tyler, local blues musicians noticed he kept a good rhythm with just a pair of sticks. So they taught him how to play with ordinary objects such as spoons and animal bones.

Ervin found his first pair of cow bones in a neighbor's pasture. Later he made pairs by boiling the meat off rib bones, then cleaning out the marrow with a clothes hanger. The oil from his hand would polish the bones to a fine sheen.

Most pairs of musical bones — originally actual bones but now often made of wood — are 5 to 7 inches long and vary in width. Thin bones have a snappy sound, Ervin said, and thicker pairs sound more "mellow."

Ervin explained how playing the bones works: The player holds one bone tightly between the index and middle finger. That piece is held in place and struck rapidly with the second bone, which is held loosely between the little and ring fingers.

"It's all in the wrist," Ervin said as he raked his hand back and forth. "Your hand is the resonator. By moving the bones up and down, you get a different sound."

Ervin likes to move around as he

plays, tapping out a rhythm with his feet for his hands to follow.

"Whatever your hands are doing, your feet have to keep the beat," he said.

Nowadays, Ervin said he prefers carving bones out of teak or rosewood. He used to own a craft shop on Broadway called Knots and Things, but since 1997 he has made the instruments at his house. He sells them for \$22.50 a pair.

One of his customers is Artis the Spoonman, a Seattle street musician made famous by the grunge band Soundgarden's Grammy-winning song "Spoonman."

The two met at an informal jam session at the Northwest Folklife Festival in Seattle, and soon after, Artis bought a pair of Ervin's bones carved from a tropical monkey-puzzle tree.

"His quality is top of the line," Artis said. "I tell people about him almost every show."

Ervin has always seen himself as more artist than performer. He was a graphic artist for the Air Force during the Korean War and studied fine art at Clark College in Vancouver, Wash. But over the years his interest has changed from painting to woodworking.

"We're blessed with so much wood in this part of the country, it's easy for an artist to become a carver," Ervin said.

It helped that he had access to lots of free wood while working at a Weyerhaeuser sawmill. As he finished wooden boards in a planer, he fell in love with the different colors and textures of the planks. When his co-workers went outside for smoke breaks, Ervin carved on leftover knots and wood clippings that he'd picked off the mill floor.

He sold his first polished knot for \$1 at the Evergreen State Fair in Monroe in 1975. As his skill with carving knives increased, he began to whittle faces, then key chains, canes and finally wooden apples complete with polished seeds.

But many customers asked Ervin where they could find bones after hearing him play, so in 1980, he began carving bones for sale. He remains among the few vendors selling

the instruments at local craft shows and music festivals.

Ervin marks his wooden bones with a "V" pattern that he copied from a design he saw in a pre-Civil War painting of a bones player.

Ervin remembers when bone players were a regular part of Southern folk music, performing alongside banjo pickers and guitarists. Because his son, Eric Ervin, loves to play the banjo, the two are making a recording for family and friends.

Eric Ervin said his father is glad to share his experiences with younger people, though he doesn't want to be known as a folk musician.

For the past seven years, Ervin has performed for students at Lakewood Elementary School during its cultural fair in January.

Dave Duzan, a teacher at Lakewood, said that what's most impressive about Ervin is the patience with which he works with young musicians.

During last summer's Blues and Heritage Festival in Port Townsend, Ervin originally had planned to attend only a country-blues workshop.

In the end, he played the bones with the Ethel Caffie-Austin singers, a gospel group from West Virginia.

The Centrum Arts and Education program, which hosts the festival every August, may invite Ervin to be a blues instructor after a number of festival goers commented on his performance.

"There's a lot of interest in old country blues because people want to be personally connected to the music," Centrum spokesman Keven Elliff said.

Bone playing is part of what Elliff classified as old Southern blues, which fell out of favor in the 1950s as the Chicago blues emphasized electric guitars. The bones can be heard in the background of the Harlem Globetrotters' theme song, "Sweet Georgia Brown."

"Clif is taking the relics of past life and using them in a new way," he said. *John DeWeese* Used with permission.

(*Russ Myers Memorial Continued from page 1*)

the Madison County Historical Society. In an adjoining room, ladies from Wilma's church, the Madison Presbyterian Church, were setting out finger food for after the ceremony.

At the appointed hour of 2:00 PM, Penn Bowers, Vice-President of the Madison County Historical Society, welcomed everyone. In the audience were Wilma, her son, David, daughter, Jennifer, grandson, Colman, and granddaughter, Katie. RBS members included Sharon Mescher from Iowa, Scott and Helen Miller from St. Louis, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet from Florida and me, Steve Wixson, from Tennessee. Virginians attending were Kenny Wolin from the DC area and John and Sarah Davis from close-by New Canton.

Penn introduced me and I said the following (as best as I can remember.)

"Welcome also from the Rhythm Bones Society and our members present and thanks for helping us remember Russell Bordley Myers, a rhythm bones virtuoso.

"Rhythm bones are among the oldest of musical instruments, most likely prehistoric. Early artifacts have been found in China and Mesopotamia. They had a thousand year run in Egypt, then moved to Greece and Rome. We know they were in England as Shakespeare has Bottom to say in *A Mid Summer's Night Dream*, "I have a rather good ear in music. Let us have the tongs and bones." They came to the States and were one of four instruments that started the almost 100 year Minstrel Music era with Mr Bones playing the rhythm bones, Mr Tambo playing the tambourine and fiddle and banjo. The Irish get credit for keeping rhythm bones alive for the past several decades. They play one handed while others play two handed as did Russ.

"The concept for this memorial began soon after Russ' funeral. A few members attended the funeral and were given a copy of the Possum Ridge String Band's CD *On The Road Again* that features Russ playing rhythm bones and telling stories. This was such a great way to remember Russ that other members wanted a copy. We asked the Band if we could

have copies, and they said yes asking only that members make a donation of any size for a yet to be determined memorial of Wilma's choosing. Members responded and almost \$450 was donated.

"The RBS Board mulled over the donations, and the idea gelled that we make a video from all of the photographs and video from our annual Bones Fests (or Festivals). We contacted Wilma and she liked the idea. She introduced us to the Madison Country Historical Society, and while they liked the idea they did not have a way to play the video. Well, it turned out that there were enough donations for a TV with a built in DVD player. Peter Bramley from the band has electronics contacts and helped us get the best TV for the monies available.

"The *Russ Myers Memorial Video* will be on display in the Kemper Residence after this ceremony and at your leisure you can view it. Later it will be at the Madison County Historical Society building for public viewing.

"I am the video editor and let me tell you about our great Irish narrator. The Chieftains are one of Ireland's national treasures and have been performing together for over a quarter of a century. If you like Irish music, I'm sure you've heard of them. Their first rhythm bones and bodhrán (the Irish drum) player was Peadar Mercier who with his contemporaries get credit for reviving rhythm bones and bodhrán in Irish music.

"His son, Mel, is also a great rhythm bones and bodhrán and has performed all over the world. Mel came to the states to work on his doctorate, and eventually selected rhythm bones for this PhD thesis. His research led him to Russ and they met and became friends. Mel and later Mel and his wife visited Russ and Wilma in their home where Mel interviewed Russ for hours and hours. Mel without hesitation volunteered to narrate the video and you will love his wonderful Irish accent.

"The video opens with Russ playing at Bones Fest V. This is followed by early details of his life and marriage to Wilma. His rhythm bones accomplishments are followed by one of his best bones stories from the pre-

viously mentioned CD about people right here in Madison County.

"The Rhythm Bones Society was formed on the back porch of Russ and Wilma's home and the video highlights this and shows Russ' great knowledge the history of rhythm bones. Russ was one of the few people who could change the pitch of his rhythm bones without changing the position of the bones in his hands. The video shows him sharing this 'secret' with other bones players. There are more clips of Russ performing at Bones Fests.

"There is another track from the previously mentioned CD of Russ playing with the Band. There are photograph from Bones Fest X, his last Bones Fest. In one photograph, Russ is in the center of almost 100 of his rhythm bones family. The video ends with the memorial garden Wilma made in the backyard of her home.

"Mel Mercier's closing remarks from the video are a great tribute to Russ. "For those in the Rhythm Bones community and the many others blessed by the gift of his laughter and music, Russ Myers was a pure joy. His memory is cherished by many and his spirit and his music live on."

"We of the Rhythm Bones Society are happy we can contribute to this memory with the *Russ Myers Memorial Video*. We will add this video to our [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website, and it will be there for many years to come."

At that point I introduced several members who added their tribute to Russ. Kenny Wolin made some personal comments and finished with the story of how Russ became the first and maybe only rhythm bones player in an ROTC band. Sharon Mescher, who was raised in Virginia and just knew that Russ was a Baptist, told how she did not believe him when he said he was Catholic. They attended Mass together at future Bones Fests. Scott Miller at his first Bones Fest performed on stage with his two young children. Later when he met Russ, who had performed right after him, Russ told him seriously and jokingly, "Don't you know how hard it is to perform after children." They became friends. Mary Lee Sweet re-

(*Continued on page 8*)

(Continued from page 7)

membered how Russ liked the sound of her cow bones, but would not trade for his whale bones. He taught her his pitch change secret.

Whit Whitfield added a tribute from the Band. He noted that Russ made them better—not only his rhythm bones playing, but his wonderful storytelling. They would love to have a rhythm bones player in the band again.

There was a musical tribute with all rhythm bones players joining with the band. Russ and Wilma's daughter and later their son joined in.

I formally present Penn with two copies of the *Russ Myers Memorial Video*. Then I called on Wilma and presented her a copy. Penn made a few closing remarks and invited people to see the memorial and have some refreshments.

What followed was a mini-Bones Fest with the band playing for a least an hour and a half after the ceremony. There are several photographs of this and the other festivities on Pages 4 and 5. Many in the audience stayed for the entire mini-Fest.

In retrospect, I cannot imagine doing anything different than was done. Wilma and her family were most appreciative for the support by RBS and her community. There were lots of hugs and kisses.

Clouds rolled in during the ceremony, and as the min-Fest was winding down, I felt a few drops of rain. I looked up and wondered. "This couldn't be tears from heaven for Russ, could it?" *Steve Wixson*



The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (Songs to the Virgin Mary) are manuscripts written in Galician-Portuguese, with music notation, during the reign of Alfonso X *El Sabio* (1221-1284) and are one of the largest collections of monophonic (solo) songs from the Middle Ages. All of the songs at least mention the Virgin Mary, and every 10th is a religious hymn. Some of the manuscripts containing this music also contain colored miniatures showing pairs of musicians playing a wide variety of instruments, the one above being a medieval trumpet player with a female rhythm bones player. The reference to this is from a book found by member Scott Miller titled *The Bones Book* by Sue Hess, aka, The Bones Lady. Cantigas text from Wikipedia.

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 11, No. 3 2009

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Bones Fest XIII

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William Sidney  
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and the Antebel-  
lum Creole Syn-  
thesis

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## Executive Director's Column

Congratulations to Linda and Gil Hibben for hosting what all reports indicate was another spectacular Bones Fest. Although attendance was slightly down, the standard of play was extremely high, as witnessed by what should be the best documentation of a bones fest so far. Audio and Video recording of the event promises to make those of us who missed it envious and proud at the same time. By the way, thanks to all who expressed concern for my son Jeremy. He is happy and well, although we are in the process of evaluating his health for the future. He was thrilled to

receive the cards signed by Bones Fest attendees, and is practicing for next year.

Seems like yesterday that I received word that an organization dedicated to the preservation and proliferation of the art of playing the rhythm bones had been inaugurated at Russ and Wilma Myers house in Brightwood, VA at Bones Fest III in 1999. What surprised and honored me was my nomination to the Board of this fledgling organization without even having been there. After years of playing bones alone,

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Our 10th Anniversary Party



Bones Fest XIII attendees celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society singing "Happy Birthday to us." From left to right are Mike Passerotti, Ev Cowett, Martha Cowett, Scott Miller, Val Cowett, Spike Bones, Frank Sweet, Mary Lee Sweet, Arthur Kastler, Mitch Boss, Bill Vits, Dave Boyles, Walt Watkins, Teri Davies, Kenny Wolin, Randy Seppala, Joanne Harper, Mike Korec, Jonathan Danforth, Dutch Kopp, Annette Boss and Steve Wixson. Not shown are Brian Allee, Mark Hammond, Hosts Gil and Linda Hibben, Wildwood Dean and Della Price, Mary Seel and Phil Thomas.

## Highlights of Bones Fest XIII

Once again, we had the pleasure of hosting a 'Bones Fest,' this time Bones Fest XIII. First, we thank Mike Carter for suggesting the Clifton Center in Louisville, KY. It turned out to be exactly what we needed. From seminar rooms to a fully equipped kitchen to a beautiful stage and theater seating. The lighting and sound was superb, and our professional Fest recording is great! Check out the highlights in the photographs on Pages 4 & 5.

On Friday night we had a catered pizza party at the Clifton center, enough pizza of various types and drinks to feed a small army! That night hap-

pened to be the birthday of Spike Bones' mother and he had a special surprise for her—a cake and a Happy Birthday song.

We had a wonderful selection of 'Bones' vendors, probably the largest selection we have seen to date. It was really fun to hear everyone picking up new bones and trying them out, some of the sounds were just amazing.

We want to thank Martha Cummings for letting us rope her into being the MC for the evening.. We have to say she did one heck of a

*(Continued on page 8)*

## Editorial

Bones Fest XIII is over and there is something to that number 13. Steve Brown planned on bringing his son Jeremy, but as they were about to leave for the airport, Jeremy became ill and they both did not make it. Jonathan Danforth made it to Charlotte, but it then took him 10 hours to get to Louisville. Other than that the Fest was great and we got great video and multichannel audio for our first CD/DVD that we can sell to the public.

There were many Fest highlights for me, but none more meaningful than to see member Mary Seel. Mary, who is fighting cancer, wasn't sure she could make it to the Fest. But make it she did, and was a delight in person and on stage. She already knew many of us who had contacted her following the article about her that appeared in the Vol. 10, No 1 newsletter. She expressed warm thanks to everyone, and said, "Lord willing, I'll see you at Bones Fest XIV."

Gil and Linda Hibben present highlights starting on Page 1, and there are many photographs on Pages 4 and 5.

Many of the photographs in this issue were taken by Mary Lee Sweet who was one of the 'sweetest' attendees at the Fest. Over the years, Mary Lee and Frank have attended every Fest since their first Fest in Greensboro and shared their talents (see [backintyme.com](http://backintyme.com).) Mary Lee also shot video at all of these Fests and provided us with a copy for our growing library of rhythm bones history. Our thanks, Mary Lee.

## Letters to the Editor

Thank you so much for that wonderful DVD. And thanks also for the memorial dedication—what a wonderful tribute to Russ. I appreciate all of the time and effort that went into putting it all together. It was a wonderful day.

I spend last Friday with Joy and Walt Watkins. They were here for a Germanna reunion (something to do with searching genealogy) and for their daughter's wedding next weekend. We went to the arcade so they could see the video and 'bones dis-

play.' Had a good visit. *Wilma Myers*

Good Day to Steve Wixson, Steve Brown and Everett Cowett. I'm feeling fine for my age, but I lost my Juliette last February. I'm hoping sincerely in a near future to be present at Bones Fest No?. My respects to all members. *Gerard Arseneault*

I regret to inform you that Tom Raisbeck passed away August 9, 2002. He made many sets of bones and took them with him on a medical mission to Haiti in 2000, and they were a big hit with the Haitians. Sincerely, *Elberta Raisbeck* [Tom was a RBS member.]

I thought you might enjoy this quote from one of my customers. *Scott Miller*. "Bones, well, they're like the crack of the percussion world, you either don't indulge or you're an addict. There is no in between." *Matt Holcomb*, Middletown, Maryland

We're home, made it safe and sound. I have never had so much fun in my life!!! I am really looking forward to the DVD and Bones Fest XIV. Every one we met was extremely nice, helpful, and wonderful to have as bones friends. Keep up the good work! If I can help in any way let me know. *Wildwood Dean 'n' Della*

## Website of the Quarter

### [www.mrbonesjohncahill.com](http://www.mrbonesjohncahill.com).

Just a note to tell you John Cahill is still with us, but having a lot of problems lately - especially with breathing. I still play music videos for him every day and sometimes he claps along with the music, but doesn't play his bones anymore - only imaginary ones as he moves both hands as if playing sometimes, but he can't hold them.

For Father's Day, his son, Pat, gave him a gift of this website so I could tell the story about how he is Mr. Bones! I am working on it at the present, and it is still under construction. I have a lot of photos to put on it which I plan to do next week—one page has a slide show.

Guess you guys are at the Bones Fest. John would have loved it, and so would I. I hope to make a memorial video of John as well. Pat is a videographer so he will do it for me when I get the script put together. *Kay Cahill*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

(Continued from page 1)

like minded individuals had dedicated themselves to the continuation of the art. Ev Cowett and Russ Myers, strongly influenced by Fred Edmunds, were the driving force in our birth. Since that time we have lost some dear friends, Russ Myers included, and gained an awareness that our little instrument has enormous potential beyond our initial horizons. The bones has survived for literally thousands of years, and we have written a new chapter in its history with an organization which represents the first of it's kind in it's long history. Happy Anniversary to you, RBS members, may you long prosper, and continue to bring our instrument into the forefront of societies everywhere.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Ev Cowett and Jerry Mescher for their hard work and dedication to RBS and service on the board of directors. Ev has been not only our founder, but our guiding light since the inception of the RBS. Jerry has been a monument of talent and wis-



dom in his service on the Board. Thanks so much to both of you, and I look forward to your continued involvement in Bones Fests and the organization in general.

I want to also take this opportunity to welcome Kenny Wolin and Bill Vits to the Board of Directors. Bill and Kenny each came to the bones as I did through Percy Danforth, and each has a wealth of talent as evidenced by their performances throughout the years. I look forward to working with each of you.

And finally, a big congratulations to Kenny Wolin and Teri Davies, who met at a Bones Fest, who became engaged at our most recent Bones Fest, and who, from all accounts, will be married at a Bones Fest. I personally wish you all the luck and happiness in the future. *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order at 11:30 AM in the basement of the Clifton Center by Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, in the absence of Executive Director, Steve Brown. Members present were Ev Cowett, Jonathan Danforth, Gil, and Steve Wixson. Visitors included BFXIII attendees.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the last Board meeting and the motion was made, seconded and passed to approve the minutes as read.

Steve Wixson gave a preliminary Treasurer's Report as of August 19th, 2009. The final report will be sent to each Board member after the end of this Fiscal year.

The Board acting as the Nominating Committee nominated the current members to serve another year.

The following motions that were approved by email were read into the record; give Ted Goon DVD to members, buy a TV/DVD for the Russ Myers project, approve the BFXIII budget and set the registration fee, approve the BFXIII Live CD/DVD project, approve the BFXIII live music expense (Rascals of Ragtime), approve funding to add two musicians to BFXIII Ceili band, approve funding to video BFXIII for the CD/DVD pro-

ject, and approve funding to purchase Dreamweaver for our website.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to reimburse Mike Passerotti for \$100 that he spent for our ASCAP Festival license. The Board thanked Mike for his work.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to rescind the Dreamweaver motion described above as our website upgrade needs more study.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to rescind the motion authorizing \$300 for youth bones as this is several years old with no action. There was discussion about this subject since youth rhythm bones players are important to our future.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:50 AM. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order at 11:50 AM in the same room as the Board meeting by Gil Hibben, Assistant Director acting in place of Steve Brown, Executive Director. There were 21 members present.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the General Membership meeting held at Bones Fest XII and a motion was made, second and approved to accept the minutes as read.

An election of Officers and Board Members was held. The Nominating Committee nominated the current Officers and Board Members to serve for another year. Nominations were opened to the floor and Bill Vits and Kenny Wolin were nominated as Members at Large.

Elections were held individually for each officer position and a motion was made, seconded and approved that each be elected by acclamation. Paper ballots were passed out and members voted for four of the six nominees for Board Member at Large. Mary Lee Sweet and Scott Miller served as tellers and the following were elected to the Board; Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier, Bill Vits and Kenny Wolin.

Old Business. The website upgrade

was discussed and Martha Cowett who originally created our website volunteered to help webmaster Jonathan Danforth with upgrades including video and more content.

New Business. The website discussion lead to a vigorous discussion of declining membership numbers. The motion was made, seconded and approved to establish a Membership Committee to study this problem and report findings to the Board. Jonathan Danforth will chair this committee, and Scott Miller and Mike Passerotti are members.

Gil queried the members about a host and location for BFXIX. Steve Wixson reported that Dennis Reidesel had two possibilities in Texas and Mike Passerotti had some ideas about Cincinnati. Ken Wolin also mentioned the possibility of the Washington, DC area. Scott Miller noted that he has heard from several of his West Coast customers who would like a Bones Fest closer to them. The Board will follow up.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:40 PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Recording of the Quarter

*Canton Express/Township Express* features member Robert (Bob) Goulet on rhythm bones. The duet, *Claire & Laurencio* started in 1999, and performed in many Canadian provinces and in U.S.A. In February 2008, they met Bob (Bones) Goulet at a traditional jam in Sutton, Quebec, and the trio, *La Vent Des Cantons*, was born.

There are 14 tracks on the CD. Musicians include Laurencio Beaudin on accordion and feet percussions, Claire Ouellet with lead vocal, piano and saxophone, Bob Goulet with rhythm bones and syncopated percussions and guest musician Marcelle Lefebvre on mandolin.

There are rhythm bones on 8 tracks. They are well balanced with the other musicians and Bob is quite good.

To order, check out their website: [www.leventdescantons.com](http://www.leventdescantons.com).

See where going to a jam can lead.

## Photographs from Bones Fest XIII



From left to right. Our hotel welcome sign by Annette Boss, Martha Cummings our MC and performer, Mike Passerotti with harmonica and bones, Val and Ev Cowett with Val on the bones, Mary Seel, Brian Allee, Host Linda Hibben (with grand daughter) who Gil says did all of the work, Dutch Kopp playing the bones and using them as the Bodhran striker, Kenny Wolin surprise on-stage proposal of marriage to Teri Davies, Randy Seppala with the silver spoons, Spike Bones with a bone, Kenny Wolin using the chalkboard during his Advanced Workshop, Kenny and students during his Advanced Workshop (note Randy's tribute to the late John Perona on the wall), and Bill Vits' Advanced Workshop with bones and drums. He is surrounded by the Bones Marketplace.



From left to right. Dave Boyles with the Rascal of Ragtime Band, Host Gil Hibben with our own Ceili band with Jonathan Danforth on fiddle, Cathy Wilde on flute and whistle, Larry Green on fiddle, Kenny Wolin on concertina and Teri Davies on guitar, Della and Wildwood Dean Price, Bill Vits, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet with their backup boys Steve Wixson and Scott Miller, Kenny Wolin with Teri Davies on the Hurdy Gurdy, whistling Jonathan Danforth, the duo of Mitch Boss and Walt Watkins, and the Grand Finale with host Gil Hibben in the middle leading . One of the videographers can be seen on the left. Photographs by Mary Lee Sweet plus stills extracted from Mike Carter's videos. As you might now imagine, his recorded video is outstanding.



## Bones at the Museum of Fine Arts

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is known as the home of the painting of *The Bone Player* by William Sidney Mount, but it also houses a fine musical instrument collection, including one of the last known Harps of the Irish Golden age of Harpers dated 1734.

In December of last year I was contacted by a local TV station looking to do an article on the bones. My house being too far from Boston for the film crew to travel to, the natural second choice was the Museum of Fine Arts. I had visions of standing next to *The Bone Player* playing the bones.

When Ted Weinstein of WCVB confirmed our shoot at the Museum, he had the good news and the bad news. The bad being that *The Bone Player* was in storage, and unavailable for the shoot. The good news was that we were to do the filming in the musical instrument collection, which also houses a fine set of ebony bones dated to the mid 1800's.

After arriving at the museum it didn't take me long to launch into my usual diatribe on bones, bone playing and bone players. When I paused for air, Darcey Kuronen, Curator of the collection jumped in to ask me to come again as part of their lecture series on instruments in their collection.

Accompanied by my trusty companion, Sligoman Raymond Henry on flute, we gave them a good bit of "craic" including the *Battering Ram Jig*, and a set of polka's Raymond's mother taught him.

Our 1min and 48 sec appearance on TV came off quite well, and arrangements were made for our appearance as part of the lecture series.

So it was on a snowy day just before St.Patrick's Day that Raymond and I, he on the flute and I on the bones, played our little performance before 20 or so museum patrons. They were quite gracious as I recanted the bones history, including the Rhythm Bones Society, and our part in preserving the bones.

And Darcey, between a barrage of jokes, invited us to return in the fall to

give an encore performance, and, hopefully, tell the bones story to an additional generation. *Steve Brown*

## *The Bone Player*, William Sidney Mount (1807-68), the Rhythm Bones, and the Antebellum Creole Synthesis

I'm currently working on a book project about the factors that combined to create, in antebellum North America, the musical genres of blackface minstrelsy. In this article, I'll pay particular attention to the Long Island vernacular painter William Sidney Mount's 1856 *The Bone Player*, seeking to unpack its musicological implications and historical significance. Mount, an amateur musician as well as visual artist, created a number of sketches and paintings of vernacular music-making which included black figures. These works, including the well-known *The Banjo Player* (1856) and most especially *Dance of the Haymakers* (1845) not only form an interesting portrait of Antebellum musical practices, but also depict with remarkable precision the interaction of Anglo-Celtic and African-American dance and music in this period. I want to focus particularly on the cultures of two islands—Long Island and Manhattan—that shaped Mount's musical and artistic world, and the way those worlds play out in Mount's iconic *The Bone Player* (1856).

By the mid-1700s African-Americans represented more than 15% of New York's population, with the vast majority living and working in close proximity to whites in small rural households; both slaves and free men of color worked in agriculture, carpentry, weaving, butchering, coopering, whaling, fishing, violin and fife playing, choir directing, sheep shearing, brickmaking, salt making, and shipbuilding.

In other articles I have traced the extensive demographic interactions and shared occupations of blacks and whites (especially Irish) in similar lo-

cales, and have argued for their musical exchange. African-Americans had provided valuable music services since the 17<sup>th</sup> century: as dance fiddlers, and as drummers and fifers in colonial armies. This was particularly true on Long Island and the Lower East Side: Hans Nathan, for example, cites a "Long Island Breakdown and Smokehouse Dance" and says "The 'Long Island Negroes,' in particular, were often mentioned as skilled dancers"; while Thomas Rice's theatrical hit *Long Island Juba, or, Love in a Bushel* [1833] and the Long Island birth of dancer William Henry Lane [c1825-1852/53], "Master Juba," reinforce the connection. Likewise, Washington Irving's early book *Salmagundi* includes a lengthy account having attended a ball in "Hayti", and describes a white dancer's performance skills thus: "He could whistle like a northwester; play on a three-stringed fiddle like Apollo; and as to dancing, no Long Island negro could shuffle you 'double-trouble' or 'hoe corn and dig potatoes' [characteristic steps] more scientifically."<sup>2</sup>

Here, I wish to focus particularly on the 1856 *The Bones Player*, in which Mount creates a heroic portrait of a musician who is confident, proud of his skills and his craft, and commanding the most fundamental parameter in dance music--the rhythm. Mount captures the physical moment and the full-body physical choreography the bones require. The *Bone Player* is a dancer, playing for dancers, driving and commenting upon the rhythm of the ensemble and of the polyrhythms of the dancers' feet.

Of all Mount's portraits, the *Bone Player* provides the most direct painterly reminder of the ethnic diversity that obtained in the North as well as South Atlantic. Afro-Caribbean musical aesthetics, repertoires, and musicians were widely represented in Long Island: the communities of the Sound had a large black population, many employed in the maritime trades, and traded regularly with the Sugar Islands of Barbados and Martinique.

In the painting, Mount employs visual references which symbolize itinerancy—the loosely-tied cravat, rumpled white shirt, fancy waistcoat, and

greatcoat—but also those which elsewhere convey independence, most notably the jaunty though ragged slouch hat, and, in an ornamental touch which explicitly evokes the Afro-Caribbean creole culture, a swashbuckling earring in the left ear. He likewise symbolizes the marginal spaces of the highway and the public house, by including both a fiddle case and a pitcher with glasses. This is not a wealthy or middle-class-respectable musician: he is too ragged and marginal a figure (he has not even doffed his coat in order to play, and his waistcoat is missing at least one button), but there is no question that this Bone Player is in command of his music, of the musical situation, and of his profession. Linked to Mount's depiction of the banjo and fiddles in earlier portraits is his rendering here of the bones: not only is the instrument's necessary and very specific physical technique absolutely accurate, but equally important is the carved decoration of the bones themselves. In *The Bone Player* Mount depicts a musician who is sufficiently proud, confident of and commanding in his trade that he carves decorations in the bone surfaces of his professional tools.

The anatomical and kinesthetic expertise in this painting can be further revealed through familiarity with the instrument's physical technique. The bones were traditionally made from polished pieces of cow's or sheep's rib, which produced high-density, resonant striking surfaces with the requisite backward curve. With loose and flexible grip, a twisting "snap" of the wrist, similar to flicking water from the fingers, permits the pivoting bones to strike against one another.

The choreographic result of the requisite technique links the bones particularly directly to the African tradition's integration of music-and-dance. In performance, the bones player's body—not just hands, but wrists, arms, and shoulders, and thus upper body to the pelvis—is directly implicated in the requisite technique. The very act of realizing the music's polyrhythms on the instrument requires that the player's body *itself* become part of the dance. This is a competent, skillful, commanding, even heroic musical so-

phisticate, the presence of whose instrument, like the droning, percussive, polyrhythmic textures of the banjo, would have skewed *every* musical situation toward the Africanisms of Long Island's creole synthesis.

This essay has been the most cursory sketch and example of some of the musicological and historiographic significance of Mount's works as a lens through which I am seeking to "see" the conditions that made the roots of the blackface synthesis possible. Though space constrains further discussion, I can state with considerable confidence that Mount's experience and evidence, the musics he heard and the musical exchanges he depicted, were not isolated, and go far to confirm the presence and—in Mount's case—the specific musical detail, of Anglo-African exchange in riverine and maritime contexts across North America—the North and South Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf Coasts; the canal works of the Erie, Ohio, and Pontchartrain; the river ports of the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri. These contexts provided the circumstances, contact, musical affinities, and aesthetic propensities out of which blackface, and musicians like *The Bone Player*, were to emerge, and quite literally take over the western world. *Christopher Smith*

Appendix: William Sidney Mount on the web: *Dance of the Haymakers* <http://tinyurl.com/pmjjmc>

*The Banjo Player* <http://www.minstrelbanjo.com/mount4.jpg>

*The Bone Player* <http://tinyurl.com/q5fltn> (see photograph on Page 8)

Footnotes: <sup>1</sup>Nathan, 61-62.

<sup>2</sup>[72; Irving, *Salmagundi and Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus*; from *The Works of Washington Irving V* (New York: The Co-operative Publication Society, Inc., n.d.)] For the Ichabod Crane reference, see Irving (1783-1859) *The Sketch Book*: from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow": "And now the sound of the music from the common room, or hall, summoned to the dance. The musician was an old gray-headed negro, who had been the itinerant orchestra of the neighborhood for more than half a century. His instrument was as old and battered as himself. The greater part of the time he scrape on two or three strings, accompanying every movement of the bow with a motion of the head; bowing almost to the ground, and stamping with his foot whenever a fresh couple were to start...[Ichabod] was the admiration of all the negroes; who, having gathered, of all ages and sizes, from the farm and the neighborhood, stood forming a pyramid of shin-

ing black faces at every door and window, gazing with delight at the scene, rolling their white eyeballs, and showing grinning rows of ivory from ear to ear." [372]

<sup>2</sup>The author well remembers in late 1970s Cambridge Massachusetts hearing and playing with the late John "Mr Bones" Burrill (1922-90), who had learned the bones from watching 1930s minstrel troupes, and who, despite a twisted spine which made walking itself difficult, was not only a virtuoso percussionist but had also been a champion jitterbugger.

[Our special thanks to Chris for creating this short work for us from the book project he mentioned.]

## NTCMA Bones Contest Winners

We had a good one this year, and already looking forward to your members being with us next year.

The winner of our Bones Contest was none other than the famous bones player, Donnie DeCamp, from Redfield, Iowa. He's now 83 years old, still travels—but not so far anymore, and still plays with the same exuberance and endurance he has done throughout his lifetime of playing this marvelous musical instrument. Second place was Jeff Osthus, and third place went to Harriett Andersen. Come see us, it's a wonderful festival. *Bob Everhart*

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XIV.** July 23-25, 2010, near Washington, DC in historic Old Town Alexandria, VA.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 30-September 7, 2010. Bones Contest is traditional on that Saturday.

## Mr. Goon Bones DVDs Mailed

The Mr. Goon Bones Memorabilia DVD described in the Vol 11, No 1, issue of the newsletter was distributed to attendees at Bones Fest XIII and mailed to the rest of the members a couple of weeks ago. If you have not received one of these, contact Steve Wixson at [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net).



*(Continued from page 1)*

job and her brother, Al Cowett, who was MC for many Fests, better watch out. Martha, you are the best!!

Steve Brown was dearly missed as he had a last minute emergency involving his son, Jeremy. We are happy to report that Jeremy is doing fine

We'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Steve Brown researching and arranging for the live music we had at this year's event. The Dixieland Band, *The Rascals of Ragtyme* were just awesome—they ROCKED.

Our Ceili Band was just as amazing with Jonathan Danforth on fiddle and Kenny Wolin on concertina, and Teri Davies on her Martin guitar. They were joined by local musicians Cathy Wilde on flute and whistle and Larry Green on fiddle. Amazing how everyone who played with this group did so with precision and FUN!

A big highlight was when Kenny Wolin proposed to Teri Davies on stage. He dropped to one knee and, in front of all of us, popped the question. Teri was stunned; she said yes! How cool is that??? *Gil and Linda Hibben*

## Our Mary Seel Died

We just learned that Mary Seel, who many of us met in person for the first time at Bones Fest XIII, died on her 84th birthday, September 28, one month after the Fest. Suffering from terminal cancer, it seems she willed her self alive to attend the Fest. The next issue will have her obituary. If you would like to express your feelings about her, please send them to me. What a lady! *Steve Wixson*



The Bone Player by William Sidney Mount. See article on Page 6. Photograph from The Print Shop Art Gallery.

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# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 11, No. 4 2009

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## Executive Director’s Column

10 years ago several visionaries were inspired to begin an organization based on the rhythm bones. They were trying to buy a sort of insurance policy to ensure that the instrument would continue, continue to be played, but continue to be taught and proliferated.

You see I think their greatest fear was that the instrument would recede to a point where it would only be known in its context of the past, and the vast majority of people would only encounter it if they saw a picture of the minstrel show, or read about it in a book. In short, people would forget they existed.

They wanted to make sure that not only did people have a chance to see the instrument being played, but they had a chance to play it themselves.

That they had a chance to experience the great joy each of us experience when we play, but when we see people’s reaction to our playing. They wanted a chance to bring the instrument to another generation by gathering people together whose enthusiasm would spark growth and eventual acceptance by a public too focused technological entertainment, and who had forgotten some of the old ways.

So here we are ten years later. We have a solid core membership, a top notch newsletter, and a yearly opportunity to display our instrument to the public. I think we can be assured that Fred Edmunds would be very pleased by this.

But what of the future, a somewhat shaky

*(Continued on page 6)*

## The Rhythm Bones Society-A Vision Come True

This article reviews the ten year history of the Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) and looks forward to the next ten years.

For those of us who have been around for a while, it’s amazing to see the changes in rhythm bones playing that have occurred during the past ten or so years. RBS has and continues to have an impact on the music world, and the number of known rhythm bones players continues to grow while playing quality improves.

**History.** RBS was the vision of founding father, Everett Cowett (read it below and also see Vol. 8, No. 1.) We organized on the back porch of the home of the late Russ Myers and his wife Wilma. On September 23, 1999, 34 people signed the By-Laws creating an organization whose purpose, as stated in the first issue of the newsletter, is “to preserve, educate, communicate and foster development of rhythm bones sounds and music.” Seven rhythm bones players were elected to the Board of Directors to lead this new society (see Page 4 for short biographies of current and former Board Members.)

**Bones Fests.** Our annual Bones Fests began two years earlier organized by Ev Cowett at the urging of who might be called our founding grandfather, Dr. Fred Edmund, maker and seller of rhythm bones and a great instructional video (see Vol. 5, No. 3). The first ten Bones Fests were re-

viewed in 2006 in a 24 page special Reflections issue of the newsletter.

**Our Website.** What do you give a father who doesn’t want anything? For Martha Cowett Cummings, it was the Rhythm Bones Central website now with the address [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com), and an early home page is shown on Page 6. This website is the source of much information about rhythm bones, and is where many people were

*(Continued on page 7)*



Rhythm Bones Society Logo. The hands are Everett Cowett’s.

# Editorial

The Rhythm Bones Society is ten years old and it's showing. Membership has declined over the past couple of years as has attendance at recent Bones Fests. As Steve Brown said in a Page 22 article in the special Reflections issue of the newsletter celebrating ten years of Bones Fests, "The next 10 years will be a challenge to keep the society together and bones playing exciting and relevant as we pass the mantel to a whole new crop of bones players."

2010 will start off interestingly. There is new blood on the Board with the election of Bill Vits and Kenny Wolin. Bones Fest XIV hosted by Teri Davies and Kenny Wolin is back on the East Coast where we have had our greatest attendance. Martha Cowett Cummings volunteered to help webmaster Jonathan Danforth with upgrades to our website.

The Page 1 article talks about the vision that RBS father, Ev Cowett, had when he hosted Bones Fest I. It is time rethink where we are and update that vision—writing it down so it can be easily shared. Let's try to finalize it at Bones Fest XIV.

The news of Mary Seel's passing barely made the last newsletter. This issue has her obituary including some remembrances from BFXIII attendees.

I had not heard of Charlie Bones, and discovered him on the internet after he died. I wrote his widow and she told us a bit about him.

I almost got to see the Carolina Chocolate Drops perform near Chattanooga and meet rhythm bones player Dom Flemons. Well Dom was nice enough to share his story with us.

New member Adele Megann sent us the short article to the right with this note: "Here's the little article, finally. As you can imagine, it's a crazy time for a school music teacher, between report cards and Christmas concerts. Check out the photo on Page 8.

Several people have suggested a Profile of a Member column, so I have added it to the newsletter. I am going to select members with the most years of membership except for this issue where I am using a profile sent in by Bob Goulet as background for his CD

reviewed in the last issue.

I had the opportunity to help a prospect with kid rhythm bones by suggesting paint stirrers cut in half. Ace, Lowes and Home Depot will give you lots of them if they know you teaching kids. I teach with heavier bones, and then give the kid, after demonstrating that they really work, the paint stirrer bones. Parents like the quiet sound.

One sidebar to the story about Ted 'Mr Goon-Bones' Goon. When I re-read the original article, Ted told about having lunch with the actor, William Holden, who played Goon-Bones. I talked to Holden's son, West, on the telephone, and while he remembered his dad played rhythm bones, he could not provide details other than Holden played drums and bongos. I wanted an interesting story!

Several years ago when my wife and I spent a night in the Lodge at Shenandoah National Park, I had the opportunity to play with Linden Bowman, stage name 'The Classic Hill-billy.' Recently his daughter contacted webmaster Jonathan Danforth and asked him if he could find me (though she did not know my name.) Jonathan sent emails to several members, and I responded. Well, Linden really liked the rhythm bones accompaniment, and now when he has some serious health problems, his daughter wanted some rhythm bones music to comfort him. I supplied that along with a thank you note for letting me play along with him. I really like the things our little Society can do.

## Rhythm Bones at Camp

What was the most energetic thing I did in October? I went to camp with eighty kids, aged nine to twelve. Yes, there's a good reason--I'm an elementary school teacher. Our Grade 4-6 students had been invited for an overnight by the Tim Horton's Camp in Tatamagouche. And no, Nova Scotia's North Shore is not the nicest place to be mid-October. (Snow was spotted.) BUT, I did get to spread the news about rhythm bones.

Just on spec, I brought along five pairs. Sure enough, pouring rain and cold wind canceled the evening's activities. While we were all inside, teachers trying to convince the kids to

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer  
Kenny Wolin

The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

play board games, I sat down in one of a pair of chairs, and started to play by myself. Kids drifted over in groups of two or three ("What are you *doing*, Ms. Megann?"), and tried the rhythm bones out ("What are *those*?").

The four wooden rhythm bones were popular, but many were squeamish about the bone bones! By the end of the evening, almost everyone--kids, teachers and staff--had given rhythm bones a try. Many visited me only once, but a few couldn't help themselves, and kept coming back between card games. A couple of kids caught on to the technique, and others really wanted to!

One Gr. 6 student in particular, Brandon, soon had the basics mastered, and was helping me out by teaching others (see Page 8). We soon had all five pairs going. Since then, I gave him a pair, and he's been practicing at home. Goes to show, you never know when the opportunity will arise to pass on the craft. *Adele Megann*



## Rhythm Bones Player Newsletters on Website

Volumes 1 through 9 of the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter in Adobe PDF format are now available for viewing. They are temporarily on my personal Comcast webpage <https://home.comcast.net/~wixson.s/Newsletters/main.htm>. They were tested with Internet Explorer.

Please try it out and let us know how it works. Consider this a working version while we continue to make changes until it performs like it should. The first change will be a title page with links to each individual newsletter.

The last two volumes of the newsletter will remain in paper form only for members. In January of each year we will add one more volume online.

In addition to looking up specific newsletters, you can do an Adobe text search for other information. This is free to everyone and part of our educational service.



Hans Weehuizen sent us this drawing titled *Lady Plays the Bones* (kleppers in Dutch). It was given to him by a friend who is a collector old music books. It dates back to the 1700s.

## Profile of a Member

I was fortunate enough to be taught to play the rhythm bones at the very young age of seven. Sometimes in life, despite tragic events, good circumstances arise that stay with you all your life.

It all started at the age of three when I battled Polio Mialitis for the next two and a half years. Physio Therapy was difficult for a young kid to do year after year without getting totally disinterested and rebelling.

The small Religious Nun in the convent I lived in after my mothers' death took it upon herself to make sure I did all these exercises. She had been taught to play bones by her father in Cape Breton N.S. when she was a young girl and figures music and bones would motivate me to exercise my arms. It worked because I loved the bones and the music. I especially, in later years enjoyed the rarity of the bones.

I played on stage in front of a live audience for the first time at the age of eight. Thrilling experience!

As a teen and well into my sixties I played the drums in Rock, Country, and Blues bands, all with a pinch of Rhythm Bones thrown in. In my late sixties, I found that carrying around that large drum kit in and out of gigs became work as opposed to fun. So much easier to carry around bones, I got evolved in local Traditional and Folkloric music. From then on, it became "Bones and Bodhran" for me. I have-

n't looked back since.

Le Vent Des Cantons (The Breese Of The Townships) has kept us busy since it started. We have played in venues like "The Montreal Olympic Stadium, The Colleeze in Quebec City, The Maritime Accordion Competition in The Coliseum in Moncton N.B., International Fiddles Competition In Burlington Vt., and so many more.

We are a trio that consists of Piano, Vocals, and Accordion with traditional syncopated percussions.

Claire Ouellette who masters the piano as well as lends her soft singing voice in local Quebec folkloric songs with a blend of alto saxophone playing as well. She is talented in her ability to work the audience as the Francophone M.C. for our group.

Laurencio Beaudin, Quebec Grand Champion Accordion Player 2008, playing any one of five different diatonic accordions, puts out a toe-stamping beat one can't sit still to. Equipped with wireless microphones, he makes it a point to leave the stage and play for the folks in the audience much like a troubadour.

As for myself; I play rhythm bones, bodhran, wood block with drumsticks along with an array of other light percussion instruments. My duties also include parading in the audience demonstrating the bones. My wireless mike lets me talk to the audience in English. A truly Bilingual band!

On [www.leventdescantons.com](http://www.leventdescantons.com) one can find a variety of real bones as well as starter kits for young people. I also make them out of Oak, Maple, Teak, Ash, wooden bones at affordable prices. *Bob Goulet*

[See last quarter's Recording of the Quarter or their website to order their latest CD.]

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XIV.** July 23-25, 2010, Old Towne Alexandria, VA. More details in the next issue.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 30-September 5, 2010. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## The Carolina Chocolate Drops' Dom Flemons

I first learned to play the bones from a woman that I met at the Mount Airy Fiddler's Convention in Mount Airy, NC in the summer of 2006. The group I play with, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, had had our first CD release party during the festival. We had finished selling CDs to the crowd when this woman approached me.

She asked me if I played the bones. I told her "no". She then responded by telling me that I needed to learn the instrument because it was part of the tradition. She placed the bones in my hand and showed me how to do it. She then told me that the bones were her family's instrument and told me a wonderful story of owning her uncle's bones which he had kept with him all the way through Europe in WWII. The bones, she said, were light as a feather when she got them and they still had the imprint of his hand on the smooth surface.

After a few months, I went to teach at Common Ground on the Hill in Maryland which is where I met Washington, DC bones player, Mike Baytop. Mike learned from an older man named Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas (I've heard his name pop up time

and time again) and what Mike showed me was that the bones can work with any type of music.

The third element of my playing developed when I began to reexamine the older minstrel band picture. The bones players in most pictures are depicted with their hands up in the air. I then began to try and interpret movements I saw in the pictures and found that not only did it work, but it took the experience of playing the bones to a whole other level.

With these lessons I had learned the basic skills that I use now in my playing. I have also found that the bones have single-handedly changed the way that I approach any other instrument that I play.

At the moment, I play a pair of cow ribs in my left hand and I play a pair of Osage Orange in my right. *Dom Flemons*

[To see Dom play rhythm bones, go to these two youtube links; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLazWX8uxPU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLazWX8uxPU) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xOxHyTP91c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xOxHyTP91c) .]

Mike Baytop had a stroke last February, but is recovering. Mike and Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas had planned on attending Bones Fest III, but Richard had some health problem that kept them away. Mike attended the Friday night session of Bones Fest VIII in Reston, VA

## Profile of Current and Past Board Members



**Stephen Brown**, Board Member from 1999 to 2002, Assistant Director from 2002 to 2004 and Executive Director since 2004. Steve learned to play the bones from Percy Danforth in 1978. He was featured lecturer at the MFA in Boston, won the All Ireland Bones Championship in 2003 and 2004, and is on the staff of the Comhaltha Music School. Hosted Bones Fest V.



**Sally Carroll**, Board Member from 1999 to 2005. Sally is a sailor and knows the maritime history of rhythm bones. At the time she went on the Board, she had been playing for less than six months (and had gotten very good) and she represented the beginning rhythm bones player. Hosted Bones Fest VIII.



Dom Flemons of the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Photograph by Scott Legato. Used with permission.



**Everett Cowett**, Executive Director from 1999 to 2004 and then Board Member until 2009. See Vol 8, No. 1 for a complete biography of Ev. Hosted Bones Fests I, II and VI.



**Jonathan Danforth**, Board Member since 2005 and Webmaster since 2002. Hosted Bones Fest X. Grandson of rhythm bones legend Percy Danforth.



**Gil Hibben**, Board Member from 2002 to 2004 and Assistant Director since 2004. Hosted Bones Fest VII and XIII. Makes bones including bones for kids. Has lead our finale at Bones Fests since BFVII.



**Mel Mercier**, Board Member since 1999. A more complete biography was published in Vol 4, No. 2.



**Jerry Mescher**, Board Member from 1999 to 2009. See Vol 8, No. 4 for more about Jerry.



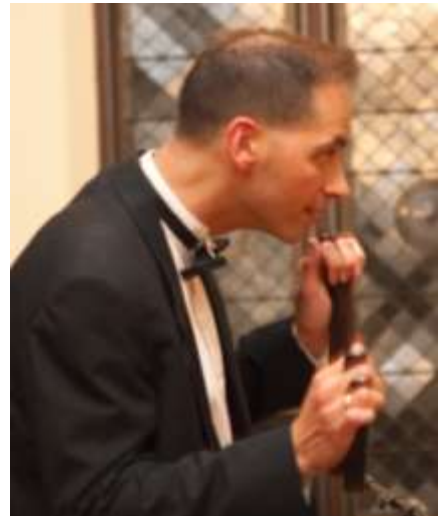
**Russ Myers**, deceased, Assistant Director from 1999 to 2002. See Vol 5, No. 2 for more about Russ. Hosted Bones Fest III.



**Steve Wixson**. Secretary/Treasurer and Newsletter Editor since 1999. He learned to play one-handed from his father, and after attending Bones Fest II became a two-handed rhythm bones player. He says he is a jack of all trades (that is of rhythms and different kinds of bones) and master of none. He gets paid to play, so considers himself a professional rhythm bones player. He hosted Bones Fest IV and IX.



**Bill Vits**, Board Member 2010. Bill learned the rhythm bones from Percy Danforth in Ann Arbor 1978. Since finding his 'bones family' on the internet he has attended 5 Bones Fests over the years. Bill is the Principal Percussionist with the Grand Rapids Symphony and plays drums with surf rock combo, The Concussions.



**Kenny Wolin**, Board Member 2010. Co-hosting Bones Fest XIV. Kenny first learned the rhythm bones from Percy Danforth in 1979. This musical passion led him to the Bonesfest XIII engagement to our very own Teri Davies, as well as the anticipated Bonesfest XIV wedding. Kenny is a percussionist with "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band and plays bones and concertina with "The President's Own" Irish Ensemble at the White House.

# Bones Fest XIV

Old Towne  
Alexandria, VA

July 23-25, 2010

Hosted by  
Teri Davies  
and Kenny Wolin

**PUT IT ON YOUR  
CALENDAR NOW**

More details in next

## Mary Bachelor Seel Obituary

In a note from Mary's son, John: "Mary passed away yesterday morning (September 28th) on her 84th birthday. Her family was by her side. It was an amazing experience for all of us. Her courage in suffering and joy for life has left an enduring mark on her children and grandchildren. We thank you so much for the Bone Fest as it fulfilled one of her last wishes. Thank you for treating her like a queen."

Mary Bachelor Seel was born on September 28th, 1925. There was a nice story of her life in the Volume 10, No. 2 newsletter. Highlights include learning rhythm bones in the fourth grade, being a direct descendent of Daniel Boone, serving with her husband as a medical missionary in Korea for many years, and having a warm and wonderful personality.

Mary died of liver cancer. It was with sheer will power that she was able to attend Bones Fest XIII where in a short period of time she made many friends. Below are some of the

remembrances of these new friends.

"A Bones Fest event is always filled with unexpected treasures. This year, I found the Rose of Alabama, Mary Seel. Her joy of life and excitement at being at Bones Fest was contagious. She entertained me with stories of her adventures in far off lands. There were stories of her bones playing, stories of her medical service, stories and more stories. I wanted to hear them all. What a lady! What a life!

Mary was a person who spent her life serving others and from that she got her greatest joy. A Native American proverb says: "When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life in a manner so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice." Mary lived such a life. We wish her fair winds and a safe passage to the Promised Land, where her joy and warmth will be welcomed and her stories will be cherished." *Mary Lee Sweet*

Just got the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, and was sad to see our Mary Seel passed on. She sure was full of life and I'll never forget her enthusiasm. *Dutch Kopp*

I helped Mary on and off the stage at Bones fest XIII. She was so happy to be there. She said quietly to me please stay close by in case I might fall backwards. Well she did not falter in her performance in any way. Her performance energized her and everyone there. What a treat to have met her. *Wow! David Boyles*

Mary was a unique and wonderful person and Teri and I are so blessed to have met her, even for such a short time. Since we're both percussionists, we hit it off right away. My first drum lessons were from the Haskel Harr Drum Method Books, and it's still considered the best and continues to be the standard teaching method. I was so excited to learn that Mary was a student of Haskel Harr! *Kenny Wolin*

Mary made a significant impact on Bones Fest XIII and left an indelible impression on the hearts of everyone there who met her. She ended her time on stage saying "Lord willing, I'll see you at Bones Fest XIV." *Scott Miller*

And Scott, I bet she will! *Steve Wixson*

(Executive Director from page 1)

subject whether we're talking rhythm bones or the economy of the country. We can only take care of our own business, we can only control our own actions, and put our energies to bear on those things most important to us.

And if we go back to our "founding fathers" if you will, it was really about connecting with other players and not allowing the instrument to be forgotten. We have what promises to be an exciting Bones Fest in a most historic environment in the coming year. We have new, enthusiastic members on the Board of Directors who promise to bring their considerable expertise to promoting our organization.

I think it would be in keeping with the original intent of the organization to develop more opportunities for our members to play for the public. I also think that the concept of Regional Bones Fests has not been fully utilized. I think too, that getting the word out to the international community could help to solidify membership and broaden our audience. I'm looking forward to the next 10 years to see how the labors of Fred Edmunds, Ev Cowett, and Russ Myers blossom and bear fruit. *Steve Brown*

DEM BONES, 'DEM BONES, 'DEM  
RHYTHM BONES!

Welcome to Rhythm Bones Central

Your host of this spot is Everett Cowett, a nationally known "bones" or for you sophisticated ear there you may call him an "instrument" (I, on the other hand, just call him Dad!) Here is a picture of me, Martha, and my Dad, Everett, playing the bones together in late years (see Parent below about the history below)

OK, so you may be thinking to yourself right now:  
"What is a rhythm bone?" or you might be thinking:  
"Is this what I think this is?" To answer that, here is a brief explanation...

**THE BONES IN BRIEF**

The bones are one of several types of clappers, all of which are common idiophones (Note: all bones are clappers but not all clappers are bones) and are classified as percussion musical instruments. The bones should not be confused with spoons, which are also clappers or chime-like, which are flat blocks of bone, or plastic scrubbed with 1 to 12 white dots. Names such as clappers, sticks, spoons, clackers, and knobby-stickers have been ascribed to the bones. The name is derived from their original composition and nomenclature, bones. Originally rib bones of small animals were used since their size and shape fit the need desired. For different sounds, bones and contemporary other materials, particularly wood are used.

Mr. Bones

Rhythm bones in some form date back almost as far as man himself. They have been excavated from prehistoric Mesopotamian graves (c.3000 BC) depicted on Egyptian relief's (c.3000 BC) found in Egyptian tombs (c.3000 BC) and depicted on Greek vases (c.500 BC). In more recent times Shakespeare calls them by name in Act IV Scene 1 of A Midsummer Night's Dream

An early Martha Cowett Cummings' Rhythm Bones Central home page. Other pages had history, types of rhythm bones, report on Bones Fest I, where to buy rhythm bones and the Percy Danforth instructional video, etc.

(Continued from page 1)

and are introduced to the Rhythm Bones Society.

### **State of Rhythm Bones in 1999.**

There is no way of knowing how many rhythm bones players there were in 1999 (or in fact today.) The number could be in the low tens of thousands, and these were taught by the last generation of minstrel bones players. Many of these people are late in life and will be gone in a couple of decades.

I found out about Bones Fest II from the Rhythm Bones Central website and attended. When I returned and coming from academia, I surfed the internet and did an exhaustive search discovering about 100 pages of rhythm bones information. There were 12 references to "rhythm bones," two to "rattling bones" with the rest using only "bones." Nowadays, our instrument is more often referred to as rhythm bones.

Ev Cowett discovered Beth Lenz Master's Thesis, and we obtained a copy with 312 pages full of rhythm bones history, some of which is being reprinted in our newsletter.

My 1999 research, which contains a summary of each web page found, is available as a PDF document. Email [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net) and I will email you a copy.

**State of Rhythm Bones in 2009.** I recently completed a similar, but not exhaustive search, and the results are interesting. There are almost 21,000 web pages for a search on just "rhythm bones." The Rhythm Bones Society is referenced on many web pages, and our content is extracted and used by others. Many of us now have our own rhythm bones websites.

The Rhythm Bones Society has had about 100 members each year though this has decreased some in the last two years (72 for Year 2009.) The quality of rhythm bones playing has dramatically improved due in part to our organization and our Bones Fests.

**Ev Cowett's Vision Presented at Bones Fest I.** "I thought we would start the program. I want to keep it very informal and really do three major things. Number 1 is share boning things so that we can all learn from one another. Secondly, I was hoping we could get together and do a little

bit of bones synchronizing, harmonizing if you will. And third, I'd like to talk to you all about having a real big bones festival where you invite people other than just bones players. During the afternoon we can talk about that."

Much of Ev's vision has come true. We share 'boning things' at our Bones Festivals (Fests) and in the newsletter. We synchronize and harmonize in small jam sessions and with Walt Watkin's pass-around. Ev demonstrated his concept of this at Bones Fest II when he and his family played together in some sort of unity. We haven't invited 'people other than just bones players,' and that is something we can discuss. 89 rhythm bones people did show up for Bones Fest X, and to my mind that qualifies as 'big.' Ev, obviously, started us off in the right direction.

### **What is our Vision for the future.**

A vision statement typically defines with inspiring words the direction of an organization in terms of its values, and inspires people to action. I would hope we can draft such a statement over the next several months and discuss it at Bones Fest XIV. I will include a Vision article in the next two newsletters before the Fest.

### **Here is what our members say.**

The following are responses to emails sent by Steve Brown and myself asking for reflections from the past and visions for the future.

Andy Cox said, "What is our uniqueness, how do we determine it, what outcomes do we want, how to communicate this to the other rhythm bones players.

Walt Watkin said "Reiterate our mission/purpose and assess whether we have met and are meeting goals. Summarize our growth pattern in membership over the ten years in age, sex, and numbers. Are we attracting youth? Changes in average age of members. Have we lost members or are we growing? Remember those members who have departed this life. What changes in style of play and music genre have emerged over the period. Where do we go from here? Invite Letters to Editor. Give them some subjects to comment on i.e. Should we budget to have a Dixieland/ragtime band, an Irish band, and or a country band at fests? Should the

Society act as agent to solicit gigs for members at various venues with the revenue for same "donated" to the Society? Possible venues: Ball parks; football stadiums; county fairs.

Former member Jim Holloway said "Do you think a social media outlet might keep people connected -- perhaps a Facebook page for RBS?"

Dutch Kopp said: "Do we really want everybody playing bones or just a select few? Should we join in on to spoons playing and maybe jaw harp players too—all in one entity each sticking up for their own thing. Hey at least more people are in attendance. Is that what we want? Electrified bones playing that's where its at—lets go that way. Well I am content with less is best when it comes to bone players and just go on teaching and having fun the heck with the rest—we're the best.

Bill Vits said: "I've been thinking that to expand our membership we need to tap into the Percussive Arts Society and their membership (1,000's). I've been to a few PAS Conventions and I'm hoping that next year I could go to Indianapolis in Nov. and have a booth to promote the RBS. My associate, Eric Sooy, runs > Black Swamp Percussion and he has a booth every year. I'll ask him what the costs would be in having a booth or if I could work out of his. There seems to be an imaginary barrier between percussionists and bones players in general. When I demonstrate for percussionists that barrier often evaporates. PAS also has "presenters" that do workshops so I could also apply for that opportunity.

Former member Rob Schneider said; "I can tell you that my lapsed membership resulted from the non-prorated method of applying dues. Seems the 'All-Ireland' championships draw very well. How about a similar "All-America" competition.

Scott Miller has made presentations at the last two Bones Fests on the benefits of using a service whose purpose is to support organizations like outs.

**What can you do?** Think about this and send in a Letter to the Editor with your thoughts on the subject.  
*Steve Wixson*





Camp student Brandon with new member and teacher Adele Meegann. See Page 2 for the story. Photograph by Chris.

## Charlie 'Bones' Ginsburg Obit

Charles R. Ginsburg was born December 28, 1921 in Chicago, Illinois. He died November 22, 2008 in Toledo, Ohio.

Charlie learned how to play the rhythm bones when he was eight years old. An African American man taught him how to play them.

As a musician and country music performer, he was a nationally registered bones player with the stage



Charlie 'Bones' Ginsburg performing rhythm bones on the *Hee-Haw* television show. Note Grampa Jones on the left.

name 'Charlie Bones.' He performed on the television show *Hee-Haw* and was featured in a cameo appearance at New York's Carnegie Hall and the Ohio State Fair. Locally, he was often seen performing at Tony Packo's with the Cake Walking Jazz Band.

Charlie's passion for playing rhythm bones and teaching the technique to children served as the catalyst to create the Spoons and Bones Club after school program for the Toledo Fulton Elementary School during the late 1960s. *Deloris Ginsburg*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 12, No. 1 2010

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## Executive Director's Column

When you see the pictures of Bones Fest I held at Ev Cowette's house, with the bones hung on the mail box with love and care, you begin to realize what humble beginnings we have come from. Not that the pictures don't look absolutely delightful, or that I wouldn't now have given anything to have been there (I was actually invited), but when we take a close look at the upcoming Fest in Washington, D.C., we truly realize how far we've come. Bones Fest I, held in the cozy confines of the Cowettes back yard in Greensboro, N.C. was the first event of it's kind, between 12 or so bone playing crazed individuals with enough enthusiasm for 10 times that many. This years event is the culmination of the last 13 years, and brings us back to the DC area in great style. The surroundings, facilities, and

activities planned harkens us into a new era of Bones Fests, and one, I think, that Fred Edmunds would be proud of. Just the idea of a Bone playing parade in our Nations Capital alone is awe inspiring. Kenny Wohlin and Teri Davies are very hard at work, and plan on bringing us a number of firsts, in what promises to be a one of a kind venue. We may never have been able to plan a fest this far in advance, in what I hope will give everyone a good long opportunity to make their arrangements. So please, let's all make an attempt to attend the fest this year, one that will truly be looked upon as something special for years to come.

I want to thank Steve Wixson for giving me an opportunity to write about my Chieftains experi-

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Steve Brown—Our Executive Director Played with the Chieftains

Steve Brown learned to play the bones from Percy Danforth in 1978. Over the last thirty years he has performed the bones and other percussion instruments in a variety of settings including festivals, concerts, coffee houses, and workshops. He has been a featured lecturer at the MFA in Boston, won the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship in 2003 and 2004, and is currently on staff at the Boston branch of the Comhaltas Music School. Here is the story of how he got to perform with the Chieftains.

The Chieftains were at the very beginning for me, not only of traditional Irish music, but of rhythm bone playing itself.

It was a warm spring afternoon when I wandered into a Cambridge record store nearly 35 years ago, and purchased a Chieftains recording with the bones on the cover. Although I've had many experiences with the music since then, I've never gone far from those early recordings, and I've been trying to replace some of my favorites on CD, having initially purchased them on vinyl.

So you can imagine the effect my phone call with Paddy Maloney had on me, just the presence of him alone was very moving, but when he invited me to come down to Symphony Hall in

Boston in March, 2009 to sit in with them, I had everything I could do to contain myself.

Six long months separated that phone call and the eventual performance, and it was a bit of a roller coaster experience. The world of professional musicians, and I say professional on a rather high level, is so very different than mine, I can tell you. Thousands of miles of traveling, and

*(Continued on page 7)*



Steve Brown in concert with the Chieftains in Symphony Hall in Boston. Steve is on the far left next to Kevin Coneff.



## Editorial

An article on Steve Brown is way overdue except for the fact that you know a lot about him from his editorials and article submissions. So starting on Page 1 are a few details about his rhythm bones life that you probably don't know and his story about when he played with the Chieftains in Symphony Hall in Boston. This is the Profile of a Member for this quarter.

Scott Miller is making an impression on the rhythm bones community with his internet company, and promotes RBS resulting in a few new members. He has written a interesting and provocative article on William Shakespeare and bones. Steve Litsios, one of those new members who also created the illustration for the article, plays bones and washboard with The Crawfish Blues Band in Switzerland.

Mike Passeroti and I have been working for years on what I call digital bones and he calls electric bones. I put together a clumsy system using wires that ran up my arms to my electronics that I demonstrated at Bones Fest VI. Mike's article in this issue talks about the first practical version using a wireless transmitter. I would love to buy such a product in a store. Good work, Mike.

Bones Fest XIV will be here before we know it. This week I made my hotel reservations, and made plans to visit the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress where rhythm bones information is kept including recordings and these newsletters. Jennifer Cutting is our contact, and sent us information on how to visit them.

## Letters to the Editor

The on-line newsletters are a good piece of work!! Thanks and congrats. I used Firefox and had no trouble searching any of the newsletters. The Table of Contents mentioned will add greatly. *Walt Watkins*

I met Dom Flemons at the Carolina Chocolate Drops show in Grand Rapids [read about Dom in the last newsletter]. That group is about to break it big time. He plays rhythm bones, jug, banjo and Dobro and really lives his music. Best to all. *Bill Vits*

(Executive Director Editorial continued from page 1) ence, and in fact, for it happening at all. If it weren't for his idea of the article on rhythm bones and the Chieftains, my path would perhaps never have crossed with Paddy Maloney at all. Thanks too to Mel Mercier, who helped arrange the phone conversation that led to my performance with them. It's quite amazing to me that my accidental visit to a record store some 35 years ago would not only lead eventually to rhythm bones, but to a performance with the band in 2009, almost 31 years to the day when I saw them perform on the exact same stage! And thanks, of course, to Paddy himself, for giving an old bones player the opportunity. *Steve Brown*

## Recording of the Quarter

Maybe after reading Bill Vits' Letter to the Editor and the short article in last quarter's newsletter on Dom Flemons, you are ready to hear what he and his Carolina Chocolate Drops sound like. You might love their new CD, *Genuine Negro Jig*. First there are four tracks with Dom on rhythm bones. Then there are tracks with vocals, throat singing, guitar, fiddle, four and five string banjo, jug, and other percussion by guest Sule Greg Wilson who also plays rhythm bones, but not on this CD.

They credit the Music Maker Relief Foundation "for their help in providing music and support during our journey." Music Maker says it is "dedicated to helping the true pioneers and forgotten heroes of Southern musical traditions gain recognition and meet their day-to-day needs. Our mission is to give back to the roots of American music."

Every track on this CD has a history of the legendary people who wrote it or who first recorded it. Credit for writing down the CD title song goes to Dan Emmett of the Virginia Minstrels (see Vol 6, No 1 for an article on Frank Brower, the first minstrel rhythm bones player, Dan Emmett and the Virginia Minstrels.)

Then if you want to listen more to the talents of Dom (1 bones track), get *Dom Flemons, American Songster*. See [www.carolinachocolatedrops.com](http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com)

## Rhythm Bones Player

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Kenny Wolin

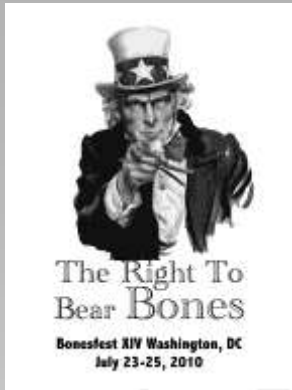
The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Recording the Rhythm Bones for Posterity

The Museum of Fine Arts Musical Instrument Collection regularly records the instruments in their collection to preserve and demonstrate the sound of the instrument for their website and for future generations. Recently they asked me to play their set of antique ebony bones during a recording session. "What do I play?" I asked. "No music just the bones." The nearby recording studio was quite friendly, and the recording technician quite interested in the bones. Sometime in the future when you go to their website and click on hear instruments in the collection, the bones, it will be me clacking away all by myself in a recording studio! *Steve Brown*



## Bones Fest XIV

Old Towne  
Alexandria, VA  
July 23-25, 2010

Hosted by  
Teri Davies  
and Kenny Wolin

For more information  
[kenny@mac.com](mailto:kenny@mac.com)

**PUT IT ON YOUR  
CALENDAR NOW**

Details and  
Registration Form  
in this newsletter

### Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.  
**Bones Fest XIV.** July 23-25, 2010, Old Towne Alexandria, VA. More details in the next issue.  
**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 30-September 5, 2010. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## Bone Fest XIV Preview

Greetings Rhythm Bones Society Members! The site for the 2010 Bones Fest has been set for Historic Old Town Alexandria VA on July 23-25 (registration and festivities begin at 11am!) This location offers so much in the way of history, entertainment, proximity to our nations Capital and of Old Town itself.

The newly renovated Crown Plaza ([www.cpoldtownalexandriahotel.com](http://www.cpoldtownalexandriahotel.com)) Hotel is located a block from the Potomac and minutes from Reagan National Airport and King Street in Old Town. For the DC area, we got a great rate of \$99 for Friday night and \$119 for Saturday (which includes our Sun. buffet in our private conference room). So that we may encourage you to come earlier and/or extend your stay, the Crown Plaza has agreed to hold our group rate of \$99 for all other days. **The deadline for hotel registration is June 21. Once the room block is released the hotel will most likely be booked up this time of year, and standard room rates are very high. Parking at the hotel is complementary for us!**

We are also pleased to announce that our host site for performances will be at the historic Lyceum (<http://oha.alexandriava.gov/lyceum/>). We are excited to note that the stage is being renovated using some of the original 18<sup>th</sup>c. ballroom flooring from Gadsby's Tavern, where notable visitors including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison & James Monroe danced. Members take advantage of our reduced rate for Bones Fest XIV!

In the meantime, we strongly urge you to make your travel and hotel booking arrangements as soon as possible, because Washington, DC is more visited than Disneyworld!

For those of you who attended last year's festival, we're also happy to announce that we'll be tying our "bonesfest knot" on Sunday morning!

To make this another great bone Fest, we'd love your input, so please feel free send suggestions.

*Kenny Wolin & Teri Davies*

## Shakespeare and The Bones

Was William Shakespeare a big fan of the bones? Some players think so. After all, he did mention the bones in one of his plays. But what was Shakespeare really telling us about the bones?

Did Shakespeare hold some special regard for the rattle of the bones? I would like to think the Bard was a bones booster. But alas, if he thought bones were boss, then it must have been outside the world of the theatre. So for better or for worse, below are the results of my exploration into Shakespeare and the world of musical bones.

**PROLOGUE.** Shakespeare calls attention to the bones in just one play. And in that one-and-only play where he mentions the bones, the picture that he paints of them is bad - and I don't mean good. Well, that is my interpretation anyway. You are free to disagree of course. And if you do disagree, then I hope you are right and I am wrong.

**SHAKESPEARE'S FAMOUS BONES QUOTE.** If you hang around the world community of bones players long enough, then sooner or later someone will cite Bill's illustrious bones quotation.

Truth in advertising: This is the first time in 40 years that I have cracked open my Signet Classic paperback edition of this work. The last time was while I was in college on the G.I. Bill at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale majoring in theatre during the notorious 1970 spring semester noted for the student anti-war riots which shut down my school and others across the nation. The lingering aroma of tear gas still wafts up from the pages--but I digress.

The citation appears in Act IV, Scene I (line 31 and 32) of Shakespeare's play, "A Midsummer's Night's Dream," where Bottom the Weaver says in reply to Titania, queen of the fairies:

"I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones." (1)

So there you have it. That is the

famous Shakespearian bones quote in its entirety. It's short and sweet, isn't it? And it is blatantly obvious that our man (errr...ass) Bottom the Weaver holds the rattle of the bones in high esteem, right? And if you are familiar with the setting, then you are aware that Bottom fully expects the fairy queen would also share his taste in music. Yes, Nick Bottom holds the sound of the bones in awe. There is no doubt about that. Yes, I can see you shaking your head at this newsletter and bellowing, "But Shakespeare isn't saying bones are bad! He's saying bones are cool." Well...maybe. But look closely. That ain't Shakespeare saying the bones are cool. It's that yahoo Bottom who is doing the talking here. And friends, that's what makes all the difference. And it is the difference between night and day. Below is the reason why.

**THE BARD'S BACKHANDED COMPLIMENT TO THE BONES?** Anyone with an ounce of literacy can tell you that Shakespeare was England's greatest playwright. I am sure we can all agree that he was (and many say still is) the preeminent master of the dramatic word. So why did Shakespeare cast Bottom's lines about the bones in such a peculiar way?

Sorry if I seem to be the bearer of bad news, but when Bottom the Weaver speaks those lines, he is not exactly heaping praise on our favorite musical instrument. At best, Shakespeare was making a back-handed compliment about the bones. But don't take my word for it. You can evaluate the evidence and decide for yourself.

So what is it, exactly, that Mr. Shakespeare is trying to tell us about the bones? We will get to that soon enough. But first, what the heck are tongs?

An excellent answer to this often asked question can be found in "A Midsummer Night's Dream Study Guide" published by Glencoe/McGraw-Hill. The guide also gives us a good hint about what folks in Shakespeare's day think about the bones.

"Tongs were pieces of metal struck against each other and bones were actual bones," the citation reveals. It goes on to explain that "these

instruments were used in comical or in less sophisticated musical performances." (2)

The description seems reasonable enough. After all, I don't think any of us would claim the bones were ever a mainstay of high-brow music. The Study Guide clearly confirms the wacky nature and lowly status of the instrument. So here we have it on record that 16th century hooligans claimed the bones as their instrument of choice.

This is why it comes as no surprise

enchanted as our esteemed bones advocate Bottom the Weaver might be, he is nonetheless a tactless, low-class dolt. That repugnant oddball, I am sorry to report, is the personage Shakespeare chooses to "glorify" the bones.

**THE PASSAGE IN PLAIN ENGLISH.** Below is what Bottom is saying in modern English. These lines come from the SparkNotes study guide, "No Fear Shakespeare."

"I have a pretty good ear for music. Let's hear someone play the trian-



Shakespeare and The Bones. An illustration by Steve Litsios. Used with permission.

gle and the sticks." (3)  
 that Shakespeare uses the bones as a literary device to help him convey the distinctly unsavory demeanor of a character in the play; namely, Nick Bottom - whom at that fateful moment is literally an ass. As enchanting and

I don't know about you, but that description gives me the feeling that even one tune played by "the triangle and sticks" is more than a normal person would want to endure.  
**BAD BONES?** I can't knock

Shakespeare for what he infers about the bones. After all, he was just doing his job. Bill was merely reflecting the sentiment of 16th century English society. And polite society during the Elizabethan Era held that the bones are a brash rustic instrument. So by implication, the instrument is played by persons who are rude, crude and socially unacceptable. That's why Shakespeare evokes the spirit of the bones. That's why the bones portray the sorry essence of that impertinent dimwit, Nick Bottom. That's why the bones are bad.

But don't lose hope. After all, Shakespeare was only 30 years old when he wrote this play. So, hey...what could a kid that young know about the bones anyway?

**SHAKESPEARE MEETS AMERICAN MINSTRELSY.** Let me point out to you that "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was written around 1595. And as many bone players know, Mister Bones, along with Mister Tambo (who were exceedingly popular during the U.S. Civil War), were the comic "end men" who first appeared on the American minstrel stage in 1843. Why are these two dates important? Because the Study Guide characterization of the comical quality of bones applies equally well to the quote in Shakespeare's day as it does to our celebrated Mister Bones two-and-a-half centuries later.

Just to be clear, tongs are a kitchen gadget, okay? Tongs are not exactly a proper musical instrument. And in Shakespeare's day the bones were closely associated with tongs. So in both eras, the bones were considered a lesser folk instrument. This suggests that bone playing was considered just as goofy during the American Minstrel Era as it was in Shakespeare's day.

I love bone playing and don't want to degrade the art. But let's face facts. Shakespeare's "tongs and bones" passage, as well as the 150-year American Minstrel Era, both portrayed bone playing as a cheeky practice.

**BONES: "THE TERROR OF THE TRUE MUSICIAN"** Below is an excellent interpretation of the "tongs and bones" passage by Shakespearean scholar, James Stalker. His analysis is

far more eloquent than mine.

"In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that daintiest melange of fun and beauty, when Bottom the Weaver is resting his ass's head in the lap of Titania, the queen of the fairies, whom a perverse spell has caused to fall in love with him, she asks him,

"Wilt though hear some music, my sweet love?" And he answers, "I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let us have the tongs and the bones."

"The tongs and the bones were the highest of poor Bottom's musical aspirations. And there is a class which prefers the tongs and the bones to all other music still. I remember a worthy magistrate, who had exerted himself to provide some innocent entertainment to keep the loungers of the streets or of the public-house on Saturday nights, complaining to me that he could not get that class to come to hear any music unless the performers were dressed up with woolly wigs and corked faces. The tongs and the bones are the symbol of the crude, laughable and vulgar; and poor Bottom's ideal reigns in the music-hall; it invades the concert-hall and the drawing-room; and sometimes it does not spare even the Church itself. The tongs and the bones - and all they stand for - are the terror of the true musician." (4)

Stalker's 1913 interpretation of Shakespeare's "tongs and bones" passage was corroborated in 1970 by James Blades, a distinguished authority on musical percussion.

"Clappers in the form of marrow bones and cleavers were prominent in the traditional music of the butchers of England and Scotland. Both instruments are seen in Plate VI of Holbein's famous series (1538) "The Wedding of the Industrious Apprentice to His Master's Daughter." Shakespeare refers to such clappers in Bottom's remark in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "I have a reasonable good ear in music: let us have the tongs and the bones." The tongs in this case were almost certainly kitchen utensils. With other items from this important room of the household - such as the pot and stick, stick and salt-box (Merry Andrew's instrument),

pan lids etc. - they were associated with burlesque music, though not on all occasions. Such implements and utensils formed the "orchestra" of the children and the elders of the poorer class who believed in the power of noise to keep away evil and add zest to rejoicing." (5)

**NICK BOTTOM: A BONE PLAYER'S WORST NIGHTMARE?** Well, I suppose you can interpret the "tongs and bones" passage as some sort of oblique tribute by Shakespeare to musical bone playing. But in my view that would be twisting his intent. The "tongs and bones" remark is an oxymoron. After all, Bottom is a fool whose idea of good music is the clamor of kitchen gadgetry. If Bottom was a cool dude that would be one thing. But he is not. Unfortunately, that bones-loving character is a creep.

We don't know if Nick Bottom plays the bones or not. But assuming he does, the characterization below by Oxford educated Jem Bloomfield, who specializes in Renaissance drama, describes Nick Bottom as what might just as well be the stereotypical bones player from hell.

"...he's a complete extrovert, bossy, energetic and quite annoying." (6)

**A SIGNIFICANT BENCHMARK FOR MUSICAL BONES.** So there you have it. Shakespeare thinks the bones are crass. But I do think it is cool that Shakespeare mentions my favorite instrument in one of his plays. Even if he does not regard them with glowing praise, this is indeed a significant benchmark in the long history of musical bones. And it just makes us want to work all that much harder to give bone playing a good name. After 400 years, I hope we can show that bone playing is more than just a kitchen gadget turned into a noise-maker.

**EPILOGUE.** Musical bones are a rustic instrument. And that pretty much sums it up. I am all for rustic instruments. They are often ingeniously simple contraptions that add a very special flavor to a tune - especially when played with skill and thoughtfulness.

So when it comes to Shakespeare and the bones, I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same.



But for most bone players - and please forgive me, Will - this entire article is much ado about nothing.

#### RESOURCES

(1) A Midsummer Night's Dream (By William Shakespeare, Signet Classics, The New American Library, 1963, 5th printing, Edited by Wolfgang Clemen, New York and Toronto, p 98)

(2) A Midsummer Night's Dream Study Guide (Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, August 1999, ISBN: 9780028180205, p 20)

(3) No Fear Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream (Act 4, Scene 1, Page 2, Edited by John Crowther, SparkNotes LLC, 2005)

[http://nfs.sparknotes.com/msnd/page\\_124.html](http://nfs.sparknotes.com/msnd/page_124.html) (accessed November 25, 2009)

(4) How to Read Shakespeare (By James Stalker, M.A. D.D., Hodder and Stoughton, 2nd ed., 1913) [http://books.google.com/books?id=bOJIAAAIAAJ&pg=PA275&lp\\_g=PA275&dq=%22I+have+a+reasonable+good+ear+in+music%3B+let+us+have+the+tongs+and+the+bones%22&source=web&ots=DxwB3fzwqU&sig=gat4FQjnuFGkJyr-yveGRkvSgXI&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=7&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=bOJIAAAIAAJ&pg=PA275&lp_g=PA275&dq=%22I+have+a+reasonable+good+ear+in+music%3B+let+us+have+the+tongs+and+the+bones%22&source=web&ots=DxwB3fzwqU&sig=gat4FQjnuFGkJyr-yveGRkvSgXI&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=7&ct=result)

(5) Percussion Instruments and Their History (By James Blades, Edition: 4, rev., Bold Strummer, 1992, 1st Ed. published in 1970, p 195) James Blades was former Professor of Timpani and Percussion at The Royal Academy of Music, London, and contributor to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. [http://books.google.com/books?id=a8V3ZGj2ExEC&pg=PA195&lp\\_g=PA195&dq=tongs+ancient+historic+musical+instrument+chinese&source=web&ots=AV6MRxiqLJ&sig=chZRmZMqQjoaZXuLL2FP42OO5CY#PPA194\\_M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=a8V3ZGj2ExEC&pg=PA195&lp_g=PA195&dq=tongs+ancient+historic+musical+instrument+chinese&source=web&ots=AV6MRxiqLJ&sig=chZRmZMqQjoaZXuLL2FP42OO5CY#PPA194_M1)

(6) Bottom in Midsummer Night's Dream: Shakespeare's Extrovert Actor With a Dream, Aug 20, 2007 by Jem Bloomfield [http://shakespeare-comedies.suite101.com/article.cfm/bottom\\_in\\_midsummer\\_nights\\_dream](http://shakespeare-comedies.suite101.com/article.cfm/bottom_in_midsummer_nights_dream)

*Scott Miller*. Copyright 2010.

## Wireless Electric Rhythm Bones

Ever since the cave men began smacking bones together, our musical heritage has had percussive sounds. Or perhaps some grumpy cave men began smacking heads together and noticed a nice hollow sound. We just don't have that history written down. What we do know is that bones have been contributing percussive joy to music in just about every culture around the world. The tones vary from natural bone, cut and shaped bones, shin bones, rib bones, to wood "vegetarian bones" including all manner of wood in all manner of shapes. Now to bring this hand held instrument into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, electric rhythm bones are being invented to include wireless technology.

We'll leave the discussion of why to the end.

Inventing a new product involves many disciplines such as materials science, mold making, electrical and mechanical engineering. It also helps to know what off-the-shelf parts are available to make the development time shorter. The best designs take complex ideas and simplify the solution. As soon as I disclose how to make a wireless electric bone, you'll think it is simple. This particular invention is a fairly simple combination of other inventions that have also been simplified over the years. And fortunately for us, the components have also come down in price. You must know that the inventing process is never done in isolation and I owe a great deal to Dan Ludemann for his time, knowledge and investment.

The wireless bones comprise of audio pickup packaged in a bone, wireless transmission of the sound, wireless reception of the sound, and then some form of amplification of the sound. Once the audio signal becomes electrical, more options are available such as shaping the sound or just using a portion of the audio signal to trigger the formation of a totally different sound. This invention opens new possibilities even though it is incomplete.

Audio pickup and transformation

into an electrical signal representing the audio wave is accomplished with a very small microphone. There are other options such as piezo electric sensors like drum triggers. There are accelerometers, pressure sensors, proximity sensors, magnetic sensors, infrared sensors and others yet to discover. I have attempted to test with as many as I could and I found that a simple lapel microphone picks up the sound very well in a wave shape that is strong enough and well formed to become a trigger to or for straight amplification.

Dan and I attempted to find a wireless transmitter that fits inside the shape of a real bone. The transmitter miniaturization is a task yet to be accomplished. Until we find a good one, the best option discovered is a belt clip sized wireless transmitter with a small wire running between the transmitter and the microphone embedded into a bone. The small size of the lapel mic and the small, discrete wire makes it fairly easy to wear. The wire is a temporary discomfort and the hope is that a smaller wireless transmitter will become available or be revealed.

The lapel mic and wireless transmitter also comes with a wireless receiver. There are many options for wireless transmitters for circumstances such as multiple wireless microphones operating in close proximity or the need for longer transmitting range. With each additional feature, the cost rises. Fortunately for my experiments, I only needed one transmitter with a short range and the sound quality didn't matter very much to me. I found a low cost lapel mic transmitter set on sale for less than \$80.

To play the rhythm on a bone we needed a way to embed the lapel mic in the bone. We started by molding a plastiscene bone shaped thing that had a chamber where the lapel mic could be snapped in and the wire held. We hoped to make the bone durable but found that the modelers' plastiscene is weak. The second experiment kneaded fiberglass into the plastiscene and found the strength is greatly improved. Another experiment com-

*(Continued on page 8)*

*(Steve Brown Continued from page 1)*

hundreds of people all working together to make it work. Sometimes it's easy to get lost in those many layers that separate the performers from the everyday people, and it was amongst those layers that I found myself for several months. Very busy people, unreturned phone calls, and very strange reactions to my standard explanation, "I play the bones". Although the Chieftains, and Paddy Maloney himself are well familiar with the bones (see the Chieftains article in Vol 10, No.3), many of the people who work with him and around him have no idea of some of the intricacies of traditional music, of which rhythm bones would be one.

Suffice it to say that gradually things began to smooth out, and I had my instructions: report to the stage entrance at Symphony Hall at 5:30pm for the 8pm show where Paddy would go over my part with me. It was all starting to seem like it was really going to happen, now the panic sets in.

Symphony Hall is truly one of the great performance venues in the country, perhaps the world. In fact it was almost 30 years to the date that I had seen the Chieftains perform there in what was to be my first of many times seeing them. The thought enough was overwhelming.

One of my truly bad habits is showing up early for everything. This can be particularly difficult in the Irish culture, because you could almost say the opposite is true—they are late for everything. In fact we've come to refer to it as real time versus Irish time, and you never expect things to start on time—in fact plan for it to be late. But there I was, walking up to the stage entrance at 5 pm for my 5:30 time.

Now starts my indoctrination into the world of professional musicians and production people. My name was not on the guest list as the agent had said, and the tour manager was not informed that I was to perform with them. None of the Chieftains were anywhere near Symphony Hall at 5:30, and all of this in the back drop of, "you play the what? You're going to do what? Who told you to be here?"

When Paddy and the boys arrived they had much bigger fish to fry than

one lonely bone player standing at the back of the stage. When I did speak with him Paddy was very friendly, but the strain of touring was obviously taking it's toll. On this night he had a great deal of difficulty getting the pipes to behave, which took up most of his time. For my part I waited, back stage for most of the 2 and ½ hours until the performance, trying not to get in any ones way, but feeling a bit like a distant relative who showed up unexpectedly for dinner.

The Chieftains, or the "Chieftain" as a friend of mine refers to them, has only one of the original members left, Paddy Maloney himself. Kevin Coneff, Bodhran, and Matt Molloy, flute, are all that remain of the core of the band having joined in 1976, and 1979 respectively. They are now joined by some very talented musicians and dancers from Canada and the United States. Two very good fiddle players, an accomplished harpist, a well known country singer, and some amazing step dancers now comprise what once was an entirely Irish ensemble. But they wear the mantle well, and put on a very tight, and exciting show with music sampled from their numerous recordings. This evening they were joined by a local bag pipe band, and a group of young Irish step dancers from one of the local schools. I stood back stage in awe of the comings and goings, watching most of the show on the monitors.

I began to gather that my part would be entirely at the end of the evening, when the band performed what is now known as the "Grand Finale." Taken from several albums, the band plays on tune several times, a member does a solo of sorts, the band repeats the tune again until each member has taken a turn. The Chieftains often ask local musicians to join them on this, playing mostly on the main tune.

The show progressed well. By the time we were well into the second half, I had relocated to the stage managers chair, just off stage left. I was much more comfortable, had a much better view and was really settling in, when I could have sworn Paddy called my name. "Did he call my name?" I asked the lead female singer, "What's

your name?" she said, "Steve Brown" I replied, "I believe he did!" She went out on stage and soon was waving me on, the time had come and I had almost missed it, perhaps getting a little too comfortable.

Kevin Coneff motioned for me to join him on his side, and when I settled in and looked up, the enormity of the building and it's grandiosity struck me. I was playing the bones on stage at Symphony Hall! The band broke into an old Scottish reel, "Miss McLeod's Reel" also called Uncle Joe on this side of the pond. Soon I was clacking away, oblivious to my surroundings, and just enjoying the moment. At one point Kevin turned around and moved a microphone in front of me, I have no idea if anyone could even hear me, but who cares, I'm playing with the Chieftains! Hey I can hear them! Several more local players joined the band, Peter Molloy, Matt's son, Tommy McCarthy jr from the well known Clare musical family and an old friend of Paddy's, and Jimmy Noonan, great flute player and Professor of music at Boston College, I was in good company.

Just as quickly as it had started, it was over, as the strains of Miss McLeod's reel came to a halt. Off the stage and back to my place, but it had worked! Soon they were playing their encore, the bagpipes were chanting for the last time, and the musical evening had come to a close. As the band left the stage and the audience began to file out, I went out to the lobby to meet and greet my own little entourage, my brother and his wife, two of my students, and a number of my fellow session members, all congratulating me.

Before taking off, I went and thanked Paddy once more, and made my way up to Matt Molloy to also thank him. I was able to squeeze into Kevin Coneff's dressing room for a brief chat on the bones (he has some but doesn't play them much) and to thank him for the assistance with the microphone. As I went out of the dressing room, he said, "See you next time" and the possibility hit me. Well I won't be waiting for that phone call, but if it comes, I'll be ready. *Steve Brown*

*(Continued from page 6)*

pared an open mic on the bone to the microphone completely embedded with a sound chamber. The closed sound chamber has the benefit of reducing feedback and stray audio pickup. The electronics adjustment is vital to dealing with the audio pickup sensitivity because the embedded mic is very sensitive.

The wireless receiver audio output jack can go to either an amplifier or to the trigger input to a drum module. If anyone desires a straight amplification of the sound a bone makes, it might be possible with very careful selection of the materials, very careful shaping of the sound chamber in the bone, and very careful adjustment of the microphone sensitivity. Our experiments didn't create a very convincing bone sound. However, the sound used as a drum trigger input provided some great fun in choosing what the bone sounded like. We tried snare drum, toms, cymbals, and some far-out sounds. We immediately recognized that the method of playing rhythm could be separated from what sounds come out of the instrument.

We have molded a bone shaped instrument with an embedded lapel mic, wirelessly transmitted that audio signal, and used the receiver audio output as a drum trigger input. The equipment list is fairly small: plasticene, fiberglass, wireless lapel mic setup, drum module, and an amplifier with speakers. The only thing custom made was the bone. The rest is readily available with many options and prices.

After this accomplishment, Dan and I have set our sights on the ability to rotate through different drum sounds while playing the bones like Steve Wixson demonstrated at Bones



Photograph of a Wireless Electric Rhythm Bone

Fest VI. Why? Because we can, and it is so much fun inventing a new kind of instrument based on what I love playing most, rhythm bones. Besides, what Steve Wixson accomplished with a wired setup, I just had to try to make a wireless system. The Rhythm Bones Society inspires me.

Want to see it in action. Check out this YouTube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txfOSIl0pkk>  
*Mike Passerotti (Cincinnati)*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 12, No. 2 2010

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## Executive Director's Column

The mail arrived as usual in early April of 1995, but included one unusual piece of mail. Envelope size but actually several folded sheets adorned with various red inscriptions, the back of which read in bold, red, letters, NEWSLETTER, along with the name Bones Unlimited, and a drawing of a hand holding one bone, but in position, and waiting for the other to be placed and music to be made. In opening this curious piece of mail, I noticed immediately the name Frederick T. Edmunds at the top, along with Issue #2, and the date, March 31, 1995. This was the second of Fred Edmunds Newsletters, and the beginning of my brief association with Fred. It began by heralding the response to the first newsletter, and then the remark, "If this thing really flies we may even have a convention some day." Some day indeed. This was

Fred Edmunds dream, that bones players would get together to share their playing, and themselves, that would bring people together from all around our vast country. He would live to see the first, but not the second. Now we are standing at the brink of the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Bones Fest which brings us back to Washington D.C. in one of the most amazing venues we could ever hope to perform in. In my preparation for this column, I tried to imagine what I could say to each of you to encourage your attendance at Bones Fest this year. I could describe the events planned, and the opportunity you will have to perform in one of the oldest theaters in the country. I could name the list of amazing players who will be attending, teaching, and per-

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Italian Bones CD Release has RBS Participation

I learned of rhythm bones players in Tuscany, Italy from Paolo Casini, who kindly shared their story in RBP, Volume 9, Number 4. He produced a CD titled *Nacchere Toscane* (which translates to Tuscan Castanets and means Tuscan rhythm bones), and recently had a public release event for it. He asked me for a video demonstrating our style of rhythm bones playing to show at the event. I edited this video from all of the materials I have collected over the years.

Paolo sent a CD with several popular songs that the Italian rhythm bones players use. To give them a variety of our styles of rhythm bones playing, I enlisted Steve Brown and Bill Vits to record their styles using the Italian provided music (no video unfortunately.) I finish editing and mailed the video to Paolo in Italy. He re-edited it adding Italian subtitles and some Italian performers.

Paolo then introduced me to Skype, the free internet video conference tool. We tested it with a video call from my home to Italy and it worked well. He then asked me to be live at the event using the Skype link to a video projector on stage in Italy. I, of course, said yes.

The day of the big event came, and the Skype link was established allowing me to see the stage live. The program began and I was able to watch it on my PC. It included formal presentation of the CD, rhythm bones performances from several local

performers (see photographs on Page 2), and the re-edited video.

While I did not understand the talking, their music and rhythm bones playing was as good or better than what I usually hear. Skype did stop once, but the link was quickly reestablished.

Later after the video was shown, the Skype link went live to the video projector and I performed live to one of the songs that Paolo sent us.

Several days later, I received a package from Paolo. In it was the re-edited video that I will bring to BFXIV. There also was a magazine titled *Maremma Magazine* with an article about the event that included a photograph of me. Wow!

*(Continued on page 2)*



The audience at the *Nacchere Toscane* CD Release Event



## Editorial

The page 1 story is a follow-up to a story about Tuscan rhythm bones players described in the Vol 9, No 1 newsletter. The Skype video conference link described has implications for future sharing of our performances. Why not give it a try with a friend or acquaintance and let me know the result. On Saturday afternoon of Bones Fest XIV, we hope to share our Lyceum stage with Italian Nacchere players via Skype and a video projector. What an experience if it works as well as in the story.

The rest of the newsletter has a variety of themes. The Meschers, now including Sharon Mescher on bones, with their unique and professional style have been described in several previous newsletters (the most complete is in Vol 8, No 4.) The article on Page 2 is a new twist to their story.

Steve Brown announces the winner of the 2010 Abbeyfeale Bones Competition. New member, Mark Houts, tells us about his rhythm bones playing grandmother.

Teri Davies and Kenny Wolin give us a last minute preview of Bones Fest XIV. Kenny also tells us about his rhythm bones performance in the White House on St. Paddy's Day.

Long time friend and former member, Nick Driver, shares a rare photograph showing two rhythm bones players. Dave Boyles shared his visit with the Gillette Brothers in Crocket, Texas.

## Letter to the Editor

My wife and I had the good fortune to attend a CMC-hosted dinner IHO of the Quantico Injured Military Sportsman Association last evening. The Irish Ensemble of MGySgt Pete Wilson, MSgt Chris McFarland, GySgt Ken Wolin, GySgt Ala Prather and GySgt Kevin Bennear was absolutely terrific. There were many-many highlights, of note GySgt Wolin's skill with the bones...

Always very rewarding to be in the company of such first class Marine musicians -- made for a great evening and made us all proud. A big "BZ" to these pros. *Col Andrew H Smith*

*(Executive Director Editorial-Continued from page 1)*  
forming at the Fest. Or I could remind you that two special bones players, who met each other at a bones fest will in fact be committing themselves to each other for the rest of their lives at this fest. But what really meant the most to me was that we are living out the dreams of our founding grandfather, so to speak, Fred Edmunds, who envisioned this very event in 1995, and encouraged, and inspired Ev Cowette and Russ Myers to share his dream. You have a family in this bone playing organization, and it's time to come home for the family reunion. I hope to see you there. *Steve Brown*



*(Italy—Continued from page 1)*

It was a great experience for me, and one that can be duplicated with people in other parts of the world.

To view the video, go to <https://home.comcast.net/~wixson.s/Paolo/index.html> *Steve Wixson*



CD release performers. Way above from the left: are Ido Corti, Corrado Barontini and Filippo Marranci. Above are Ido Corti on castanets and Giorgio Piola on accordion.

## Website of the Quarter

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DpXi-S6i3g&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DpXi-S6i3g&feature=player_embedded)

Here's a great Indian video of their version of the bones. *Bill Vitx*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Rhythm Bones Players Featured in Tribute to Ted Mack in Miami

Tom and Bernie Mescher Worrell hosted "An Old Time Country Tribute to Ted Mack and Benefit for Horse Country" on February 27, 2010 at the German American Club, and it was a great success. Bernie's brother, Jerry Mescher, along with their father – Albert Mescher, appeared on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour on Father's Day, June, 1961. Bob Everhart, who produces Old Time Country Music festivals and shows throughout the Midwest, felt that we could build a great show around the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their appearance. Bob Everhart had scheduled a tour that would include Florida, and was a fantastic help in organizing and promoting the show and in getting other entertainers to come to Miami.

Bernie says there were three goals

for the event: to bring, and help preserve, the music and traditions she grew up with in the Midwest to our area, to get Horse Country publicized and to raise money to help preserve the area from developers. Tom says that the publicity for Horse Country was even more important than helping fortify our “war chest.” After the event an article in the *Miami Herald’s Neighbors* for Sunday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010 begins:

” Horse Country is alive and well, and the Mescher family is willing to rattle some bones to prove it. That’s bones, as in the instrument. And for those who have never heard of Horse Country or the bones as a musical instrument, Sharon and Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell (see photograph below) are playing for you.”



The performers paid their own way to come to Miami from the Midwest and for their lodging and food while they were here. They know what it takes to preserve our heritage and how important it is.

Precisely at 7:10 pm, the curtains opened and Jackie Shewey sang *Just Look at Old Glory* in front of a flag saved from Vietnam by Francis Hahn who followed up with *Hidden Valley* – a song about how he was able to “come home” from Vietnam.

After the opening, Tom, who was the MC for the show, told the story of how Albert Mescher taught himself to play the bones and developed a unique style of playing the bones. He then showed a clip from the show – leading in to the curtains reopening and Jerry playing a fast (and fabulous) *Twelfth Street Rag*. The audience of over 350

really showed their appreciation of Jerry’s performance and then Jerry introduced Bernie; he told the audience that after his dad died – he didn’t think he would ever have a partner again – but that was before Bernie mastered the Bones. Bernie and Jerry then performed *Just Because* featuring the syncopated “offset” created by their father. After the audience finished applauding, Bernie introduced the newest member of “The Mescher Bones”, Sharon Mescher, Jerry’s wife. The Mescher Bones then performed: *In the Mood*. After the intermission, they did a second set featuring *Red Wing* and *Down Yonder*. It was really great to see the Mescher Bones perform perfectly in sync and with some fancy footwork.

For the performance they were

backed up by: Rick and Harriette Anderson (Rick on guitar and Harriette on the stand up Base), Ken Meyer on accordion, and Bob Keim on piano.

In addition to providing backup, Rick and Harriet did some hilarious songs (like Harriet’s original song about Rick’s cold feet) and Rick played a

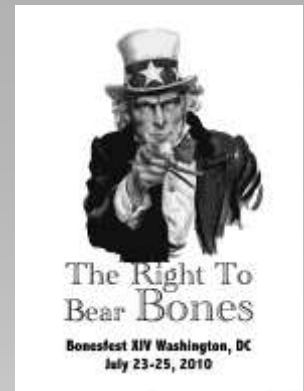
great *Shenandoah* on the Harmonica.

At intermission Ken played so the audience could take advantage of the German American clubs great dance floor. Bob Keim is a great ragtime piano player and he entertained the audience, appropriately, with *The Entertainer* and other great old time songs that have made him a winner at festivals in The Midwest.

Bob and Shelia Everhart have made a career preserving Old Time Country music – they were instrumental in making this event possible and producing many of the news articles that appeared before and after the event. The audience really enjoyed their performance on the show. Pat Boilesen performed, singing original songs that were inspired by her life on the plains of Nebraska – songs like *Prairie Fire*. Terry Smith, from Nashville, who

wrote *The Far Side Banks of Jordan* for Johnny and June Carter Cash, along with “The Mescher Bones” was the hit of the show. Terry is not only a great singer and songwriter – he’s really funny and get’s the audience involved in the show!

The German American Club was a great venue for the event. The round tables, seating parties of ten, fostered a wonderful feeling of community. The food was provided by the vendor that regularly caters events at the club. He did a terrific job offering meals like: Chicken Cesar Salad, Shrimp Scampi, Bratwurst with Red Cabbage and Sweet Potato Fries, Chicken Wings and several other great dishes. *Tom Worrell*



## Bones Fest XIV

Old Towne  
Alexandria, VA

July 23-25, 2010

Hosted by  
Teri Davies  
and Kenny Wolin

For more information [ken-nybones@mac.com](mailto:ken-nybones@mac.com)

Details and  
Registration Form  
On our website

# Paddy Donovan Wins His 4th Abbeyfeale Bones Competition

The weather was good, clear and cold, in Abbeyfeale for the All Ireland Bone Playing Competition. The largest crowd yet gathered in the square, drawn by the high level entertainment provided, and the bone playing for sure. The previous day had seen the Junior Bone playing competition won again by John Ford, capturing his 3rd Junior title in fine form. The Senior Bone Playing Competition, which is the last event of the weekend festival, Fleadh by the Feale, has through the years drawn competitors from across Europe, and the United States, has suffered by lack of numbers, apparently due to the Global economic down turn, but not for enthusiasm, and level of competition. Although only five bone players competed, the competition was stiff, and only one point separated first and second place. The Fleadh it's self enjoyed high attendance throughout the week end, including a sold out Celebrity concert featuring Frankie Gavin and the New De Dannan. By the time the Bone Playing Competition was held, the crowd was fully warmed up by the Tournafulla Comhaltas group, and a large contingent of local musicians and dancers.

The bone playing competition was judged by Gino Lupari, a previous judge, who plays bodhran, and bones, and sings with the group, Four Men and a Dog. Coming in third was Catherine Flavin, a past competitor. Catherine is a local woman and has solid base in the music. David Murphy from Abbeyfeale was second, only one point behind Paddy Donovan, who captured his fourth All Ireland Title. Paddy was sporting a new set of bones, which gave him just the lift to win.

The Fleadh Committee will need to take a hard look at the Bone Playing Competition, as concerns over dwin-

ding numbers of competitors raise questions about the nature of the competition. Add to that the decrease in Fleadh sponsorship, and serious economic condition in Ireland, might indicate the competition is in jeopardy. As perhaps the best Bone Playing Competition in the world, this would truly be a shame if it is not able to continue. But the bone playing spirit is there in Abbeyfeale, as witnessed by the large and enthusiastic crowd. Let's all hope for a rejuvenated contest next year

One new player, Tom Connolly had come down from Galway, and asked, "Do I use two pairs of bones or one?" and was told he could do either.

Adrian O'Leary came in second in the Junior Bones competition, and may well prove a threat to John Ford in the future. *Steve Brown*

P.S. To hear samples from this year's competition, go to [www.fleadhbythefeale.com](http://www.fleadhbythefeale.com), scroll down to "Bones Playing Competition," and below that are three mp3 links.

## Been Rattlin' Long? Only 80 Years.

Her birth certificate names her Erma Lois Wyman, but many people--even if they are no blood relation--just call her Granny. Granny was born in Enid, Oklahoma in 1923. When she was five years old, she visited her cousins and her uncle Ruben. Her cousins had some bones (they had made out of old cow bones) and were rattling the bones between their fingers.

Granny was intrigued. "They gave me some and showed me how to use them. When I left [Uncle Ruben's] house, they gave me two [hand-whittled wooden] bones and I took those home and just worked and worked and worked with those two bones. When I got good with those, my mother took me to Chenoweth & Green [Music Store] and bought me some new bones." To the best of her recollection, this set of four bones set

the family back somewhere between 5 and 20 cents.

Her parents didn't mind the relentless nature of little Lois's new endeavor. "It was just my mother and my daddy and me. My older sisters weren't at home very much," Granny said.

Granny still owns the four bones her mother bought her when she was six years old. "If you take care of them, they don't wear out," she said. Those bones were originally coated in a black finish, which promptly began to wear off from heavy use. Her mother cleaned off what remained of the finish and coated the wooden bones with a clear varnish. Traces of the black finish are still visible. Her mother also made a carrying case out of pink satin and ribbon. She still has this carrying case, as well, and absolutely treasures it. Pointing to a brown spot, she said, "A bug crawled in it and died, a long time ago."

On January 1, 1944, Granny married the love of her life, Tommy Barnes. Tommy has always loved seeing Granny perform for crowds, at family get-togethers, and for friends they made in the course of their extensive travels. "Travelling in a motor home, there was a party every night, you know," Tommy said. Granny's bone rattling was always a big part of the party.

One time, the pair, along with another couple, went to a show in South Texas to see a man purported to have been the 'World Champion' of bone rattling (neither of them can now remember the man's name). One of their friends informed this man that Granny also rattled the bones, so he invited her on stage for a duet. "Everybody agreed she was better than he was," Tommy said.

This same friend, Lloyd, frequently encouraged Granny to play. Tommy explained: "Most restaurants always had a guitar player, and if Lloyd was with us, he would always get her in on it." On one occasion, Granny played bones on the front porch of a restaurant while the resident picker plied his trade and Tommy greeted arriving patrons. "I can remember that just as plain as can be," Granny said.

Another time, Granny was invited to perform at a celebration in Kansas. Tommy sat in the crowd, *in cognito*. When she finished playing, Granny would always tell how she started playing the bones, give a quick lesson, and ask if anyone in the audience had any questions. Always a jokester, Tommy raised his hand. Granny humored him, and let him ask a question. "What are you doing tonight?" Tommy asked. The joke was lost on the audience until Granny explained that the man asking the question had been her husband for almost 50 years.

Granny did not perform publicly with the bones very much, until she was in her twenties. "There wasn't anybody in town that wanted anyone to come rattle the bones," she said. Tommy pointed out that, back then, people regularly met to play music together. "Little towns like Douglas [a farming community near their marital home] used to have programs . . . once a week, where everyone would come together and play their instruments. That's what we did for entertainment," he said. However, Granny is also an accomplished piano player, so her talents on piano were in greater demand than were her bone rattling skills.

In true minstrel fashion, Granny even played bones in black face a few times, rubbing dark makeup on her face and hands. Sometimes she would pull a 'black sock' over her face. "You just don't do that, anymore," Tommy said, recognizing how times have changed.

Granny once played bones for a crowd of 1,500 college students at Oklahoma Christian University in Oklahoma City. She has also been the opening act for famous musicians like Mel Tillis. She prefers to play with piano accompaniment, but enjoys playing with fiddle and guitar as well.

Granny and Tommy have been married 66 years and still live in Enid, Oklahoma. They have four children, six grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. *Mark B. Houts*

## Visit to Texas and the Gillette Brothers

For all of you folks who were at Bone Fest XI in Newburg, Wisconsin, and met the Gillette Brothers, here is a review about our visit to Crockett, Texas. Peg and I flew into Dallas, Texas to start a trip to visit friends and tour Texas from north to as far south as Corpus Christi... (Can't go any father south). My old high school friend, Jim Riggs, from Toledo, Ohio, is a retired music professor at North Texas University in Denton... have not seen him in 50 years. We had a very good quartet that played around Toledo through high school and into college. I played the up right bass then. Jim plays sax. Damn did we have a good time! Jim hooked me up with a five piece Dixie band. I joined in with my washboard and bones... what a treat to play with Jim 50 years later!

Moving on to Crockett, Texas. The main reason I am telling you all this..... Crockett is about 150 miles south and a little bit east of Dallas. Take all the back roads to get there if you want to really see Texas. Well, you have to be there to appreciate the old fashion charm of this little county seat town of Crockett. The Gillette Brothers are very successful ranchers in the area. Besides that, they are dedicated to western music and live it by performing in the area and the sponsoring of the "Camp Street Café" in Crockett, Texas. The pictures only give you an idea of what I am trying to express about this historic place. Take the time to look at the Gillette Brothers web site. Just put in "Gillette Brothers" and you will see all the fun things the brothers are involved in. They have a great lineup of music at the café. We listened to and met Michael Martin Murphy—just him and his guitar. He has written lots of popular music including *Wild Fire*. Michael is friends with the Gillette Brothers. Check out the line up of music at the camp Street Café's web site.

Picture me on the little stage of the café with the Gillette Brothers. Put this on your list of places to go and let

the Gillette Brothers know you are coming so they can show you some of that Texas hospitality. *David & Peg Boyles*

[See photograph of Dave and the Gillettes on Page 8.]

## A Last Minute Look at Bones Fest XIV

We are so excited to be hosting Bones Fest XIV this year. This event has been the highlight of our summers for as many years as we have been attending (Kenny since BFIII in Reston & Teri since BFIX in Chattanooga). It never ceases to amaze us how creative the hosts become at their Bones Fest – each one puts their own signature stamp on it and a sort of history is made that those in attendance discuss for many years.

Believe it or not, in the wee-early planning stages, we were at a bit of a loss as to theme. Perhaps it's our constant proximity to DC, but the obvious hadn't struck us right away—maybe that's the musician in us. It took a while to dawn on us that anything that smacked of red, white & blue would not only be appropriate but downright essential. In that regard, planning this one is kind of easy (remind me I said that July 26<sup>th</sup>). OK – rephrase here – the DC area is so steeped in history and the region so beautiful that our difficulty was in narrowing our focus down rather than the contrary.

Old Town is so attractive for so many reasons that it would be difficult to have a bad time here (heck, we could serve you guys BPJ's for two days & I seriously don't think you'd notice). Rest assured, the food will be amazing – we've sampled it – and Old Town Alexandria holds a lot of interest for history buffs, shoppers, stargazers and musicians. Truly something for everyone.

We realize some are showing up on Thursday – something that's started to become a bit of a tradition for some (us). We're going to attempt to set something up so we can extend our bones-playing weekend by another day.

This is going to be a lot of fun folks and we can't wait to see you all this year! Cheers, *Kenny & Teri*





**THE SOUTHWOLD EXPRESS — THE ENGINE JUMPS THE RAILS OWING TO EXCESSIVE SPEED. THE SKILL OF THE DRIVER ALONE SAVES ALL FROM INJURY.**

## A Photograph from Nick Driver

Here is a high grade, very rare image that I'm sure you would like to publish. It's so unusual, as you well know, to find any illustrations of bones playing.

If you look closely at the picture you will see two minstrels standing on the roof of the train, one with a banjo and the other delightfully holding a pair of bones in each hand, [interesting proof of two handed playing in that part of Britain.] We know that this small, private railway, the narrow gauge Southwold Railway, closed in 1929 so the comic card dates from before then. Southwold is a town not far from me. It was from late Victorian times and still is a posh seaside resort. In Edwardian times, the early 1900s it had a small pier with a stage etc. for concert parties. The fact that two blacked up minstrels are on the train suggests that the illustrator must have associated them with their performances in those town concert par-

ties.

It's been a long time since I communicated with the Society, and I do hope that I find it's going great guns.

Happy days, I'm still fit and well and enjoying a cold summer. My very best to you and all. *Nick Driver.*

[For information about Nick, see *Rhythm Bones Player*, Volume 3, Number 2. He was a former member and former maker of cow (and other) shin bones in the style that Steve Brown now makes.]

## Kenny Wolin Played Rhythm Bones in the White House

Kenny (aka Gunnery Sergeant Wolin) performed on rhythm bones, bodhran and box (anglo concertina) again during the White House's annual St. Patrick's Day State Diner. Notable guests included Ireland's Prime Minister, the Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen, T.D., as well as Irish actor Gabriel Byrne. Kenny co-leads "The Presi-

dent's Own" Marine Band's Irish Ensemble. He is currently learning the banjo because it also starts with the letter "B." The photograph on Page 8 shows him drinking green champagne in the White House State Room.

Kenny recently returned from the Mystic Seaport's 31st Annual International Sea Music Festival. He taught a rhythm bones and spoons workshop with the assistance of our very own Jonathan Danforth on rhythm bones and fiddle. Tim Reilly, the Seaport's resident Interpreter and Chanteyman, performed earlier at the Seaport on rhythm bones, and then at Block Island, R.I. as a vocalist and multi-instrumentalist with his band, Barnacle (<http://www.myspace.com/barnacle>)

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XIV.** July 23-25, 2010, Old Towne Alexandria, VA. More details in the next issue.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 30-September 5, 2010. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

# Mike Passerotti's Collection of Rhythm Bones Video Links

3 generations  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORtSWAfcMcM>  
Barry Patton World Class Bones player  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDMwl7T6JTk>  
Breandan O Beaglaoich - Hornpipe Paddy "Sport" Murphy, all Ireland bone playing champion 5 times  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4hft4-IxV0>  
Brothers  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkbvBe\\_sxCM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkbvBe_sxCM)  
Carolina Chocolate Drops (Dom Fleming)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGzGyLk4pNc>  
Dom Flemons and Rowan Corbett jam on Bones  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLazWX8uxPU>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKJHe7XEaW8>  
Clif Ervin bones & Chris Coole banjo  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnUjERsFLlo>  
Gene, a.k.a. Doc MacGillicuddy On The Bones  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11cMtDDC7fY>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVkwN9wGfrQ>  
Grandad MacDonald Playin' the Bones  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjEMzV14HXY>  
Greg Adams, Carl Anderton, Tim Twiss  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x3Ajm4sr7E>  
Greg Burrows  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeZkfp1Asf4>  
Hillar Bergman  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0H3TszZGDcA>  
Hoss on the Rattle Bones

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RGMUEG1Spk>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4NEr0SI3vc>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYyrcTf6D74>  
Jes Lund II  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPZeAMshDtM>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5Rjd-DAvtM>  
Jack Frost  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_R9FvUQtGk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_R9FvUQtGk)  
Jeff Lefferts  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1320W5TQCJk>  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCFukAxO\\_al](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCFukAxO_al)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAM1aAAzaiA>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEWHeWXHsoI>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1320W5TQCJk>  
Jerry and Sharon Mescher and wife  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbEEMoKOopo>  
John 'Bones' Nobles & Taj Mahal  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTpOK5pqCRI>  
Kyle Pretzl  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiHL75zwNvc>  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMxKfCOh\\_7M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMxKfCOh_7M)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVYiIKX1GXw>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OqCRTCfVWc>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTR-xRlmb3E>  
Mike Passerotti  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09Vizm7Y1xI>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqLcvYOGIRg>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOFYv4dXzG8>  
Percy Danforth & David Holt  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNEHsVSZ8dI>  
Scott Miller  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UOhduPeBUQ>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFZFOSrYFTY>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbMVHmBvj6w>  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/>

[bonedrymusic  
Spike Bones  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnMegTzLeJ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnMegTzLeJ8)  
Some others, unnamed but not unknown  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcdCHIJRIRQ>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqY4dn2bKJA>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhXsuoEisoM>  
Tinsmith (Rowan Corbett)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gww4Dyoi5-U>  
Vash  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mU31eqwC3w4>  
Yoppy Kyabetsu  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebSBcvj1kD0>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cDDURKV7Rg>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6U4fe-TyoM>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KwYDK7V1TM>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4odNCj7oJVY>  
Rob Rudin  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qGKZIGnpgU>  
Wayne Jones  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaK6u91avuQ>  
Sky Bartlett and Ernie Duffy  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp4sVvDfdUQ>  
Spencer (no bones video yet)  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/plucknpick>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdeULqR7jE>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy84weMIsTs>  
Kenny Wolin  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdkBpXTEfj2M>  
[Editor's note. This list should go on our rhythmbones.com website.]





Worrell Tribute to Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour. See Page 2



Granny Barnes and grandson and member Mark Houts. Photo by Kyle Maly.



Dave Boyles visits the Gillette Brothers in Crocket, Texas. See Page 5



Kenny Wolin in White House State Room on St. Pat's Day . See Page 6

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 12, No. 3 2009

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## Executive Director's Column

A number of years ago, writing in Rolling Stone magazine, Jon Landau said, "I have seen the future of Rock and Roll, and his name is Bruce Springsteen."

After attending Bones Fest XIV, I can honestly say I've seen the future of rhythm bones and the Rhythm Bones Society. I've seen the future of the organization in Kenny and Teri Wolin producing a Bones Fest which will long inspire those in attendance. I've seen the future of the membership in Lauren, Barbara, Zip, Skeff, Bob, Joe, Damian, Jesse, Maggie, Judy, and every other first time attendee who, now bitten with the bug, will be playing and attending

bones fests for years to come.

And I've seen the future of bone playing in Sky Bartlett who has fused everything Jerry Mescher, Donnie DeCamp, Ernie Duffy, and Shorty Boulett taught him, and added his own electricity at the tender age of 22.

Jon Landau, in that famous article, also mentions how his "rock and roll past flashed before his eye's" which also was true at Bones Fest XIV. Joe Birl, looking more like 50 than the 94 years young that he is, and playing long into the night, the entire Cowett family up on stage, The Meschers now three players strong letting us see

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Highlights of Bones Fest XIV

When I go to a Bones Fest magic happens because talented people attend, and Bones Fest XIV was no exception. The Lyceum, steeped in its own history in Historic Old Towne Alexandria, VA, was the perfect venue for the Fest. Across the Potomac River was our nation's

Capital and the home of "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band with hosts Kenny Wolin, a member of that Band, and Teri Davies, who as you will see, was moving from Buffalo to Virginia.

*(Continued on page 7)*



Bones Fest XIV Group Photograph taken by Louise Krafft of the Alexandria Gazette and used with permission. Shown in the center are hosts, Teri Davies (in purple) and Kenny Wolin, who were married on Sunday with this group as witnesses.

# Editorial

It is Sunday morning of Bones Fest XIV weekend, and I awake about 6 AM to first light. From my Crowne Plaza seventh floor window, I can barely make out the outline of the Capitol building. My wife, Janet, in bed says “what are you doing?” I tell her that I am capturing memories while they are still fresh in my mind and getting ready for a few more (like hosts Kenny and Teri’s wedding.)

It is impossible to say which Fest is best though BFXIV will be long remembered. Each have their own personality shaped by their host and this year by two very talented co-hosts.

The Lyceum was a terrific venue, and there were 51 paid with many new and many returning attendees.

We were joined by Bob Winans who produced *The Early Minstrel Show* recording that featured Percy Danforth on rhythm bones. We owe him a debt as there are very few recordings of Percy other than his instructional video.

Having said that, membership is down and as successful as BFXIV was with five new members, it is down for the second year. This again was discussed at the General Membership meeting and while there were some good suggestions, it is still not clear to me how to fix this. A redesigned website is in the works with Paypal for new members and renewals, and it should help. There will be more on the website in the next newsletter.

In the past few weeks, three performers came to Chattanooga that play rhythm bones. Matt Kinman’s and Dom Flemons’ performances are described on Page 6.

The third performer, Ernie Hawkins, performed at a local college playing on guitar and singing the old style Piedmont blues. I learned about him from member Guy Gillette who played rhythm bones on one track of Ernie’s CD titled *Rags and Bones*. While Ernie plays the bones, he does not perform with them. He spent some time at my house looking at my collection of rhythm bones stuff including videos of you members performing. Maybe you will inspire him to perform rhythm bones publically.

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

into the development of a style, and how great to see Wilma Myers and her daughter Jennifer, reminding us that the bone playing spirit of Russ Myers will never die.

Bones Fest XIV will stand amongst the best Bones Fests not because of the standard of play, which was very high, not because of numbers of attendee’s which was decently in the 50’s, and not because of the impressive surroundings of the Alexandria Lyceum, which was very impressive. It’s true measure can be felt in the spirit it created amongst the people in attendance, which truly will carry us long into the year. Heck, I’ve even started practicing again, preparing for next year! *Steve Brown*

## Letters to the Editor

I wish I could have made the Bones Fest in St. Louis a couple of years ago. I grew up in central Missouri, so I could have killed several birds with one stone!

I’m still teaching bones workshops 2-3 times/year here in Albuquerque. I always do a workshop at the ABQ Folk Music Festival in June. When it gets closer to Halloween, a folk music store in town—Apple Mountain Music—has me do a Saturday bones workshop. It’s fun and little extra money.

I appreciate you keeping me on the list. Thanks for thinking of us westerners. I’ll see if I can make BFXV. *David A. Wilson*, Albuquerque, New Mexico USA, Elevation: 5,170 feet

Here is a follow up to the Ted Mack/Mescher article in the last newsletter. See the on-line version of the story at <http://www.carrollspaper.com/main.asp?SectionID=1&SubSectionID=284&ArticleID=9703&TM=26724.77>. *Mary Lee Sweet*

## Website of the Quarter

Jim Pistarelli posted this on the rhythmbones yahoo list. “The below Utube link to a clip from the 1935 movie *Go Into Your Dance* shows Al

## Rhythm Bones Player

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Jolson playing bones, in blackface, with Ruby Keeler dancing. It’s part of a large production number titled *About A Quarter To Nine*. The bones part starts at about 3 minutes, 4 seconds into the clip and lasts about 30 seconds.” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr5XQ9BhOqM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr5XQ9BhOqM)

Co-incidentally from Hank Tenenbaum’s biography in the BFXIV Program, “When I was about 12, I showed my Pop a set of bones I bought and asked him to show me how to play. His explanation took place to big band music on the phonograph as he showed me how he used to sand dance under the occasional gas lamps on the street corners of N.E. Washington with his next door neighbor, Al Jolson.”



## Tommy Cowett's Essay Contest

I was the winner of a \$25 gift certificate from Scott Miller's Bone Dry Musical Instrument Company in the drawing held on Saturday night of Bones Fest XIV. I want to award this certificate to the winner of an Essay Contest.

My thoughts for the essay contest would be success stories of how a rhythm bones player has been able to join in playing with musicians in various styles. I want the story of how they were able to fit in or sit in at gigs with bluegrass, country, rock, folk etc.

The winner would be the story I feel could best help other rhythm bones players in breaking the ice and joining a band. I heard some pretty good stories at the Bones Fest, so put them in writing and you might win.

Email your story to me at [blueludwig@triad.rr.com](mailto:blueludwig@triad.rr.com) or snail mail it to me at 4538 Brandt Ridge Road, Greensboro, NC 27410. This will be fun. *Tommy Cowett*

## Joseph Kooi Wins Bones Contest

This year, Joseph Kooi, 12, won the bones contest at the 2010 National Traditional Country Bluegrass Music Festival. Last year he bought a set of bones from us because he wanted to learn to play. Well, at this year's festival he came to our workshop and showed us what he had accomplished.



Joseph Kooi playing at the NTCMA Festival

We could not believe our eyes and we were speechless!! He is playing all the rhythm patterns. We had him play on a couple of our shows. He is amazing! He comes from a wonderful, musical family. *Sharon Mescher*

## New Members

We received several new members at Bones Fest XIV. Welcome to Rowan Corbett, Matt Holcomb, Joe Machado, Irvin Peterson, and Bob Winans.

## Minutes of Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown on July 23 at 1:50 in the Lyceum Museum, Alexandria, VA. Members present were Steve Brown, Jonathan Danforth, Steve Wixson and Kenny Wolin.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the last meeting and a motion was made, seconded and approve to approve the minutes as read.

Steve Wixson gave a brief Treasurer's report. We ended FY 2009 with an actual balance of \$2,326, less than most years due to a small loss from BFXIII, \$400 for the Ted Goon DVD project and \$1,783 for the BFXIII CD/DVD project that will produce recordings that we can sell to the public. A draft of the DVD should be ready for review by the end of 2010. A motion was made, seconded and approve to approve the Treasurer's Report. A copy of the 2009 Treasurer's Report and all supporting documentation will be sent to Steve Brown as Executive Director.

The following approved email motions are read into the record; BFXIII and its budget, \$550 for live music from Rascals of Ragtime, \$900 for Mike Carter to video BFXIII, and \$410 for the TV/DVD for the Russ Meyers Memorial Project.

The Board met as the nominating committee and the motion was made, seconded and approve to nominate the current Officers and Board members to serve for another year.

Due to the fact that Kenny Wolin, had to leave to do host duties, the

meeting was adjourned due to lack of a quorum. It was planned that the meeting would resume, but since the host was also getting married, remaining business will be conducted using the internet.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

## Minutes of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 2:00 PM on July 24 in the Lyceum Museum, Alexandria, VA

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the last meeting and a motion was made, seconded and approve to approve the minutes as read.

An election was held. The nominating Committee nominated the Officers and Board Member to serve for another year. Steve Brown called for nominations from the floor. Being none, the motion was made, seconded and approved to elect nominees by acclamation. Those elected were Steve Brown, Executive Director, Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier, Bill Vits and Kenny Wolin.

There was a brief discussion of declining membership.

Steve Brown welcome the four new members who joined at the Bones Fest.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:25 PM.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XIV.** June 10-12, 2011, San Antonio, TX. See announcement above.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29—September 4, 2011. 36th National Old Time Country Bluegrass Festival, Lemars, Iowa.

## Photographic Highlights from Bones Fest XIV



Tim Reilly's workshop with Jonathan Danforth and Kenny Wolin helping



Steve Brown's workshop on Irish bones playing and session etiquette



Tim Reilly, Teri Davies (now Wolin) and Kenny Wolin performing



The Meschers with Jerry's wife, Sharon, Jerry and sister Bernie Worrell



Dennis Riedesel, host of Bones Fest XV in San Antonio, Texas



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet in their Backintyme costumes



Our in-house band with Jonathan Danforth, Mary Audette, Bill & Terry Johnson, and Maureen Wilson with Steve Brown performing.



Spike Bones juggling tambourines with from left, Rowan Corbett, Jonathan Danforth, and Greg Adams



The Irish jam session at the Farmer's Market Pavilion with Shepherd's Pie and friends providing the music. The biggest pass off in history took place here.



The Cowett family from left, Al, Dan, John, Martha and husband Joe, Ev and Tom with guitar



Joe Birl still playing great at 94



The make shift band of Tim Reilly, Greg Adams, Jonathan Danforth, Bob Winans and Rowan Corbett



The traditional congo line Bones Fest finale



Late night jam session at the hotel with Greg Adams (white T-shirt) and Bob Winans playing their period minstrel banjos



## Carolina Chocolate Drops Play Chattanooga

The Carolina Chocolate Drops performed in Chattanooga the first weekend in September and were better than advertised. The three of them are all great musicians and Dom Flemons played bones on at least one fourth of their songs in a wild style that the audience loved. They are a high profile group now and Dom is currently the Ambassador of Rhythm Bones, if there is such a title. Maybe they will get on national television and we will see some interest in rhythm bones.

The group learned much of their repertoire, which is based on the traditional music of the Piedmont region of North and South Carolina, from the eminent African American old-time fiddler Joe Thompson, although they also perform old-time versions of some modern songs.

Before the performance, Dom stopped by my house and I showed him all of the rhythm bones stuff that I've collected. He told me more about his rhythm bones playing style.

"I play cow bones in left hand and osage orange in the right. I was given a pair of bones by a woman in Mt. Airy, NC at the fiddler's convention in 2006. She showed me how to hold them and told me I needed to learn them because "they were part of the tradition." She told me her whole family played bones and that for a while she had a pair that her uncle had taken with him through France during WWII.

"I developed my style from a few different people. I first met Cliff Ervin at the Black Banjo Gathering a few months before Mt. Airy and watched him with no inkling to play. The same day I received a pair in Mt. Airy, I got a lesson from Matt Kinman, a great old-time renaissance man. I also met Mike Baytop from DC at Commonground on the Hill and he showed me more way to play bones. He showed me it wasn't just for Irish music. It could be played next to the jukebox which is a technique he learned from his mentor, Mr. Bones (who played with Archie Edwards).

"Finally, I met another fellow

named Rowen Corbett from around the DC area and he and I had a bones "duel" at the Folk Alliance in Memphis in 2007 (which you can find on youtube) and that gave me another perspective on playing the bones.

"Also having met people like Bob Winans (whose Early Minstrel Band album was a staple of my collection), Greg Adams (researcher of minstrel/African connection), and Bob Carlin (The Birth of The Banjo book) all of whom are prominent minstrel banjo scholars as well as folks like Cheick Hamala Diabate from Mali, Joe Thompson, and Sule Greg Wilson. I learned I lot about the varied rhythmic aspects of American music and minstrel music. There is so much going on in that material and it just explodes with energy especially when bones are added to the mix. I was never a dancer but I've learned to dance with a pair on bones in my hand in a way that I could never do with my feet.

"Taking the pieces of music and applying them to abstract elements of folkloric academia such Alan Lomax's cantometric studies and Mike Seeger's experimentation with old-time music 'styles' along with bebop jazz nuances such as Charles Mingus' rhythms and textures, I developed a way of thinking about how to approach a fully adaptable instrument. "

In addition to being talented, he is a nice fellow. *Steve Wixson*

## Another Website to Check Out

This is a follow on to Jonathan Danforth's article on Chlefeli in the Vol 7, No 2 newsletter. Peo Oertli-Kassim ([peo@rhythmics.ch](mailto:peo@rhythmics.ch)) sent us two pairs of Chlefeli that I took to Bones Fest XIV. As shown in the website below, they have a different look, but sound quite good.

To view the website, copy the following to your web browser and when the translate page comes up click translate: <http://translate.google.com/#auto|en|http://www.rhythmics.ch/clappers.html>. *Steve Wixson*

## Matt Kinman Plays Old Time Rhythm Bones

Matt Kinman is an old time musician who plays many instruments including fiddle, guitar, banjo, mandolin, and rhythm bones. Matt, thirty eight years old, actually grew up playing old-time music. He appears regularly with the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers and the Pea Ridge Ramblers. He has performed with Old Crow Medicine Show, Mike Seeger, Tennessee Mafia Jug Band, and others.

"It was an old-time band that started the Grand Ole Opry, and they were playing fiddle tunes then," says Kinman.

He and a friend, Jonathan Farrell, played in Chattanooga a few weeks back. I had the feeling that the two were jamming in his front room and that we were just sitting there listening to them. They played old time Americana music and the newest song they played was by Jimmie Rogers.

My only regret was that he played rhythm bones on only one song, but it was some fine bones playing. He would occasionally hit the bones against his other hand or his knee to get an extra click.

After the show I got to spend some time with him. He learned to play one-handed bones from his father when he was about 8 years old and his father learned from a sailor who was 103 at the time. Matt plays shin bones that came from England (however they don't look like Nick Driver shin bones that several of us play.) He introduced Dom Flemons of the Carolina Chocolate Drops to the rhythm bones.

After his previously mentioned bones song, he told this story about musician John Hartford. He was jamming with John and others and such sessions quickly became Hartford sessions. Matt started playing his bones and John yelled out, "No Bones." Being a rhythm bones player, I was sorry to learn about that.

You can watch Matt play a neat fiddle tune at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0oZjoOQ0Y4>

You can see how he teaches bones at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssMEbMYkOX8&feature=related>. *Steve Wixson*



(Bones Fest Highlights—Continued from page 1)

The Fest actually began on Thursday evening with a reception in the RBS Hospitality Suite in the Crown Plaza Hotel for those folks for whom two and a half days of rhythm bones playing was just not enough.

The Fest officially began Friday at 11:30 AM with a reception with food and drink, jamming, the Bones Marketplace, and people renewing old and making new friendships.

The planned Skype link to our new found Tuscany rhythm bones friends unfortunately did not work, and we were not able to share techniques with them. There is a photograph below of the Italians who sat waiting for us to come on-line. There were technical problems in the Lyceum, and next year hopefully it will work.

This was followed by an afternoon of workshops. Steve Brown led a workshop on how to play Irish music and how to join in an Irish Session, and Tim Reilly led a workshop on how to play drum rudiments on rhythm bones.

Can there be a Bones Fest without a Rib Bones dinner? This was catered by the Red Hot and Blue Restaurant. The rest of evening was fun with informal performances by most everyone. The photographs on Pages 4 and 5 tell the story.

We continued on Saturday with an Irish Bones Jam Session at the Alexandria Farmer's Market on the City Hall Pavilion Stage. We held the largest Pass-Off in history, and tried to get it sanctioned by the Guinness Book of Records. Music was provided by Shepherd's Pie and some of our host's friends. This was a grand highlight.

Lunch was followed by more workshops in the Lyceum. These were titled 'Art' workshops, and Tim Reilly started them off with 'The Ancient Art of Bone Scrimshaw.' Spike Bones led 'Rhythm Bones and the Art of Dance.' and Kenny's was 'Taking it to the Next Level – The Art of 2-Hand Independence.'

After a pizza dinner, we reorganized for our public performances. The doors opened at 6 PM for beginner lessons led by the Meschers and an open Bones Marketplace. At 6:30 the show began, and continued until eve-

ryone who wanted to perform did perform most in some kind of costume or better dress. Apart from the wedding, host Teri's greatest Bones Fest highlight was performing bones on stage for the first time with her daughter Emily. Everyone had a great time.

Most of us went back to the hotel and jammed until the week hours. Greg Adams and Bob Winans, both with their period minstrel banjos, played for a couple more hours. Lots more rhythm bones jamming.

According to the hosts, the highlight of the weekend happened Sunday Morning. At 9 AM sharp, attendees gathered in the lobby of the hotel and waited for Gunnery Sgt Kenneth Scott Wolin, in full dress uniform, to walk down the stairs and lead everyone to TransPotomac Canal Central. Music was provided by Jonathan Danforth on violin and Mary Audette on flute, playing Teri's favorite waltz, *Give Me Your Hand*. The crowd hushed as Teri Davies walked down the curved stairs to the landing where after pausing down more stairs through the raised bones of the Rhythm Bones Honor Guard (see photograph). It was a beautiful culmination of Kenny's proposal to Teri on stage at Bones Fest XIII (to the surprise of Teri and all attendees).

Then it was back to the hotel for a champagne breakfast and farewells.

Steve Brown thought the new atten-

dee's were quite impressive, and there must be 10 -15 folks who had never been to a Fest. Each and every one of them were enthusiastic, and charmed by the event. He was pleased to see Wilma Myers, who looked in good health, and the Cowett's all playing together again. He was thrilled that Bob Winans had come, and he was, Steve thought, impressed with the event. Many thanks to Bob and Greg Adams for coming back to the hotel and playing tunes and informing us about the banjo long into the night.

Steve Wixson

First Announcement

Bones Fest  
XV

San Antonio, Texas

June 9-12, 2011

Host

Dennis Riedesel  
riedeselD@uhv.edu



The Italian rhythm bones players waiting in Tuscany for a Skype internet link so they could share Bones Fest XIV with us. Unfortunately the link did not work. Next year it will!

## The Wedding of Teri Davies and Kenny Wolin



Teri and Kenny's daughters pass out flowers to attendees



Teri Davies walks through the Rhythm Bones Honor Guard



Music by Mary Audette On flute and Jonathan Danforth on violin



Mr and Mrs Kenny Wolin

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 12, No. 4 2010

### In this Issue

A New Look for [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

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## Executive Director's Column

It's now the end of December, and the new year will be fast upon us, time, perhaps to reflect on the past and look to the future, while not neglecting the present. Let me first wish everyone the best of this Holiday season, and the very best in this coming New Year.

While this year produced one of the very finest Bones Fest's, it also saw the passing of one of our members who was well known in and beyond his native Georgia. John 'Mr Bones' Cahill was a most enthusiastic bones player. I met him at my first Bones Fest, and although he had had a stroke by then, he never let it stand in the way of playing the bones. He learned to play the bones the year I was born, 1950, and played a great variety of music. You can read more about him in the obituary in this issue.

Also sad news about our friend, Elwin "Shorty" Boulet, who remains in a nursing home, where he celebrated his 90th birthday on December 27, 2010. See the letters to the Editor for his address, and keep him in your thoughts.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Steve Wixson, who once again has out done himself in his efforts to improve the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website for our members and the public at large. The improvements are amazing including access to our Newsletters, information about our members including those who have passed on, and video. Do take the time to read his article on the improvements, and have fun exploring the new site.

It is part of the human condition to look to

*(Continued on page 3)*

## A New Look for [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Martha Cowett created it. Jonathan Danforth gave it its great look. Now Steve Wixson adds video and new navigation and features.

The Rhythm Bones Society website, [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) (now also [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)), has a new look with features that members have requested. The new Home Page is shown in the Figure on this page, and keeps the same look and feel as in Jonathan's redesign of Martha's original.

The goals of the new look are three-fold; general education, rhythm bones instruction, and attract new members.

Navigation is at the top of each page and is

the consistent on all pages. The navigation button provide easy selection of website resources, and most of these resources are Jonathan's pages with navigation at the top.

Directly under the navigation buttons are two larger boxes that will change on a monthly basis.

The left box, titled *Player of the Month*, features some important rhythm bones personality, and clicking on that box will lead to more information—in this case, with Everett Cowett as the personality, it displays the newsletter that has an article

*(Continued on page 6)*



New Home Page for Rhythm Bones Society Website

## Editorial

There is sadness in the rhythm bones community with the loss of John 'Mr. Bones' Cahill. John had been in poor health. He was a long time member of the Rhythm Bones Society, and until recent times attended most Bones Fests. See his obituary in this issue.

The front page story is about the new look of the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) webpage. Many of the things that members have asked for are now on the website, and hopefully this will help us get our message out resulting in an increase in membership.

Please help us test the new website at [www.stevewixson.net](http://www.stevewixson.net). If you discover something that is not working, please contact me at [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net). It may take a while to get all of the problems resolved, but as soon as we do, it will go live at both [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) and the new [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org).

Beginning now there will also be a monthly email with current information of interest, and something that you can easily forward to other rhythm bones players. Membership is down and we need recruiting help from all of you. Membership applications and renewals can be made now on-line using the test website and later on the real website.

We first met Ida May Schmich at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, and then again at Bones Fest XII in St. Louis. She is profiled in this issue of the newsletter. At 94, she continues to be a live wire, and a rhythm bones player I aspire to be like.

Steve Brown needs to move to Ireland, though as I have read the stories of his visits there in this newsletter, I wonder which of those wonderful places he would pick as his home. This issue has a story of a visit to another part of Ireland, County Sligo.

## Letter to the Editor

As I write this it's snowing, and the wind is whipping around, just to let you know it's winter in New England.

On a more serious note I just got a letter from Shirley Boulet. Shorty is now in a rest home, and suffering the

effects of congestive heart failure. It is unlikely he will be able to go home again as he needs that level of care. For those of you who don't know, Shorty Boulet learned to play the bones at 10 years old in his native Vermont in Derby on the line. He won a talent contest that same year by playing the bones and harmonica at the same time. He's played the bones ever since, and celebrated his 90th birthday on December 27th. I'm wondering if folks might be willing to send him a belated birthday card to shower him with cards. His address is as follows;

Elwin "Shorty" Boulet  
Morrison Nursing Home  
6 Terrace St. Room 104  
Whitefield, N.H. 03598

I have very fond memories of Shorty—from the first time I met him in the VFW in Belows Falls, VT to a number of bones fests, both national and regional. He was a true character, and played the bones with great enthusiasm. Thanks in advance, *Steve Brown*

## New to the Website

There are four new historical items added to our test website.

The first is Beth Lenz Master's Thesis titled *The Bones in the US: History and Performance Practice*. Beth had access to all of the information that Percy Danforth had collected over the years, and she crafted it into an important work.

Several years ago RBS obtained a copy of her thesis from the University of Michigan where she did the work, and with her permission parts of Chapter 1 have been printed in the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter starting with Vol 8, No 2, and continuing in Vol 8, No 4, and Vol 9, No 2. Now she shares the entire thesis with the rhythm bones community and others via our website. Many thanks, Beth.

The second is from a presentation Joe Birl made at Bones Fest III where he described how he made, patented and sold his black plastic 'rhythm bones.' While there are some routine aspects to the process, there are some interesting and amusing parts also. Joe sold about 150,000 of these bones.

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues. The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.	
Rhythm Bones Central web site: <a href="http://rhythmbones.com">rhythmbones.com</a>	

The third is memorabilia of Ted 'Mr Goon-Bones' Goon a very successful rhythm bones recording artist in the late 1940s. There was a DVD given to members that contained this material, and now it is available on our website.

The fourth is internet research that Steve Wixson did back in 1999 which shows the state of rhythm bones then. He found only about 100 web pages while searching using several variations of 'bones playing.' A Goggle search today using just 'rhythm bones' returns almost 18,000 pages. RBS has and is making an impact on rhythm bones playing.

## Website of the Quarter

The website of the quarter is our test site for the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) update with the internet address of <http://stevewixson.net>. Try it out and let him know if anything doesn't look right at [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net)



(Continued from page 1)

the future with hope, and I am no exception to that. Bones Fest XV will be the first bones fest west of the Missouri River. It will be held in San Antonio, Texas, on the grounds of the Texas Folk Life Festival, with exceptional musicians, and the fest hotel will be across from the Alamo. Dennis Reidesel is hosting the Fest, and has done a fine job of planning. What more could we ask to encourage hope for the future of bone playing.

Thanks to all of you who make up the membership of the Rhythm Bones Society for it is with each and every one of you that the future of the instrument depends on! *Steve Brown*

## Profile of a Member Ida May Schmich

The fracture didn't show up in the X-rays. Only when iodine was injected did the telltale crack show up in her pelvis. But Ida May Schmich was not going to go peacefully.

"Let me preface this visit with telling you I'm not the ordinary 93-year-old who is willing to sit in the chair and rock," she said brusquely to the doctor. "I square dance. I play my banjo and my bones. I'm active. Now tell me what's wrong and how long it's going to take to heal!"

From the get go, Ida May was a doer. She probably received that trait from her parents.

"My dad came from Copenhagen, Denmark, when he was 5. Later, he and a friend came down from Muskogee, OK, to St. Louis and became friends with a group of people," said Ida May. "I don't know how my parents met, but they both belonged to that same group and they would all go out on an island in the middle of the Mississippi—the men to fish and the women would bring bacon along just in case they didn't catch anything. They all had a good time."

Born in St. Louis, her mother tried to show her how to do things around the house.

"I was not domestic!" she said adamantly. However, she'd follow her carpenter dad around to various jobs, "helping" him oversee his work on

weekends.

Life was good for Ida May. She led an active existence and music became a part of her life at an early age.

"I took piano lessons when I was 10, but only practiced a bit before my Saturday morning lessons, so my mother decided she was wasting their money on me," she said, laughing.

It must have been watching her daughter on her bones that gave her mom the inkling Ida May had musical talent.

"My daddy made my first bones for me when I was nine," she said. "A man who lived down the street played the bones and showed me how. I kept persisting and he lent them to me for awhile. His were made out of rosewood and I had my dad make a pattern and make mine."

The bones have been a part of her life even since. In 1938 and 1939 she played her bones as part of a trio at the National Folk Dance meeting held at the Keil Auditorium in St. Louis.

"I bowled at that time and would swim at the Y. I bicycled for years—even hitting 2,000 miles twice on my cyclometer. Before that I was in the hiking club, I played tennis and I played volleyball with the Mother's Club from the PTA while raising my boys. And," she said with a grin, "I met my husband while I was roller skating."

Before her husband, Joe, died, he saw a notice on the bulletin board—Learn to Square Dance. Before long he and Ida May were square and round dancing all over.

"In 1957, I attended the 6th National Square Dancing Convention at the same Keil Auditorium." Ida May said. At 94, she is still dancing—able to dance the male or female role depending on her partners.

After Joe passed away in 1997 after 52 years of marriage, a square dancing friend convinced her to come down to the Valley, and Ida May settled into Winter Haven Park in Pharr, TX.

"I like the location because it's close to the parks where I square dance," she said. "But, my dancing was curtailed this year when I tripped over a microphone cord and fell flat on the concrete." That was the cause of her fractured pelvis.

Discovering Jams when she first came to the Valley, she took her bones and began attending.

"I would just sit there with my bones because you can't play the bones all the time," said Ida May.

"Somebody had an omnichord and I thought, 'I can play that. '"

Learning the omnichord, she would play that instrument at jams except when playing her bones. But here, these last few years, she's taken up the banjo, doing mostly chords at jams—always saving her bones for her specials.

When she thinks of the future she's mindful that she's still up—looking down—not looking up from the grass. She's grateful for that and shooting for 100 years old.

Hoping to be an inspiration to people by being happy, active and having fun, she's back to her square dancing after only eight weeks out.

There's only one thing Ida May is lamenting over these days

"I used to be go, go, go—fast, fast. Now I'm slowing down a little bit and I hate it!" She laughs and life is good. *Roda Grubb*

[Extracted from March 3, 2010 Original Winter Texan newspaper, and used with permission.



Ida May Schmich photograph by Roda Grubb

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XV.** June 10-12, 2011, San Antonio, TX.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## John Cahill Obituary

John B. Cahill, Jr. (also known as “Mr. Bones”), 75, of Buford, GA, died Nov. 10, 2010 after a lengthy and courageous battle with a rare brain disease. He was born November 16, 1934, in Atlantic City, NJ, and graduated from Boys Town High School in Omaha, NE, in 1952.

While at Boys Town, he learned to play “rhythm bones,” a musical instrument crafted from wood or animal bones, common in minstrel shows in the 1800s. It was a rare talent that became his lifelong passion.

John received a Bachelor’s degree from Austin College in Sherman, TX, and served in the U.S. Navy for two years. He was an engineer for General Dynamics and Montgomery Ward before moving to Atlanta in 1969. He worked at the JC Penney Catalog Center in Forest Park until he retired in 1998.

After many years of playing the bones as a hobby, John began his musical career in 1990 as a street performer at Underground Atlanta.

Later that year, he joined Dr. Horsehair’s Old Time Minstrels, a band playing popular music from the 1800s. For seven years, he performed with the group at festivals, conventions, fairs, Civil War re-enactments, and other venues across Georgia. The band was featured at the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic Games (including Centennial Park), Six Flags Over Georgia, Stone Mountain Park Antebellum Festival, Atlanta High Museum, Georgia Dome, Callaway Gardens, and The Omni.

John also brought his distinctive sound to the South Metro Concert Band and the Peachtree Jazz Edition Band.

In 1998, he formed Mr. Bones & Company, a four-member band that entertained at festivals, nursing homes, senior centers, churches, and other events.

Five years later, he and his wife Kay teamed up to form the bones/keyboard duo of Mr. & Mrs. Bones. They performed for a range of audiences in the Metro Atlanta area, and participated in the Summer Program for Kids at 20 Georgia libraries, tell-

ing stories and educating children about bones history.

Several of Mr. Bones’ DVDs are being documented and preserved in the Library of Congress, along with the history of minstrel shows and bones. [Excepted from his formal obituary.]

John was a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society, and the photograph on Page 8 shows one of his performances at Bones Fest III.

I had a few excellent conversations with John Cahill and his wife. They are in my treasure box. What did playing bones mean to an aging old man? He may have lost his ability to hear conversation level voices, but the bones' clicking is loud and clear. He may have lost his the ability for form complete sentences, but repeat phrases of rhythm were no problem. When he dressed up and stepped out on stage, he was a performer and loved by all. He grew old with grace and poise, with love all around him. Illness can take away physical and mental abilities, but the man on the inside was the same strong, witty, professional performer that so many have come to love. I had a brief moment in time to get to know John. I'll never forget him. *Mike Passerotti*

My sincere condolences to John Cahill's family, I remember his dynamic performance at Bonesfest VIII very well. The loss of any bonesman (or boneswoman) is a big one as there are seemingly so few of us out here! *Greg Burrows*

This is sad news but, alas, not surprising. John was a talented player and a man with many fascinating life stories. I will miss him *Michael Ballard*



Steve Brown in Ireland. See the article to right.

## Up Sligo!

I must admit, I had to pinch myself several times to make sure it was real. There I was, a passenger in one of those right drive vehicles, making our way west from Dublin toward County Sligo. I was in Ireland again! This time quite impromptu, as my good friend, and flute player Raymond Henry had invited me to tag along on a visit to his birth place, Carnalech, in Clonacool, just outside Tubbercurry, in County Sligo. “Think of these places as a small box, inside of a larger box, inside of a larger box” he explained. This whole fantastic journey having been planned at our bi-weekly gig just a few short weeks before. Raymond, who was visiting his mother, would be staying at his own house near his brothers, and would already be renting a car. The temptation was just too much to pass up. And after getting approval from the big boss (my wife) I was soon sitting in my seat on another Aer Lingus flight, winging my way toward Dublin Airport.

In preparation for the trip, I made several inquiries by email, as to the possibility of performing, or doing a bone playing workshop as a way to earn a little extra money to defray the cost of the airfare. As luck would have it, I had the most willing of collaborators in 5 times All Ireland Bodhran Champion, Junior Davey, and his extraordinary wife Jelca. Junior and I had communicated several times by email, and he had been the recipient of a pair of bones I had made, given to him as a birthday present from his good friend and mine, bodhran and bones player Nicolas Dupin of France. Junior and Jelca were quick to arrange a workshop at the Coleman Music Center on the Saturday following our arrival., in Gurteen, just a few miles from where Raymond and I would be staying.

County Sligo is truly an amazing place for Traditional Irish Music. The birthplace to such legendary musicians as James Morrison, Paddy Kiloran, and perhaps the most influential Irish Fiddle player of all times, Michael Coleman, who emigrated to America in the early part of the 20th

century, and whose recordings were played all over Ireland. Today it is a strong hold of traditional music boasting a large number of musicians including Flute players Seamus Tansey, and Harry McGowan, the traditional band Dervish, and is host to one of the largest Summer Schools in Ireland, the South Sligo Traditional Music School in Tubbercurry.

Bone playing, though, is not as well known in the area, although it is known. Junior himself plays, as well as Cathy Jordan of Dervish. Much more known is the traditional Irish drum, the bodhran. A long history of playing the drum by "hand strikers" is seen in the area, as opposed to using the stick, which is seen more commonly around Ireland. Junior teaches the drum in the schools of Gurteen, as well as at the Coleman Center, and his students have gone on to win over 30 All Ireland titles in various age categories. Many bodhran players have played the bones in Ireland, including Peadar Mercier, Tommy Hayes, and Junior's inspiration, Johnny "Ringo" McDonough. Unfortunately, many of the younger bodhran players have not picked up the bones as much. Junior is committed to encouraging the Irish tradition of bone playing in hopes that this art will continue, and not be lost.

To say Raymond and I were lucky in the timing of our trip would be an understatement. The Week end we arrived Tubbercurry was host to a music festival, Ceol na Samhna, which included a concert on Friday night, workshops during the Saturday, and music sessions throughout the town all week end. In addition, far to our South, in County Clare, the Ennis Trad Festival would be running through Monday night. Combined with Junior and Jelca's invitation for the workshop, we were looking at a week rich with traditional music that the area is known for.

After settling in at Raymond's house, and meeting his two brothers, Fergus and Ignatius, we grabbed what we could of sleep, before Raymond headed off to visit his mother. Upon his return, I was quite surprised to learn that we had been invited to perform at the Friday night concert, where we could drum up participation

in the workshop the following day. Many of the local performers, some of the best musicians in Ireland, would in fact be performing that night, although Raymond seemed to have forgotten to tell me that before hand. I suppose ignorance is bliss, as we prepared our three sets, excited by the prospect, although sleep deprived.

We arrived on Irish time at the concert, 9pm for the 8pm start time. Soon we were joining the mc back stage, and walking out to do our little bit. We started with two reels, Maid behind the bar, and the Kilmaley reel, and when we ended, the response was over whelming. The locals seemed to truly enjoy these two Americans who had invaded their locality. Then came the jigs, our show pieces, the battering ram, and Gallagher's Frolic's. Again we finished to what we can only describe as thunderous applause, I kept looking around to see if someone else had come in. Truly charmed by the crowd, I was approached numerous times through out the night by the town folk, who expressed their appreciation for our performance, and remarked over and over again , ". with the two hands!"

We were home by 2am after a session in a local pub, and scrambling to make the workshop in Gurteen at 2pm. Outside the Coleman Music Center we were met and greeted cordially by Junior Davey. Junior himself comes from a rich musical heritage, his father, Andrew Davey having been a well known fiddle player. Junior is not only an All Ireland Bodhran Champion, but a very accomplished bone player. Playing in the one handed style that dominates Irish bone playing, he complements the music with some interesting syncopation, also evident in his bodhran playing.

I really had no idea what to expect at the workshop. I remarked to Raymond that perhaps it would be Junior, he and I looking at each other for the afternoon. As we made our way in side, we realized we were not going to be alone. We had 22 registered for the workshop, and now I was feeling the pressure. I've done numerous workshops over the years, usually lasting for an hour, but now I realized I needed to fill a three hour time slot

with bone playing. And to make it a little more challenging, I had small children from about age 8, adult beginners, and several adults who had been playing for some time. This was going to be a most challenging experience, I thought, to hold everyone's attention, and to provide them with a pleasant experience to encourage their learning in the future.

The workshop started out as planned, holding, learning the tap, and progressing to the rattle. Less than half were able to produce a rattle, and then we broke for tea, a welcome break for me, having given individual attention to each participant, and worked my way around the entire circle several times. After tea, a miracle had occurred. With less than half producing the rattle before the break, after the break more than 75% were producing a rattle, "What was in that tea!" I remarked. And I came to the stark realization that in that short time away from me, they had all learned what I had been trying to teach them, but without me present!

I must say that I had the great fortune to have some superb musical backing during the workshop. Not only from my good friend Raymond on Flute, and Junior on the Bodhran, but we were joined by an exceptional box (accordion) player PJ Hernon. PJ, originally from Connamara in Galway, was gracious enough to have come by at the urging of Junior, and played some great tunes in that inimitable style. The afternoon was rounded out by some individual performances by some of the children who danced sean nos style, and some of the more experienced participants who played along with PJ, Raymond and Junior.

After the workshop, Raymond and I enjoyed dinner with Junior, his wife Jelca, and their two children Adel, and Rachel, who both had participated in the workshop. More music at the restaurant, comparing bone playing styles, and a quick bodhran lesson for me. Then tea, and promises to see Junior and the family when they visit New York in February. Soon we were off to another late night session in Tubbercurry, and hitting the bed just after 2am.

With our formal obligations behind us, the rest of the week found us enjoying the company and hospitality of Raymond's family, including several small house sessions, and a larger house session which included local musicians Josephine Judge on accordion, flute players Michael Hurley, Father James, Harry McGowan, and Raymond, Michael's son Diarmud on bouzouki and bodhran, as well as Raymond's brothers Dermott on piano, Fergus on guitar, Ignatius on banjo, and Ignaticious' daughter Klina on flute and whistle.

On Wednesday we were asked by Junior to visit several schools in Gurteen to demonstrate American bone playing. Over the hour or two we visited two schools and several classrooms in each school. The children were delightful, asking for our autographs, and paying strict attention as I talked and demonstrated the bones. Once, two of the children played along with us, whistle and bodhran, and showed great expertise on the instruments. At each turn we were greeted with excited faces, eager to see and hear the bones.

In what seemed like a flash, the week was over, and we were making our way back to Dublin in the pouring rain. I can't thank Raymond and his family enough for their extreme hospitality, and to Junior Davey and his family, not only for arranging the workshop, but making me feel so welcomed and appreciated. Most of all to Raymond himself whose generous invitation made this great Sligo adventure possible. *Steve Brown*

## Preview of Bones Fest XV

Texas is known for doing things big, and Bones Fest XV is no exception. The Fest hotel is beside the Alamo Compound, and we have a guided tour and IMAX presentation titled *Price of Freedom*.

The Fest is scheduled for the same weekend as the Texas Folklife Festival and we have stage time on both Friday and Saturday nights. On Saturday night, the Congo Line Finale will take us to the Riverwalk for a river-

# Bones Fest XV

San Antonio, Texas  
June 9-12, 2011



Host  
Dennis Riedesel  
riedeselD@uhv.edu

Full Program and  
Registration  
materials in the  
next newsletter

boat dinner cruise on the San Antonio River.

We also have stage time in the Alamo Compound on Friday and Saturday mornings. There are workshops and jamming with lots of live music from several of my friends who can play about any kind of music; Irish, authentic Americana, folk, bluegrass, jazz, etc!

The Fest graphic drawn by Abbie Hanson, shown here in grayscale, is in color, and the Bones Fest XV t-shirt will be a keeper.

You Be Here, You Hear! *Dennis Riedesel*

(Continued from page 1)

about him.

The right box is the *Video of the Month*, and a rhythm bones video that will change monthly. The first video is the finale from Bones Fest XIII hosted by the Gil and Linda Hibben. There is a control panel in the lower left corner of the box with a button to start the video.

On the left side of the page under the Player of the Month box are four smaller boxes that should attract new members.

The upper left small box, titled What are Rhythm Bones, directs viewers to a brief description of rhythm bones. Clicking the DEM BONES box in the upper right corner of the page take you here also.

The lower left small box selects the Dr Edmunds rhythm bones on-line instruction page. From there one selects one of three basic or introductory lessons; How to Hold the Bones, The Tap, and The Triplet.

The upper right small box directs people to where they can buy rhythm bones and related resources, hopefully after they have tried the on-line instruction.

The lower right small box takes you to RBS pages for information, new member application and member renewals. We are trying PayPal for dues and a future On-line Bones Marketplace. Clicking on our circular RBS logo takes you here also.

To the right of the four boxes is a current news box that should be of interest to members. It has news outline in textual form and the reader can click inside the box to go to a page with the full news text. This should change frequently, but monthly at the minimum when the monthly Player and Video change.

The following is a more detailed look at how the row of navigation buttons at the top work. They are an up-to-three level index to most of the content on the website.

Home—Click this to get back to the Home Page

Current—Click this to bring up a pop-up list of current information.

Calendar—A Listing of dates of



upcoming rhythm bones related events. This is the most volatile page on the website, and most difficult to keep up-to-date. Viewers can use the new Contact Us page to submit new events. How long it take to post them on the calendar will depend on how much free time is available. The monthly update for Player and Video of the month will likely be when it happens.

News—A page with the full text of the news. Same as clicking inside the News box on Home Page.

Next Bones Fest—The latest information on the next Bones Fest.

Yahoo Forum—Clicking this takes you directly to the Yahoo Rhythm Bones Discussion Forum.

Players—Information about individual rhythm bones players

Biographies—Essentially the same information as on the current website.

Obituaries—This page is a way to honor and remember with stories, photographs and video of deceased members and other rhythm bones players of the past few decades.

Russ Myers Memorial Video One such remembrance is to Russ Myers, founding member and first Assistant Director. A video covering his rhythm bones life was produced and given to the Madison County, VA Historical Society in a memorial service held in his hometown with several RBS members attending. This video is now on-line.

Resources—It amazes me how much information Martha and Jonathan have placed on our website. The new Resource button controls three level set of buttons to the rest of this resource. Clicking it brings up a drop down lists of sub-menus.

Instruction—Instruction is important and it has been place first in the drop-down list.

Edmund On-Line Instruction—This on-line rhythm bones instruction is so important that it also has its own clickable box on the Home Page. (see review below.)

Reviews of Bones Videos—This presents reviews of all the known rhythm bones instructional

videos that can be purchased at stores or on the internet. The reviews originally appeared in several the Rhythm Bones Player newsletters, and are collected here for easy access and comparison.

Newsletters—The Rhythm Bones Player newsletter has been published quarterly since 2000 with one issue in 1999, and all but the last two years are available on-line. The most current two years are published in paper form and reserved as a benefit for members. Please join and help us promote rhythm bones and receive these newest newsletters. Note that the newsletter can be searched using the Adobe Reader Find function.

Rhythm Bones Society—Information about the Society.

History—Presents a brief history of the origins of RBS.

Bones Fests—Presents an overview of our Bones Fests with links to the details of each Bones Fest.

Join RBS—A new page where people can join on-line using PayPal

Renew Membership—A new page that allows members to renew on-line using PayPal.

History of this Website—A short history of this website.

History—A few bits of history.

General—A brief history of rhythm bones.

Sue Barber's History—A history of rhythm bones written by Sue Barber.

History of Bones Contests. A short history of known rhythm bones competitions.

Mr. Goon-Bones—A collection of memorabilia from recording artists Ted Goon.

1999 Internet Search—The results of a 1999 internet search.

Video & Audio—A collection of rhythm bones media.

Mike Passerotti YouTube List—Mike has collected all known YouTube rhythm bones videos into one convenient index. Click a link and see the video.

Discography—A list of some audio recordings.

Videography—A list of some other videos.

Where to Buy—Works the same as the same box on Home Page.

Items for Sale—This is not yet implemented. We have a few t-shirts from previous Bones Fests that we could offer.

Contact Us—A new page so that viewers can send us messages.

Rhythm bones instruction arrives with the Bones Unlimited course designed by Dr Fred Edmunds who many consider the grandfather of the RBS (See RPB Vol 5, No 3.) While this course teaches the percussive style of rhythm bones playing, his introductory sections apply to both percussive and traditional styles of playing. The power of his instructional materials are formal exercises that progressively increase in difficulty. In the future we may offer the entire course on a DVD, and there will be a link to purchase it at the On-line Bones Marketplace.

PayPal. Many people who have difficulty paying in dollars have requested another way to pay dues, and PayPal is an option. An email was mailed to members asking if they feel comfortable using PayPal and only two members responded negative. Some people do not know that you can use credit cards with PayPal without having to sign up as PayPal member. Let's see if it works for us.

While this article describes the website as it is now, it will change. We ask members to use the Contact Us page and make suggestions for additions and improvements.

Had enough words! Well go and try it out. The test version address is stevewixson.net. When fully tested it will have the new address of rhythmbones.org (we are a society—not a business), and rhythmbones.com will continue to work.

If your screen doesn't look like the figure on Page 1, let me know at wixson@chattanooga.net.

Technical stuff. The website was updated with Adobe Dreamweaver CS5. The concept for the Home Page was inspired from member Gil Hibben's www.hibbenknives.com Home Page created by RBS friend Mike Carter. *Steve Wixson*

## Recording of the Quarter

**Minstrel Banjo Style:** featuring Joe Ayers, Clarke Buehling, Bob Carlin, Bob Flesher (with John Cahill on rhythm bones), Tony Trishka, and Bob Winans. Rounder CD 0321

I was fortunate to have purchased a recording from Bob Winans, banjo authority, and player, at Bones Fest XIV this year. Not only is it a great introduction to the Minstrel banjo era, but it has several bone players featured on 8 of the 28 cuts. One of the bone players is our good friend who recently passed away, John Cahill. John didn't play on a lot of recordings, that I'm aware of, so it's particularly gratifying to me to have him on record. This recording is a compilation of six banjo players, playing in the style that was popular in this country in the mid 1800's. I'm not very knowledgeable about this type of music, so I really enjoyed hearing the tunes and songs, and becoming more familiar with the music that is so connected to the rhythm bones. Some of my favorite tracks would be Bob Winans' interpretation of Briggs jig, and Briggs



Steve Brown and Junior from Steve Brown's trip to Sligo. See article on Page 4.

Reel, featuring Ken Koons on bones, and Bob Flescher's version of Jim along Josie, featuring John Cahill. There's also a wealth of information in a small booklet that comes with the recording, although I found it a little hard to find the names of the bones players and other musicians who accompanied the banjo players. Ironi-



The late John Cahill performing in costume at Bones Fest III. His obituary is on Page 4.

cally enough I recently started playing with a minstrel banjo player who lives here in my own town. I would consider this a very good introductory recording for folks who want to hear music from a gone by era in America. This recording is available from Rounder Record Corp, One Camp Street Cambridge, Mass. 02140. *Steve Brown*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*

Ida May Schmich at a jam in Pharr, TX, and wearing her Bones Fest XII t-shirt. Photograph by Roda Grubb, and used with permission.



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 13, No. 1 2011

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## Executive Director's Column

So, will you be, *On the Road to Abbeyfeale* as the song says? Amidst the very difficult times in Ireland these days, the *Fleadh By the Feale* will once again host the All-Ireland Bone Playing Championship. It was, I understand, touch and go for the sponsors, but in the end the Fleadh, and the contest will go on.

As bone playing contests go, Abbeyfeale stands alone for many reasons. It features only bone playing, unlike the Bones and Spoons contest at the National Old Time Festival and Contests now in Missouri Valley, Iowa.

The judges have, for the most part, been well known bone players, or at least percussionists, and have included members Mel Mercier and Ronnie McShane, and also Tommy Hayes. This year Junior Davey, 5 time All Ireland Bodhran

Champion, and excellent bone player has agreed to judge the contest.

Bone playing, although a bit of an aberration in most of Ireland, is well known in Abbeyfeale, and the whole town comes out to see the contest.

Yes, the contest in Abbeyfeale is a haven for bone players, but how much longer will we be able to say that? Contestant numbers have steadily decreased over the years. In my first year of competition there were 16 contestants from five different countries, and 6 counties in Ireland, last year only four contestants representing only one country, and two counties of Ireland.

These are hard economic times, and none

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Memories of Erik Ilott, 'The Bristol Shantyman'

A few memories of my late friend and "Bones Mentor" Erik Ilott, the "Bristol Shantyman"

I first met Erik somewhat more than five-and-twenty years ago at a folk-song club in Grimsby, the once-great fishing port on the East Coast of England. It was an occasion that had a significant effect on the turn of my musical life.

Erik had ventured north from his home port of Bristol to entertain us as "The Bristol Shantyman" at our folk-club held at an old Grimsby pub, the "Royal Oak", just a stone's throw from the town's commercial and fish docks.

At that time I was working on the Tugboats of the River Humber, serving the ports of Grimsby, Hull and Immingham, probably the busiest estuary in the UK after the Thames. Luckily the folk-club that evening did not clash with the tides! I was there because of my interest in sea songs and shanties and I had never come across the "Bones"

before.. It was an absolute revelation to see and hear Erik when he "Got into his stride" with his songs, accompanied variously with Concertina, Banjulele and Bones. In the English folk-clubs you get used to the concertina and even the occasional Ukulele or Banjulele but the "Rhythm Bones" were something completely new to most

*(Continued on page 7)*



Erik Ilott from liner notes of *Shipshape and Bristol Fashion' Sea Songs* album.

## Editorial

Long time member, Shorty Boulet, died recently, and Ernie Duffy writes his rhythm bones obituary.

I came across an Erik Ilott's album titled *Shipsape and Bristol Fashion' Sea Songs* several years ago. Can't remember how it happened, but it is an autographed copy. Then sometime later, I received an email from member Pete Hayselden (Shanty Jack) saying he knew Erik and wanted to write an article about him. That article begins on Page 1.

The only similar article was written by Tim Reilly titled *Bones at Sea* in RBP Vol 5, Nos 1 and 2, now online on [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com). A big thanks to both Pete and Tim for maritime history about rhythm bones.

Jonathan Danforth in RBP Vol 7, No 2, also online, wrote about the Klepperle, a German word for rhythm bones, and this issue presents the website, [klepperle.de](http://klepperle.de), that has lots of interesting photographs and video.

The JO Templeton and Francis Craig stories are interesting in that they took place in the early 1950s when Brother Bones, Freeman Davis (see Vol 4, No 3, now online), and Ted 'Mr Goon-Bones' Goon (see Vol 2, No 2, also online with sample audio recordings) were recording and successful. It would not surprise me to find more recordings from this era from rhythm bones players trying to capitalize on the success of Freeman and Ted.

Our updated website is getting some attention. See the Website Update in this newsletter. Below are a couple of emails from viewers.

## Letters to the Editor

Thank you for having resources online. They are very, very helpful especially the Dr Fred Edmund Bones Unlimited Instructional Course. I'm still learning from it, and watch it almost every day with the help of the book. Ana Mitchell [Ana is a new member.]

I am self taught. When Prairie-land String Band played various venues I would often see bone players. I

began observing their playing and I became interested. I once bought a set of wood bones when we were playing at Silver Dollar City at Branson, Mo. I began trying to play those bones, but had no luck. So next I started making bones from various woods and trying out various shapes, lengths and thicknesses. The set that I like best, I made from walnut. I still play those, but after watching the video at [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com), I'm getting the urge to try to make a set from bone. Thanks again. *Gene Henry*

In the 1970 movie *Ned Kelly* starring Mick Jagger, there is a scene where musicians including a one handed bones player are playing. The movie is available at Wal-Mart. *Tim Reilly*

[Adam Klein graciously let us put one of his songs on our website. The photograph he sent to accompany it had the most interesting shaped rhythm bones. Here is his reply to a question about them.]

I've made many experimental shapes in the interest of changing the timbre, generally meaning lowering it and/or giving it a more discernible pitch closer to what claves sound like.

That paired with my sci-fi interests inspired me to shape bones that mimic that famous Klingon weapon, the Batleth. I thought it made a more interesting photo than two conventional pairs.

There are 3 or 4 other shapes that hopefully very soon will be for sale at my website. The Batleths are some of the most playable, I made them from maple and cherry: the ones in the on-line photo are pine. See another photo of them at <http://www.adamcjklein.us/bones.html> *Adam Klein*

*(Continued from page 1)*

feeling it more than Ireland. The future of the Fleadh and the contest rests on continued support from it's sponsor's, and who knows what tomorrow will bring. I think it's important for this contest to continue as it encourages not only the bone playing tradition in Ireland, but gives bone players all over the world a goal to shoot for.

So I say to you in Ireland, Europe as a whole, here in the United States, and any that are able around the world, be off to Abbeyfeale, compete

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

in the contest, and preserve that great bone playing tradition in Ireland, for as my good friend Paddy Donovan current All Ireland Bone Playing Champion said, "A big thanks to all competitors, for without the competitors there would be no contest" and without this contest bone playing could be an aberration in Abbeyfeale as well.

Speaking of being on the road, I hope each and everyone of you will be on the road to Texas this coming June for Bones Fest XV at the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio. I can't tell you how thrilled I am to be going to Texas. We have some outstanding bone players from Texas including the Gillette Brothers, Walt Watkins, and our host Dennis Riedesel himself. They say they do things big in Texas, and I'm sure Bones Fest will be no exception to that. So I hope to see you "Deep in the heart of Texas" when Bones Fest XV rolls around! *Steve Brown*



## Website Update

The biggest addition since the formal announcement in the last issue of the newsletter of our website update is the page that summarizes the audio and video on the website. To see and listen to it, click Resources:Audio&Video:Audio & Video on this Website. Members and others continue to contribute to the website, and it is quite exciting. People also continue to contribute to Mike Paseroti's YouTube Video Summary, and these two web pages provide hours of rhythm bones video content.

## Shorty Boulet Obituary

Elwin "Shorty" Boulet was born on December 27, 1920 and died on February 13, 2011. There is a nice article about Shorty in the online RBP newsletter, Vol 6, No 2, and to find more search all newsletters for 'Shorty.'

He was an avid musician and played with country western bands throughout New Hampshire.

While Shorty could play a number of instruments by ear – guitar, mandolin, banjo, harmonica – his favorite instrument was the rhythm bones. He was given his first set of bones at the age of nine and soon mastered the technique. Though unable to read music, he could play any piece after hearing it once.

The high point of his musical career happened in 1999 when he was invited to play the bones at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival held in Washington DC. He represented New Hampshire's French heritage music.

In his later years, he sold or gave away bones that he had made himself.

As Shorty played at square dances and other functions in and around his hometown of Whitefield NH, he didn't know that he was "teaching" another up and coming rhythm bones player. I was eagerly watching Shorty play, and was impressed with Shorty's enthusiasm and talent. Later I was amazed to discover that Shorty was self taught and in an era when the bones weren't well known.

(Continued on page 8)

## J. O Templeton, Ragtime Bones Player

Johnny Maddox was a ragtime piano player who was among the first to record with the new Dot Record Company. He made a couple of records with J.O. Templeton playing rhythm bones. The first was Dot 1005, *St. Louis Tickle/Crazy Bone Rag*, recorded May 19, 1950, and the second was Dot 1023, *Memphis Blues/Alabama Jubilee*.

In a letter, here is how Johnny remembers him. "J. O. (Jacques O'Donnell) Templeton was a drummer on my early Dot records. Jerry and I started working together in 1939. I was twelve years old. Temp had played with an earlier orchestra, The Blue Grass Serenaders, 1924—1930. He played ivory bones and also ebony bones. He was so good at doing this. He has been dead so many years ago. Francis Craig, of *Near You* fame, also was a bones player. In fact he wanted to do a record with me. Never came to pass. These are the only two that I can think of at the moment." Yours Truly, *John Maddox*

In the 1920s, Templeton toured with a big name band, but did not like the road returning to Gallatin. He formed a band for the WSM radio program, The Blue Grass Serenade, and called the band, The Blue Grass Serenaders, one of the first bands that performed on the WSM station.

His son, Joe, does not know where his father learned to play the bones, but he was interested in rhythm his whole life. In 1946, he organized a minstrel show for the local Lion's Club, and played a rhythm bones number in the show.

## Rhythm Bones Part of Dot Record History

Dot Records was started by Randy Woods in Gallatin, TN in 1950. Randy had an electronic shop in his garage and decided to put in a record rack. It was so successful that he decided to produce records, and among the first to be successful was the Dot 1005 mentioned above with J.O. Templeton on rhythm bones.

## More on Francis Craig

The reference to Francis Craig in the Templeton article got me thinking again about him. Francis Craig was band leader in Nashville, TN and another person who made rhythm bones records. There was a short article on him in RBP Vol 7, No 1 (now online on our website.)

The following was extracted from a recording in the Special Collections Section of Vanderbilt's Heard Library. The interviewer was Jo Sherman of radio station WSM, and the recording date was March 20, 1962.

"Most people look at me as a band leader or orchestra leader, but this time Red Foley asked me to make a record and join in with him playing the bones. I play the bones like in the old minstrel shows.

"It turned out terrifically I must say, and I can brag on playing the bones anyway. It was Red Foley's second biggest record."

In response to a question from the interviewer, "I don't know how many it sold, but he conceded that it was the second biggest hit he ever made in the recording business."

The interviewer ask if he made any more bones records. "Yes, we did make a few more, but that was the biggest hit."

The record he was talking about was *Alabama Jubilee*. The only other rhythm bones record found was titled *Play Them Bones*. You can hear both of these records on our website.

As a child, Craig taught himself to play the bones using the remains of a beef roast.

## Ida Mae Schmich Died

Scott Miller informed us that member Ida Mae Schmich died on March 16 of old age. There was a nice article on her in the last issue, Vol 12, No 4. She attended Bones Fests in Chattanooga and St. Louis and impressed everyone with her energy. She played bones and banjo right up to the end.

# Review of Becky's Bones Book

Do you want to learn how to play rhythm bones and are looking for something you can hold in your hand. Member Becky Cleland has written a small instructional booklet titled *Becky's Bones Book: Learning to Play the Bones* that might be for you.

With words and photographs, she briefly presents the history of rhythm bones and then takes you through the wrist movement, holding the bones, putting it together to get the tap, the triplet, and then adds a unique section on troubleshooting if things are not working.

She closes with a bit about Bones Etiquette and refers people to our website.

Another nice thing about the book: it will be around when some of the more transient media are long gone.

For more information, contact. rcleland47@gmail.com. Steve Wixson

## Website of the Quarter Klepperle.de

Jonathan Danforth wrote a quite nice article on the Klepperle (German) and Chlefeldi (Swiss) in the Vol 7, No 2 issue of this newsletter (now online on our website.) Since klepperle.de can be roughly translated as *rhythmbones.com*, I wanted to know more about this website—but I don't know German.

With the help of an internet translator and a friend who lived in Germany and knows the area that is home to this website, this article will guide you through their website. Note that this is sort of an overview translation as there was not space to translate the entire website. Translated text is shown in this type font.

**Overview.** For the Klepperle or rhythm bones player, the highlight is the Preiskleppern, a contest held as part of Carnival—a Mardi Gras like event. It is immediately preceded by a parade, Hemdglonkerzug, and these events are part of the chamfering night custom where the 'spirits of winter'

are driven out by noise makers including the Klepperle.

Each year in preparation for the Preiskleppern, a Klepperle training course is held for youth and adults. It is said it takes two to three years of training to be ready for the contest. You will see in photographs and video that hundreds of people are involved.

**Home Page.** The main title is Bones Playing and Eve of Fasting in the city of Radolfzell, a charming city on Lake Constance bordering three countries, Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

The art of playing bones is a question of prestige for the inhabitants of Radolfzell. People who participate in the parade and Carnival activities are called 'fools' or 'jesters.' It belongs to the custom of the times.

Below the photograph of a pair of Klepperle is the title New Highnesses followed by; On March 2, after the parade with people wearing white night gowns and playing instruments that make noise, the exciting, prize winning bones playing contest took place with 15 kids (10 boys and 5 girls.) This is followed by the names of the new Queen, King, Princess and Prince, a list of their Guard, and a photograph from the 2011 event. At the bottom is a list of organizers starting with Master of Ceremonies.

The links on the right side of the page from the top are; E-mail, Contact, Contents, Search (full text), Home Page, Making a Klepperle, the Contest, Winners, Photo Gallery, Kings & Princes, History, Training Course, Verses and Legal Information.

Contents Page or Site map.

The four panels are in the shape of the Klepperle. On the left is about the same as the Home Page with the addition of Assistance/FAQ and at the bottom, Where to Buy Klepperle.

The second panel is History with a list of links; Roots, Places, In Ra-

dolfzell, Parades, Competition, and Winners.

The third is more on the Competition; Registration, Parade, Resignation of Last Year's Winners, Jury, Contest, Crowning, Winner's Certificate Awarding and Performance.

This is followed by Courses; Annual Training Course, On-line Crash Course and Film (video.)

The last panel on the right has legal information that will not be addressed in this article. At the bottom are links to the Photo Gallery and to Video of the 2010 event.

Klepperle Page

Description. The rhythm music instrument or clacking apparatus is officially called 'Klepperlehölzer,' that is clapping woods or concussion idiophones. They are made of wood with a notch to fit securely between your fingers.

Material. Hardwood is used predominantly. Acacia is considered as one of the best woods, however, is very rare. Beech, Cherry and Ash are used and also walnut and elm. Rarely used are Oak and calf rib bone.

Only well dried and long stored woods (best several years old) without tears or branch holes can be used. Ideally the grain of the wood runs at right angle to the later flapping direction of the Klepperle.

In former times the lower striking end was partly treated: hammering nails with round heads into the wood, scorching, weakening, weighting with lead balls, and drilling holes.

Size. The pieces of wood are approx. 11 - 15 cm long, 4 - 5 cm wide and 10 - 12 mm thick. The Klepperle has different sizes in

other places. Those in Radolfzell are the largest and people from **other places call them 'Clubs.'**

Work procedures. To make a simple Klepperle takes about 45 minutes for a pair. 1. First bore the notch hole for the finger. 2. Then saw two blanks out together. 3. Afterwards they are sanded into the final form. 4. Finally they are shaped with a wood rasp. 5. To finish, the Klepperle are manually sanded with fine sandpaper. The Klepperle production depends on the detail. One should not sand too much, otherwise the Klepperle will have a high pitch sound.

August Dieterle has manufactured Klepperle since 1966, and sells them only for the Training Courses at his cost. If you want **to buy Klepperle, see 'Where to Buy Klepperle' on the next page.**

Webmaster. The webmaster welcomes any further details and requests people communicate either by his Contact Page or E-mail. **Most pages end with this request.**

History of Klepperns Page

The origins are not completely known, and not even the spelling is clear. Many claim it comes from rattling and write it "Kläpperle. Others claim that the Kleppern could have something to do with the instruments used for noise making in order to scare birds from the vines in the vineyard. More probable however is the connection with the chamfering time and the medieval use.

Detail (**links to other pages**)

Medieval roots

Places where played

History in Radolfzell

Hemdglonkerumzug Parade

History of the Preiskleppern

List of the former winners

Medieval Roots Page

First Sources -The origin of the Klepperns is not fully understood. Medieval roots of the chamfering night custom can scientific be proven to some extent. In 15th and 16th Century, some sources say rattles were used by lepers, and lepers had to warn the healthy population with clapping. [some not translated.]

Swiss Evidence - In the choir stalls in the cathedral of Bern is **a figure titled 'Fool and Klapper'** and dated 1523. In Switzerland, the church order of Schwyz from the year 1588 testifies that boys on Easter Saturday ran around the village rattling. In the Schwyz, the Chlefeldn is played in the 40 days from Ash Wednesday to the Easter Saturday. The Chlefeldi is used there as chamfering instrument as a replacement for the church-bells which are silent.

19th Century - They were represented for many years until the custom slowly declined in the post-war period .

Designation - The names used are very similar. Germany - Klepperle, Kläpperle and Klepperli. Switzerland - Chlefeldi, Chlätterli and claque.

History in Radolfzell

Intermediate wartime - The traditional Kleppern on chamfering night, with two Holzbretchen, had been hardly maintained after the 1st world war (1914-18). Beginning in the 1920 years, it was again introduced. [some not translated.]

Post-war period During World War II (1939-45), the lowest point had come for Mardi Gras. In 1950, the chamfering night

tradition was again taken up, and the Hemdglonkerzug with King Kleppern was held. It had to begin anew since young people could not play the klepperle.

Klepperart In Radolfzell Rhythmic compositions from text, melody and Klepperle sounds are implemented together.

Places Page

Almost all places where people play the Klepperle are along the Rhine Valley. [**Only a small part of this section is translated.**]

Far Places—Mainz - Klepperle guard of 1856, World-wide - rhythmbones.com, Film, which shows a Klepperer in England.

Gengenbach - In Gengenbach there is a adult Preiskleppern.

Waldkirch - Here the beginning pupil competes for the title "Prinz" and "Prinzessin." The older pupils can be "Könige" and "Königinnen."

Konstanz - Klepperle consists of a wood piece with a steel sheet attached to both sides. Further information can be found on [www.narrengesellschaft-niederburg.de](http://www.narrengesellschaft-niederburg.de).

Switzerland - Here are scores for Chlefeldi, spoon, broom, harmonica, and muzzle drums.

History of Hemdglonk Page

**The Hemdglonk is the large character carried high at the front of the parade. They call it 'the great man' or goliath. It is shown in the photograph. [rest not translated.]**

Hemdglonkerumzug - **This is a very old tradition in German Carnival, and very poor people could take part since they only need to wear their white night clothes.** The Hemdglonkerzug Parade is divided into groups: Band, large Hem-

*(Continued on page 6)*

(Continued from page 5)

dglonker, Klepperle chorus, lantern carrier, torch/flare carrier, and noise instruments. [rest not translated.].

Klepperle Training Course Page.

**To navigate to this page, click Kurse from the Contents (Inhalt) Page.**

Lessons for the young and young at heart. The Kleppern looks beautiful and sounds fascinating. **There is some introductory comments followed by a link to the Annual Training Course for children and adults (with 2 interesting photos.)**

**On-line Crash Course** - This is offered to people who can't wait for the annual course. There are two links, one to word and picture lessons and the other to video examples.

**Where to Buy Klepperle** - Gustel Dieterle sells Klepperle to people taking the annual training course. If others want to buy them, email uhl@spiel-freizeit-swars.de. The cost is 9.90 Euros for 1 pair, 19.80 Euros for two plus 4.50 Euros shipping.

Training Films Page.

**Navigate to this page by clicking Filme from the Training Page above or from the Contents (Inhalt) Page.**

Learn by watching. For those who cannot take our courses in January, and all, who want to view in video, we present videos of the basics movements of the Kleppern. See the On-Line Crash Course Page for written and photo explanations.

Since the AVI films are in AVI format and are large (7 to 15 megabytes), they are suitable only for users with DSL or broadband connection.

Preiskleppern Page

To become Klepperle King and Queen is the desire of many children. It requires much pa-

tience, practice and also talent.

Procedure. The Preiskleppern in Radolfzell is held annually at the start of Carnival, Wednesday evening before Fat Thursday, and directly after the Hemdglonkerumzug parade. The solemn ceremony takes about one hour.

Detail (**links to other Pages**)

Register for Competition  
Hemdglonkerumzug Parade  
Old King and Guard recognized  
Installation of the Jury  
Contest

Coronation of new winners  
Certificate presentation  
Appearance of the winners

**Most of the preceding Pages are not translated. There are lots of photographs and a list of previous judges.**

Contest Page

**Below the photograph.** Contestants are evaluated by the judges:

The impact must be clean.

The rhythm is to be continuous and not too fast.

The sound of the Kleppern must be euphonious and loud.

The body attitude should be loosely upright in order to be unconstrained so the Klepperle are played freely.

The melody. Here it depends on the composition, the invention wealth, the variation and the elegance.

**The contest is like a ice-skating contest with a required short program and a freestyle program.**

Required Program: Two-handed Kleppern to a verse (see Verses below.) Due to the different speech and rhythms of the fool verses, inevitably different degrees of difficulty of rhythmic content result.

Freestyle Program: After the required verse, each applicant

must present a free style self-composition. Here the judging particularly depends on the creative variations of the rhythms.

Verses Page

The Kleppern needs a short **'Eve of Fasting' verse to compete. It is assumed that this is for the required paragraph above.** Note: Strike once or twice to each syllable. **This is followed by a long list of verses.**

History of the Preisklepperns in Radolfzell Page

**This is a table listing years and accomplishments.**

List of Winners Page.

**A list of winners by year.**

Photo Gallery Page.

Photographs of the Preiskleppern and the sovereignties. This photo gallery is being constantly expanded for you. Please note that the photos are relatively large and thus need thus a certain load time. Nevertheless, we think that high quality photos are worth the wait. The gallery is programmed in such a way that the following picture is loading while you look at the first. This reduces the waiting time somewhat. **While the text is not translated, it is easy to navigate the photo gallery.**

Film Gallery Page

**Navigate here from the Contents (Inhalt) Page.**

Here you will find videos of the Preisklepperns and the sovereignties from February 18, 2009. We developed this gallery which is constantly updated for you. Please note that the videos are very large (1 to 20 megabytes) and thus need a long load time. They require a DSL or broadband connection. **This is followed by a list of 59 captivating videos. The language is German, but the sound of the Klepperle is universal.**



You will want to attend this event after viewing the videos.

This is a large website, and there are many pages that are not translated. If you would like to translate additional pages, try using <http://dict.leo.org/ende?lang=en&lp=ende> for individual words and <http://translate.google.com> for paragraphs.

The creator and webmaster of [klepperle.de](http://klepperle.de) is Dr. Joachim Schuhmacher, and he assisted both Jonathan and me with our writings. You can send him an email at [kontakt@klepperle.de](mailto:kontakt@klepperle.de). We look forward to a long relationship with him and the Klepperle players.  
*Steve Wixson*

**Bones Fest  
XV**

San Antonio, Texas  
June 10-12, 2011



Host  
**Dennis Riedesel**  
[riedeselD@uhv.edu](mailto:riedeselD@uhv.edu)

Full Program and  
Registration  
materials in this  
newsletter

*(Erik Ilott—Continued from page 1)*  
of us.

Erik had the audience in the palm of his hand with his songs of the sea and the stories of some of his experiences in His Majesty's Navy during the second World War. It was a night to remember. He paid several visits to the "Royal Oak" Club and also Visited our local Yacht Club where he again captivated the audience.

He would play at various times with 3 bones in one hand and 4 in the other. He used cow bones mostly. His hands were quite large and this was to my advantage because he gave me a set of his old bones which were literally too small for him to play! I treasure them to this day.

Eric subsequently visited at our home on the Cleethorpes (Lincolnshire) seafront (overlooking the wide river Humber estuary) where he spent some time introducing me to the basics of Bones-playing. My progress was slow and after Erik left I practiced the moves assiduously, much to the annoyance of my wife who subsequently christened the bones "Erik's Curse"! We also visited with him at his hillside home in Bristol. It was a nice old place with one room full of books as I remember. The bathroom had an old-fashioned "Skippers" bath, the sort where you sit up on a ledge at one end with your feet in a kind of well where the taps (faucets) are. I would imagine it came out of a ship. They were built like that to save water. You could see over quite a lot of the City from his back garden. I believe that he had also lived at the Bristol "Sailors' Home" at one time.

He was fairly proficient on his Wheatstone Anglo Concertina and was involved for some years with a group of concertina players in Bristol. The name of the group escapes me for the moment!

He was also an honorary member of two Morris Dancing sides, the local "Bristol Morris Men" and the "Earlson Morris" of Coventry in the Midlands. Since Erik died these Morris sides celebrate his life with an "Erik" day from time to time. This involves playing and dancing at a large number of Pubs!

Erik was a really fit guy for his age. I remember seeing him dance a quite energetic Hornpipe on the quayside at the "Albert Dock", Liverpool at one of the Shanty Festivals. He was at one time a champion racing cyclist. That was quite a few years before I knew him but he still rode a bicycle as a means of everyday transport. That in itself was no mean achievement in a hilly City like Bristol!

At times Erik was something of an irascible character, especially when driving his car. One could have been forgiven for thinking he might have had a drop of French blood in his veins, given the way he would rail and gesticulate at other drivers who may have balked him! Yes, it could also be a terrifying experience being in a car with him!

There are lots more memories which are worthy of recording. Probably enough for another epistle at a later date. *Pete Hayselden* (Shanty Jack)

[The photograph on Page 1 is from a 24 page set of liner notes that accompanies Erik Ilott's LP album titled "Shipshape and Bristol Fashion" Sea Songs. This is a magnificent document with all sorts of detail about sailing and ships including photographs and drawings.

There is a short write-up on him in the Obituary section of the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. From there you can click on a link that will take you a recording of one of the songs from the above mentioned album.

The liner notes and the album itself are copyright by Erik Ilott and Folk'sle Records. We were not able to find Folk'sle Records, and present this as a tribute to the late Erik Ilott.]

## Bones Calendar

**All-Ireland Bones Competition.**  
May 2, 2011. Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, Ireland.

**Bones Fest XV.** June 10-12, 2011, San Antonio, TX. Program and registration form in this newsletter.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.



Shorty Boulet performing at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

*(Continued from page 3)*

Soon Shorty and I became friends and Shorty taught me how to play the rhythm bones.

Shorty was very well known throughout the area and was extremely popular with the local bands. He was often invited to play many times with different musical groups in a variety of functions. Shorty graciously asked me to join him and we played together side-by-side. It wasn't long before the two of us often spent time together.

It was not long after that I taught a young 13-year old Sky Bartlett how to play the rhythm bones, and it wasn't long before the three generations were playing together publicly.



The late Shorty Boulet and his legacies; Ernie Duffy and Sky Bartlett

Ernie, Sky, Shorty and his wife, Shirley, attended Bones Fest V in Philipston, MA. They were hooked and attended two other Bones Fests. The crowds at each of these Fests wholeheartedly enjoyed watching them play.

Shorty wasn't a tall man, but he was big in many ways. He had a smile that lit up a room. His bones playing caused people to stop and watch; especially when he played off his knees, elbows and forehead! He was known by many and each of us will miss him more than he'll know.

Thanks, Shorty, for entertaining us for all these years. We hope we can honor your memory by passing on the things you taught us. *Ernie Duffy* [A tribute video will be on our website.]

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 13, No. 2 2011

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Bones Fest XV

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## Executive Director's Column

When Dr. Edmunds, Russ Myers, Ev Cowett began to get together and hold Bones Fests, there was great joy that people were continuing to play the bones. The most frequently heard statement at those early bones fests was, "I thought I was the only one left!" My first fest was so much like meeting a family I had been estranged from. It continued to give me energy for the bones well into the year, and beyond.

The Rhythm Bones Society itself was such a revelation that we could bring so many people together, have increasingly bigger Fests, see better and better players, bring more new players into the group, and produce both a newsletter and a web site of extremely high quality, that we felt great satisfaction and a sense of security that we have something concrete that will continue to

grow well into the future.

But I have to tell you, I fear for that future, and have come to the realization that what we have built is somewhat tenuous. There are no guarantee's in life, that's for sure, but our actions can sustain the present, which will contribute to the legacy that we leave.

And I think that we need to think about how our actions can sustain and contribute to making sure our society continues. I had a frightening and sobering realization during the great San Antonio Bones Fest, what if Steve Wixson wasn't there. What if Steve moved on to other things, or worse was not able to continue in his role as Newsletter Editor/ Treasurer/ glue that holds us together? His contributions to both the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Highlights of Bones Fest XV

I really enjoyed being with all of you during Bones Fest XV. I hope you enjoyed San Antonio and all the activities.

The staff at the Alamo personally thanked me --and through me to you--for what we did in the Courtyard on Friday and Saturday morning. (A special note: For those of us who do so, we need to send a thank you to the appropriate entity for the wonderful cool temperature, low humidity,

and breeze we enjoyed on Friday and Saturday morning.)

As of this writing date, the Folklife staff has not had time to develop and share their review. It will be sent to Steve Wixson for inclusion in a future newsletter when it is received.

When setting up the performance times, I did not know how many bones players would be

*(Continued on page 7)*



Bones Fest XV Group Photograph. Dinner cruise on the San Antonio River that meanders through downtown San Antonio.

## Editorial

I am again juiced up by the Fest and writing this on my flight home. Bones Fest XV, hosted by Dennis Riedesel, was another great Fest, and will be remembered as the 'Performer's Fest.' There were 9 and a half hours of stage time and over 8 hours of jamming to live music. Capping it off was a dinner cruise on the San Antonio River. Dennis' highlights article begins on Page 1. Our thanks to Dennis for being a wonderful host.

Many people deserve credit for the photographs in this issue. Mary Lee Sweet again photographed and videoed the Fest. I also shot some photos and video. Tom Worrell, Larry Wheat and others shot video that you will see on our website soon.

While I am acknowledging credits, I have to step into my grandfather roll, and thank my granddaughter, Abbie Hanson, for drawing the Fest Graphic used for T-shirts and posters. The concept for the graphic came from our host Dennis Riedesel.

Special thanks to Walt Watkins for hosting the duo of Tammy and Jay Roy for Friday afternoon and late evening jamming. It was a welcomed change of pace.

I feel the need to comment on Steve Brown's nice words about me. It amazes me that I was able to turn an elementary school hobby into a retirement avocation. A trait of many first born children is the need to produce, and RBS has given me that opportunity. If I have been a blessing to my rhythm bones family, you and our society have been a blessing to me. Thanks Steve for the kudos.

In closing, when someone calls out "Remember the Alamo," it will have two meanings for me and for this year's group of tired Bones Festers.

## Letter to the Editor

I spent four days (March 17-20) teaching banjo at Suwannee Banjo Camp in Florida. I was impressed by the number of people learning to play the bones that came out of the woodwork once they realized that I played as well. Bones playing was not part of the schedule, but once I realized that at

least 6-8 camp attendees were interested (some of whom already had their own sets), I made time to get together with people to go over rudiments and offer tips on how to blend in with old-time banjo/fiddle music. I think more people are asking questions not only about the history of playing bones, but also looking for more opportunities to play. It's a notable sign. BTW, here's a video that includes me playing bones as part of the faculty concert during the camp ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFQIThdKH14](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFQIThdKH14).) You can hear me in the background, but I eventually get a chance to briefly "solo" during one of the breaks. I'll keep doing my part in sharing with people as opportunities arise. I'm glad that RBS' website is updated so that I can direct interested individuals in your direction. Best Regards, *Greg Adams*

My name's Ari, and I taught rhythm bones at the Downeast Dance Festival. Thanks for having this society and this website. I have referred to it many times. Jonathon, if you're the one this email goes to, thanks as well as you're the one I learned from at the NEFFA festival. *Ari Erlbaum*

I am excited to find this web site about bones playing. The bones have been in our family for years. My grandfather, Chet Davids played for dances while shearing sheep on the desserts of Idaho and surrounding area. His bones were made of ebony. My father Theron Davids, then taught himself to play them as they were setting around his home. He played with an orchestra in Chesterfield Idaho for years. Chesterfield is on the national historical register and is visited by many each summer. The restoration group has rebuilt the original recreation hall on the town site, and my brother Paul Davids and I played with a band there last summer. Paul has a metal set of bones and a pair of ivory bones. I started to play the bones in 1963, and my father taught me his techniques and his enthusiasm for the art. It was my talent in a Miss Caribou County Pageant, and I placed second runner up in that contest. I forwarded your web address to my daughter who also enjoyed it. I am

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

planning a family bone fest in a few months with my brother's families. I think we will have a great time, and we will start the next generation on their bone playing fun. *Shirley Christensen*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVI.** Date and location not decided, but Ireland, Orlando and Flagstaff are possibilities. Interested in being a host—send for the Bones Fest Host Guide.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## William Turnbull Died

RBS recently learned that member William Turnbull of Toledo, OH, died in 2008. He was a self taught player who liked Dixieland music. He played with cherry and ash rhythm bones.

(Continued from page 1)

newsletter and the web site, and his tireless energy for the bones is truly staggering.

I think about the original Board of which there are only three of us left on the board after 10 years. Russ Myers has passed on. Our dear friend Ev Cowett is not able to be as active as he once was. And being an organization based on an ancient art, we are getting older as well. (I got my first senior discount in San Antonio this week end!)

So what can we do to make sure what we have will continue? I think we can all participate up to our level, and ability. I can give Steve more support, write more articles when he needs them, pay more attention to the inner workings of the organization, so that in the event that I am needed to take on more responsibility, I'll be there.

We have two new Board Members, Sharon Mescher, and Skeff Flynn. Great choices who will bring much needed energy to the board, and a wealth of knowledge and experience.

But what can you do? You can participate to the level of your ability. Attend a Bones Fest when you are able, give your opinion as to where and when bones fests should be held to make sure you can get to one now and again, write an article for the newsletter, or just tell us what you think.

Because I fear that what Fred, and Russ, and Ev had envisioned could easily become dust in the wind, as we will all become, I sincerely hope that when I'm gone, there will be five more of you to take my place, and carry on what we have contributed to building.

I want to thank Dennis Reidesel for putting on a truly fantastic fest—what a great time. I want to thank each and every Bones Fest participant for being there and contributing in their unique way. What a great city San Antonio is!

And finally I want to thank Gil Hibben, and Kenny Wohlin for their service on the Board. Gil had been a Board Member since 2002, and Assistant Director since 2004. His leading the conga line at the end of the Bones Fest was a fixture at Fests since my

first Fest in 2000.

Kenny's term on the board was a bit shorter, but no less valuable. We will always have fond memories of the Fest he sponsored last year, and continue to be wowed by his technical expertise on the bones. We encourage them to return to the Board in the future.

In addition I welcome on the Board, Sharon Mescher and Skeff Flynn. Sharon is well known to all of you not only with her remarkable progress as a bones player in the Mescher Tradition, but also for her exemplary work on the 10th Anniversary commemorative issue of the Rhythm Bone Player newsletter.

Skeff, although a relative new comer, has great enthusiasm for the bones and RBS, and represents the newer player. Please join me in welcoming them! *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 4:10 PM in Room 3 of the Emily Morgan Hotel. The motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes of the last meeting as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented a brief Treasurer's report noting that we ended the year with \$2,460 in the bank. The motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the report.

There was an election of officers and Board members. Since there was not a quorum for a Board meeting which is also the Nominating Committee, all nominations were from the floor. The following were elected; Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members Jonathan Danforth, Skeffington Flynn, Sharon Mescher and Mel Mercier.

There was a discussion about the location of Bones Fest XVI. There are three possibilities; Mel Mercier in Cork, Ireland, Mary Lee Sweet in Orlando and newcomer Michael Satterwhite in Flagstaff, AZ. The Board will follow up.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:05. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 8:00 AM in the Emily Morgan Hotel restaurant. Present were Steve Brown, Bill Vits, Steve Wixson, and new members Skeff Flynn and Sharon Mescher. There were three visitors, Jerry Mescher, Randy Sepala and Michael Satterwhite.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes of the last Board meeting as printed in the newsletter and summarized by Steve Wixson.

There was a discussion of our website and how to continue to improve it. Since Skeff Flynn is a web developer, the motion was made, seconded and approved to give him access to the website so he can develop a clone (a copy) using the web tools he uses that the Board can evaluate.

The issue of rhythm bones to give away to kids was discussed. Steve Wixson did a little research to see if Joe Birl's plastic bones could be inexpensively duplicated. His first quotes were high, so Steve Brown will check with some people he knows who might be able to do it cheaper. Randy noted that the Dem Bones Company is retooling and will be able to quote on give away kids bones soon.

Many years ago Doug Rideout of Liberty Films shot professional multi-camera 16mm film of Percy Danforth for a documentary. He was not able to finish that project, and it would be a contribution to the history of rhythm bones if this project could be completed. As a way to hopefully restart the project now using digital techniques, the motion was made, seconded and approved to authorize \$400 for the purpose of scanning as much film as possible into the computer so the Board could examine it as video and determine the feasibility of completing the project.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:55. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*



## Bones Fest XV Photographic Highlights



The Alamo with our Fest Hotel in the background



Randy Seppala, Annette & Mitch Boss performing in the Alamo Courtyard



Steve Wixson teaches a group of youth in the Alamo Courtyard



Sky Bartlett playing rhythm bones to Jessye Weinstein's classical solo



From the left, Dr Winders who led our Alamo tour and learned to play bones a bit, Steve Wixson, Jessye Weinstein, Courtney Byrne-Mitchell, Annette Boss, Becky Shannon, Jerry Mescher, Skeff Flynn, Sky Bartlett, Bernie Worrell, Michael Satterwhite, Sharon Meacher, Ernie Duffy and Mitch Boss.



Walt Watkins hosted afternoon and after hours jamming sessions with Tammy and Jay Roy who can play most any song that someone can name. A very nice change of pace.



Another Spike Bones rhythm bones extravaganza performance





The Mescher Trio, Sharon Mescher, Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell, performing on the Grape Arbor Stage



Performing on the Grape Arbor Stage are from the left, Skeff Flynn, Sky Bartlett, Randy Seppala, Mitch Boss, Walt Watkins, Ernie Duffy, host Dennis Riedesel on the one string bass banjo, Bill Vits and Steve Brown. What a treat to perform with the Tanner Family Old Time Medicine Show Band.



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet in their Backintyme costumes



Sky Bartlett driving, Becky Shannon, daughter Jessye Weinstein and friend Courtney Byrne-Mitchell start back to Colorado after the Fest

## Profile of a Member Michael Ballard



In 1983, I visited Renaissance Faire, then in Agoura Hills, California and I got "shanghaied" into working there. I've worked there every spring since then. At the Faire, amongst all of the oddly dressed people, there was one group that was more odd than most and they put on a really fun show of Scottish and Irish music and dancing. I was hooked immediately.

The group is called The Clan Mac-Colin of Glenderry. Through them I was introduced to two more styles of dancing and I was introduced to Bones and Bodhran. I've been dancing and/or playing in their dance shows (and many other places) for more than 20 years.

In 1985, I noticed one Faire weekend when many musicians were missing. The following weekend they were all back so I asked where they had gone. That's when I found out about the California Traditional Music Society and their annual Summer Solstice Folk Music, Dance and Story Telling Festival. I went to the 1986 Festival as a paying customer and found out about the benefits of being a volunteer. After being a volunteer for a few years, I was invited to join the staff as a teacher and as Artistic Director - Small Instruments/Percussion. I've been teaching, co-teaching or assisting in bones, bodhran and spoons classes since 1987. I've also learned a bit of clave, doumbek and djembe at the Festival.

In 2000, I found out about the Rhythm Bones Society from a bones player friend, Molly Bennett. I attended Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, TN that year and several more since then (IV, VI, VII, IX, X, XI, XII).

Over the years I've played in innumerable pub sets and jam sessions, mostly in Southern California. I've played concert gigs with everything from classical orchestra to heavy metal and mariachi bands. Highlights include:

Gigs with Silverwood, Kitchen Fire and The Shamrockers (all based in the San Diego area).

Playing with the San Diego Repertory Theater Company in their Christmas 2000 production of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol".

Many years of playing on the streets of the Renaissance Pleasure Faire (and occasional other venues) with hammered dulcimer master Glenn Morgan. *Michael Ballard*

[In the photo, Michael at BFXII went to top of the Gateway Arch.]

## Key to the Page 1 Group Photograph

In the left boat on the left side from front to back; Sharon Mescher, Jerry Mescher, Annette Boss, Mitch Boss, Skeff Flynn, Marynell Young, Gene Young, and Randy Seppala

In the left boat on the right side;



Tom Worrell, Bernie Worrell, Michael Satterwhite, Steve Wixson (not shown taking the photograph), Steve Brown, Rebecca Shannon, Jessye Weinstein, Courtney Byrne-Mitchell, and Sky Bartlett.

In the right boat on the left side: host Dennis Riedesel, Ernie Duffy, Glen Christian, Mike Szymanski, Renee Neese, Spike Bones, and Bill Vits.

In the right boat on the right side: Larry Wheat, Joy Watkins, Walt Watkins, Jennifer Szymanski, Craig Brubaker, Frank Sweet, and Mary Sweet.

## Recording of the Quarter

Spike Bones found the 33rpm vinyl record shown below. It features Sterling Kelly on bones and hickory leaf and Ralph Smith on harmonica. Sterling was born in Flat Rock, MO several miles south of where Spike lives. He learned to play rhythm bones from his father who worked for the Dandy Dixie Minstrel Show.

The liner notes say, "The instruments featured on this album are, in a sense, the folk instruments par excellence of the America of not long ago...What you will hear on this record, is a direct transmission of American folk art of the earlier years

of this century?"

The record number is listed as TR-4 from Troubadour Music, Inc., copyright 1977. We have been unable to locate them, and assume they have gone out of business. Therefore, we will digitize some of the tracks and add them to the growing list of rhythm bones music on our website. If anyone knows anything about this company, please contact Steve Wixson.

*(Continued from page 1)*

attending the conference. The rationale for a 3 hour block of performance time was because I recalled that this was about how long it took for everyone to perform at the Bones Fests with a large attendance. When it looked like our attendance would be low, the 3 hours of performances were locked in at Folklife, but that opened more time to schedule other activities around the morning and early afternoon jam and meeting times. I hope all of you got in enough performance time before an audience and at the jam sessions!

Many of you commented about how much you enjoyed the dinner cruise. I have taken the barge tour many times, but enjoyed the dinner cruise since it was the first time for me. I also enjoyed the parts of the river that the tour barges do not visit so that was also a "baby book" experience for me. The Casa Rio is my favorite place to eat when I am downtown, but I choose this restaurant to serve us dinner because Steve Brown said he wanted some real Texas Chili. From the 1860's to the 1930's, the San Antonio Chili Queens plied their food wares from their carts on Alamo Plaza. The chili on your dinner plate was one of those Chili Queen's recipe!

I also hope you found the Alamo and the I-Max move informative. If we had been in another part of San Antonio I would not have scheduled this event—but since we were right across the street...

My music folks shared with me why they enjoyed this event: 1) they really liked the configuration of players that were able to assemble for this gig. We stayed and jammed until after 1 AM Sunday morning after all of the bones players left; 2) they were glad that they were once again able to perform at Folklife since it has been too many years since the last time they performed there; and 3) they were enthralled with the talent the bones players brought to the jam sessions and public performances. When I asked them what they thought of the bones players that had much more talent than I do—they said, "Wow!"

A big thank you goes out to Walt.

Early on I gave Walt the times and rooms that were available for the Friday jam sessions. We did not have enough hotel rooms reserved on Friday and Saturday night for us to be able to use the hotel's meeting rooms as per our contract. So plan "B" was developed which was to use the Alamo Compound meeting rooms. Then we were able to settle on plan "C" where those of you who came in the extra nights before and after the Friday and Saturday night block allowed the re-negotiation for the use of the hotel's meeting rooms. Walt had a contract with his music group so he and I had some anxious moments while all of this was resolved. His duo was wonderful and really added extra enjoyment to our Friday afternoon and evening jam sessions.

Steve Wixson and I were discussing the event and how we both enjoyed developing the vision, doing the planning and negotiations involved in putting this event together. I really had fun doing my part for this event. Steve told me that if I follow true to form with those who have hosted more than one event that I would do this again in about 5 years. If you want to come back to San Antonio, I would be happy to serve once more.

Performance Highlights that I enjoyed:

The way the pattern of the notes of "Golden Slippers" are played on the Hammered Dulcimer allows for this song to be played at a very high tempo. When Sky and Dana shifted through the gears into super overdrive it was all I could do to keep up and I was just thumping along on the beat—pity those musicians that had to fill up less and less space in between the beats!

Jessye and Sky's duets on Celtic Fiddle and Bones were a treat.

Mary Lee and Frank Sweet's sets were enjoyable. And a big thank you to them for being willing to time their performance so the band could get a break.

Naturally all of the individual performances were wonderful for me to observe, but I was especially enthralled when the players formed the various combinations to perform together in twos or threes. I do not recall seeing many of these combinations in

past Bones Fests so it was interesting to watch each player fit their technique into the technique of their partners. I am glad things worked out time wise so we could do more of these group performances that what we were able to do in past Fests.

And while I am thinking in terms of duets and trios, it is always a highlight experience to watch the Meschers! Also a thank you goes to Bernie's husband, Tom Worrell, for help with the sound systems and to remind me that some of you wanted to perform to your own music.

Randy's silver spoon bones were very interesting when applied to the waltz. I can only recall Randy doing this to "Silver Bells." After I heard him play some of the other waltzes, I thought maybe I could throw Randy a curve when I asked the band to play my favorite waltz "OOT PIK" but Randy's spoons were beautiful with this song.

When I saw the list of attendees developing, I felt pretty sure that I would not have to schedule any workshops during the afternoon sessions. I left this part of the schedule open so that we could hold workshops if anyone wanted one or wanted to present one. But, I think the way things developed, everyone wanted to jam with Jay & Tammy on Friday afternoon and with the Tanner Family Minstrels on Saturday afternoon. I believe that everyone did as I did. They attend workshops as they watched each other's solo performances and then watched each other during the pass-offs and picked up techniques via that method instead of a formal workshop.

I was also interested in those of you who played along with Gene's blues guitar. I have performed along with him in the past so I was interested in what could be done in concert with this instrument.

An off stage event that many of you probably missed was that I had asked Larry to bring along his "Fiddle Sticks" fiddle. Steve Brown, Bill Vits, and a few others got to try out or see this percussive technique.

I do not know why the Alamo Staff were so interested in the bones. They had a set (modern) in the archives

*(Continued on page 8)*



## The Fabulous Tanner Family Minstrel Band



Shown on the Grape Arbor Stage of the Texas Folklife Festival are our backup musicians for the Fest. From right to left are BFXV host, Dennis Riedesel, rhythm bones, one string bass banjo, Dana Hamilton, hammer dulcimer, Marynell Young, fiddle, Jenny (Young) Jones, fiddle, Chuck Chandler, banjo, Larry Wheat, guitar, mandolin, fiddle, Glen Christian, guitar, Judy Hamilton, bouzouki, Karol Wheat, dancing jack, tambourine, bodhran. Not shown is Rachel (Young) Lester, fiddle and RBS members who sat in on occasion, Jessye Weinstein, fiddle, and Michael Satterwhite, bodhran.

*(Continued from page 7)*

collections and brought the set out to the patio. I did not see this, but Steve Wixson told me that Dr. Winders,

who lead our special Alamo tour, actually played in our final group on Saturday. I was also pleased to see most those who were with us at the

hotel were able to rattle out the triplets. Thank you, teachers; maybe we can actually get some new members. *Dennis Riedesel*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 13, No. 3 2011

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## Executive Director's Column

Fall is blowing through New England, and the muggy dredges of summer are being replaced by a crisp clear night, and we have exciting news. For perhaps the first time in history, a Phd is awarded based on the traditional art of playing the bones! Through out the ages, bone playing goes semi-documented, passed by word of mouth and hand, slightly noticed by the institutions of higher learning, but no more! Our own Dr. Mercier has granted our instrument an air of respectability by shinning the light of Academia brightly on the bones, and those who play them, and for that we are grateful. I'm excited to read Sharon Mescher's article on her, and husband Jerry's trip to Ireland, and the ceremony acknowledging Mel's great achievement. I will be even more excited to read his dissertation, and

the fruits of his labor which taken a number of years. I know that Russ Myers is smiling up there, and telling his many stories of his friendship with Mel. A hearty congratulations, Mel, and a big thank you from the bone playing community.

My apologies to those of you planning on attending the New England Regional Bones Fest, cancelled due to a pesky hurricane which blew through here a few weeks ago. I have sponsored a number of these small fests, and I was looking forward to the opportunity of seeing a several of you, and playing the bones together. This was to be a remembrance of our dear friend Shorty Boulet who passed away last winter. After discussing the rescheduling with

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Congratulations, Dr. Mel Mercier

On August 26, 2011, Mel Mercier's title changed, for on that date he was awarded his PhD from the University of Limerick. Along with his wife, Maura, their daughter, Nora Kate, his mother, Nuala, three sisters, aunts, uncles, and friends, Jerry and I had the privilege of attending his graduation. Congratulations, **Dr. Mel Mercier!**

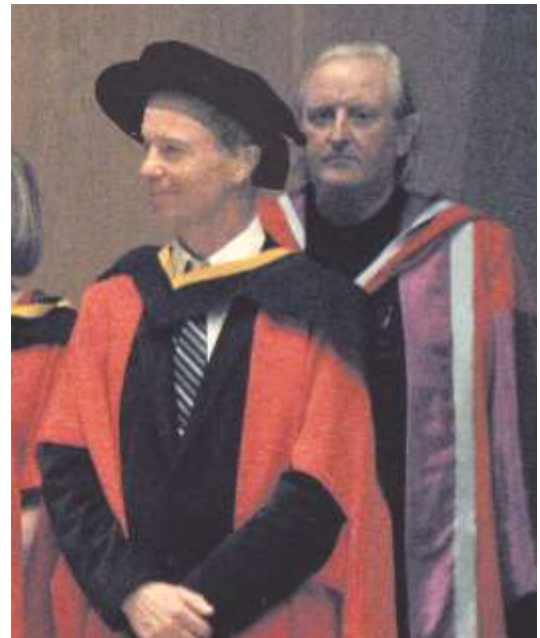
There was a story about Mel in the Vol 4, No 2, newsletter, now on-line on the RBS website. In that article, he shared the legacy of his father, Peadar, who taught and encouraged him to play the bones and the bodhran. From those humble beginnings, it is apparent that Mel's successful musical career has skyrocketed to new heights, and continues to reach new heights.

During the last ten years, Mel has been extremely busy, and there have been many changes in his life.

Mel's musical life revolves around three strands: "the theater, performing traditional Irish music, and teaching non-Western music. They're all connected in some ways, but really different worlds...As part of the academic world...and the one of being a traditional musician and a bones player, that's where the PhD dissertation is; at that intersection between those two...So, right up to 2005-2006, I decided I needed to start writing the dissertation."

Mel began teaching at the University College Cork in 1991. By 1994 he was teaching full-time. His vision at that time was "to develop the study of world music," and, "we needed a gamelan. So they gave me the money to go to Java

*(Continued on page 6)*



Dr. Mel Mercier in cap and gown with Academic Supervisor, Professor Micheál Ó'Súilleabháin, looking on

# Editorial

Bones players are aging and they are dying. On Page 3, San Slomovitz tells us of the death of rhythm bones maker Ray Schairer.

Jerry and Board Member Sharon Mescher attended Mel Mercier's graduation ceremony in Ireland, and Sharon has an interesting update on him that starts on Page 1. Mel tells us a bit about his thesis on Page 3.

On Pages 4 and 5 are stories about two unique rhythm bones players who were both described as 'Characters' (though ain't we all.)

1. The promotion for Bones Fest XV included sending everyone in our database who lived within driving distance of San Antonio either an email or written notice of the event. As I looked at that list of bones players, Bones Fiedler popped out at me. I learned of him from a member of my church who saw a newspaper article about him. Seems Bones helped the police catch a bad guy, and became a regional hero. At that time in 2003, I called him and recorded a nice conversation which I then forgot about.

I tried to call him to invite him to the Fest only to learn that he died back in 2006. I thought he should be re-member in print, and when you read my story about him, I think you will agree. It starts on Page 5.

2. There have been a couple of Australians who have joined RBS for a year or so, and I periodically search for 'down under' stories on the internet. Recently I found Sally Tompkinson, and her story is on Page 4.

Hans Weehuizen, a long time member, lives in the Netherlands, and we got to meet him at Bones Fest X. He occasionally contributes to the newsletter, and this quarter tells us about his maritime rhythm bones workshops.

Michael Satterwhite is a new member who we met at Bones Fest XV. He has expressed interest in hosting a Fest in Flagstaff. On Page 5, he tells us about his bones workshops.

On Labor Day weekend, I attended the National Folklife Festival in Nashville, TN. This festival is sponsored by the National Council for the Traditional Arts, and moves around the country for a three year run in each

selected city. I found out about it too late for RBS to participate formally this year, but I talked to the Festival Director who suggested we submit a proposal for next year. I'm thinking we could schedule a Regional Bones Fest and get some stage time like Dennis Riedesel arranged for BFXV as well as teach kids in the Children and Family area of the Festival. Any thoughts?

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Bones Fest Family! What a wonderful time I had in San Antonio with the group. You are all very warm and welcoming. All the music, the activities planned for the weekend were so well coordinated and so much fun; the hotel was excellent. I was practicing my bones this afternoon by watching Fred Edmunds' video. Maybe by next year, I'll get it. Thank you all for your kindness and generosity. *Becky Shannon*

Like each Bones Fest, Frank and I enjoyed visiting a new place and being treated to the special features of the city as presented by a resident bones member. Dennis did an outstanding job of finding and sharing the treasures of San Antonio. Jamming with our rhythm bones players on the grounds of the Alamo was a treat that should have been on my bucket list - I just didn't think of it.. Our guided tour by the Historian Director of the Alamo was wonderful and performing at the Texas Folklife Festival was another notch on our "where we've performed" list!

While performing and jamming at the Alamo, it was wonderful to watch Bones Fest members teaching willing tourists to play the bones. Old folks, young folks and in-between folks all wanted to see what this was and how to do it. The musicians that Dennis brought to play for us were outstanding and added that professional touch to our shows. Just listening to them was a pleasure!

But the highlight of the fest has to be the River Walk Dinner Cruise. This unique experience had us floating down the San Antonio River while sharing a superb Mexican dinner from the Casa Rio Restaurant with fellow

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

bones players. As we wined and dined, other cruise boats wondered how we got the diner boat and they got the sardine boat. Their boats were packed with people. Ours had a long table laden with food and smiling bones players breaking bread together. Those walking along the River Walk enjoyed the sight and waved to us. Bones players enthusiastically returned their greetings. *Mary Lee Sweet*

I recently sold a set of rosewood bones, and wondered how the customer managed to find me. All thanks to you, I think. Many thanks and best wishes, *Mike Blair*, Bedroom Acoustic Music, email: [bedroomacoustic-info@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bedroomacoustic-info@yahoo.co.uk)

[We seldom hear from people we list on the 'Where to Buy Bones' page on our website. Thanks, Mike for the feedback.]

I am so bummed that I missed Bones Fest this year. Both Alice and I

were hoping to come this year. Filming is going well, and while I feel very blessed for all of God's inspirations which should be seeing the light of day soon, I am sad that I was not able to partake with my Rhythm Bones family. I have to get you a video at some point, and I think I'm going have to be there next year, or take you guys and gals out with me! Hmm... Sounds like a good potential weekend next year! Let's see what happens! Please give my love and hellos to the gang!  
*Dan Griffin* [We met Dan at BFVI.]

I've been in contact with John Beck and, through him, his friend Wiley Sykes. John is the percussion faculty head for the UNC School of the Arts School of Music and Wiley is the percussionist for the NC Greensboro Symphony. John and I hope Wiley should be sending in applications I gave them to join the RBS. John and I are planning some ways to present bones as an important percussion instrument. Nothing is going to happen for a few months ; I will let you know when things get farther along.  
*Mitch Boss*



This book's title page says "Copyright, MDCCCLXXIX, by Clinton T. De Witt. The Roman numeral date is 1879. Scott Miller has a few of these for sale, probably at more than fifteen cents a copy. See [bonedrymusic.com](http://bonedrymusic.com).

## Bones Maker Ray Schairer Died

I am very sad to let you know that Ray Schairer died on Saturday, September 17th, after a year-long struggle with lung cancer. He was 89 years old.

Ray was the originator of the Danforth bones, and began crafting them for Percy Danforth (the man who taught me how to play the bones) in 1976. He retired last year after making more than 35,000 bones.

I started apprenticing with Ray, learning to make the bones, in 2002. Last year, he gave me his custom bones-making tools, and I have, and will continue, to make the bones.

Ray and I also collaborated on a wonderful project. In his eighties, he began writing down stories of his childhood, and in the summer of 2008 I, along with my nephew Daniel, was able to help him publish a book of those memoirs. I will miss Ray's warm friendship and skilled mentoring very much.

There was a long article and photograph of Ray in newsletter, Vol 5, No 1, Pages 3 and 4, which is now on-line on the RBS website.

For a biography of Ray, and excerpts from his book about growing up in a farming family in Michigan in the 1920s, please visit his website, [BarefootBoyBook.com](http://BarefootBoyBook.com).

At Ray's funeral, I played the bones on *When the Saints Go Marching In*, with my friend, Brian Brill on piano. Be well, *Sandor Slomovits*, [Gemini-ChildrensMusic.com](http://Gemini-ChildrensMusic.com).

## Website of the Quarter

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIRG0ANd2yQ>. The title of Mel Mercier's PhD thesis is *The Mescher Bones Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape*, and it is a study of the development, transmission and performance of the Mescher style of rhythm bones playing. This link presents long time member Jerry Mescher and his father as they demonstrate *The Mescher Tradition* on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour on Father's Day in 1961.

(Continued from page 1)

Ernie Duffy, we have agreed to re-schedule it sometime in early May. I will get the date out to all of you.

Calling all Bones Fest hosts! With the fest not being held in Ireland next year, it does give us a void as to where it will be held this year. We have long wanted to go to Florida at the urging of the Sweets, and Mike Satterwhite has expressed an interest in holding it in Arizona. Any and all proposals would be most welcomed!  
*Steve Brown*



The Boston Museum of Fine Arts is the happy home of one of best examples of bone playing through the ages, *The Bone Player*, a painting by William Sydney Mount. I have visited it many times, so I was understandably delighted to be invited to record a video standing in front of the painting (see Vol 11, No 3, now on-line on the RBS website for a story about this painting and a photograph of it.)

The Museum had recently gone through construction of a new wing in which the bone player would reside. The video is used on the "video tour program" and when the visitor enters the painting's code number, a video of me playing a set of bones in the Museum's collection is shown. I can't thank the museum enough for the opportunity. The museum is no longer carrying the painting as a post card in their gift shop. So if you received the post card in your fest packet at Bones Fest V, hold on to it.  
*Steve Brown*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVI.** Date and location unknown. If you are interested in hosting a Fest, contact Steve Brown at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com).

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Contact Jerry Mescher for details.

# Sally Tompkinson Australian Bush Bones Player

If you do a Google search on 'Sally Tompkinson,' you will see links to a couple of photographs of her and a link to an interview by folklorist John Merideth. The photographs and interview are housed in the National Library of Australia, and I wanted to learn more about a rhythm bones player who could catch the attention of such an institution. Searching more with Google and following up with e-mail, I contacted the Library, her son Glen, and friends, Bob Campbell and Barry Norris.

RBS purchased a copy of the recorded interview by John Meredith which resulted in the interview being placed on the Library's website (see 'Recording of the Quarter.') In addition to Sally talking, you can hear her rhythm bones playing style. Meredith made many field recordings, and the Library maintains them in the John Meredith Folklore Collection.

Bones Player Sally Tompkinson was born premature at 2 pounds, two ounces, on June 6, 1919 at Coolah, Australia. She was wrapped in cotton, placed near the fireplace and lived. Her parents moved to Beryl, near Gulgong, when she was three. Her son said she joined the circus when she was 14.

One day, when she was about 16 years old, she heard an Aboriginal lad playing the bones. Intrigued, she hung around him until he showed her how to hold and rattle them. She was so adept that he taught her some of the finer points, such as playing a roll, then presented her with his set of bones.

Sally's dad was a drover, as well as being a blacksmith and a wheelwright. He taught her to waltz when she was a little girl by letting her stand on his feet as he waltzed around the room. When she had learnt the movements, she would step down and dance by herself.

Sally played bones taken from the sun-bleached skeleton of a beast found in a paddock. With the marrow

eaten out by insects, these bones had a softer and richer tone than the 'green' bones obtained from a butcher, which were then boiled and scraped. Sally would tune her bones by shortening them until she got the sound she wanted. She was very particular about which bones she played, and had bones with high, medium and low pitch. Her son said Sally had some wood bones, but she said real bones were superior to those imitations made from plastic or hardwood.

Barry Norris said there was a thriving community called 'No Name' and later 'The Tribe' about fifty kilometers from Gulgong on the Goulburn River. Sally was part of 'The Tribe,' a loose association of bush (rural) people who gathered together and partied. Music and dance were a big part of their activities, and Sally, who always carried several bones in a basket, was dancing and playing bones at their gatherings. Their bush music was a combination of Irish, Scottish, folk and country traditions.

Barry said, "When I was young, rhythm bones were very popular, and I played them a bit. Today they are a rarity." So when he said Sally was a good bones player, I believe him.

Barry's dad christened her, 'Sally Honky Tonk.' Barry's band, *Home Rule*, played at numerous functions around the district and Sally would get up and play. He said, "She always was a great hit."

Her son said she also played with Frank Bourke and the White Rose Orchestra when he toured their area, and thinks she recorded an album with them. I could not find the album.

Sally died March 20, 1988.

Some of the information in this article is from *Real Folk* by John Meredith, National Library of Australia, 1995, ISBN 0 642 10639 X. *Steve Wixson*

## Recording of the Quarter

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-man6044185>. Listen to John Meredith interview Australian bones player, Sally Tompkinson. He also accompanies her while she plays her rhythm bones. To listen, go to the link above, scowl down and click on 'View

Online Content,' and accept their Conditions Page. If you click on: Tompkinson, Sally, 1919- (Performer) you can see photographs of her.

## Hans Weehuizen's Maritime Rhythm Bones Workshops

It is with a lot of pleasure that I give workshops on "How To Play The Bones" during Maritime Festivals, mostly Shanty Festivals (see the photograph on Page 8.)

My workshops last from 45 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour, but it is an active hour.

Every time I am surprised that with every workshop there are always 2 or 3 persons who have the technique under control in a few minutes, while others need more time (or never learn.) Most of the time I have 10 persons with a maximum of 15.

For all the participants, I have practice bones available. At the end of the workshop they can buy them (but this is not necessary.)

For the participants who can not learn directly from me, I have a book with text and photos. I have also made a CD with spoken text in English and Dutch and there are also 8 songs/tunes on which a bones player is active and these are good to play with for a beginner.

Scott Miller sells my packets in the USA.

On the average, I give 5 to 6 workshops a year and hope to do this for many coming years.

The most of the work is to produce the bones. I make them together with a friend and bones player, Rik Homan.

Rik has a small shipyard and because of that, has regular leftover wood that is excellent to use for making the bones. We use only wenge (panga-panga, Dutch name.) We steam the Bones round and after that we finished them beautifully.

For both of us, it is our hobby because if you look at the time it takes to make the bones, the bones would be very expensive. Therefore it is always just a hobby. Met vriendelijke groet [With kind regards.] *Hans Weehuizen*



## Michael Satterwhite's Bones Workshops

New member Michael Satterwhite taught two "Musical Bones" workshops again at the Arizona Highland Celtic Festival (<http://nachs.info/festival.shtml>) in Flagstaff, Arizona in July 2011. The festival is produced by the Northern Arizona Celtic Heritage Society (NACHS). Michael has taught this workshop on prior years and loves introducing curious folks to the fun of playing bones. He uses 'penny bones' so everyone can begin to learn the basic mechanics of playing, and they are affordable enough for the festival to send everyone home with instruments. Workshops are full of giggling and banter as players realize they too can deliver a basic rhythm and bones can be flying every which way.

Michael's final request of his new bones players is to observe them playing their new bones as they take in the various musical offerings of the weekend. Wooden bones from various suppliers are offered close to cost. Any profits go into the NACHS scholarship fund - which has dispersed over \$50,000 to deserving students of Celtic culture through the years. Recipients can study, music, culture, language with Celtic orientation. Indeed Michael received a small scholarship to offset travel expenses to attend Bonesfest XV this year based on the anticipation it would strengthen his workshop leadership. Michael was amazed by his fellow players at Bones Fest XV, learned a huge amount and was able to carry back more knowledge to share with his students.

Michael also taught a bodhran workshop and assisted with a spoons workshop taught by another local, Nicole Bauge. The festival makes the bodhran workshop affordable by dispensing small cardboard pizza boxes and dowel 'tipplers' for the students to use during the workshop.

This family-friendly festival is a lively offering of music, children's activities, bagpiping competition, traditional athletic games, visiting clans, vendors and Celtic-oriented food vendors. But near and dear to NACHS is the festival's strong educational component which is exemplified by the

bones, bodhran and spoons workshops. They are joined by whisky-tasting, language, storytelling, genealogy, Celtic attire, Celtic plants, the history of salt and much more. Thank you, *Michael Satterwhite*

## Bones Fiedler—Wish I Could Have Met Him

Bones Fiedler was Harper, Texas' unofficial Ambassador, and usually had over a dozen visitors a day; some were local friends, but many were out-of-towners stopping at the Chamber of Commerce office to get information. Inside his house were two walls full of pictures of visitors who had taken his picture and sent it back to him. In a telephone interview, I asked him for his home address. He said, "Bones, Harper, Texas. Somehow it gets to me even without a zip code."

Richard 'Bones' Fiedler was born on November 2, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, and died on January 20, 2006. He served in the Army during World War II. Upon his return, he began working in the zoo in Washington, DC, and had many interesting experiences there. He helped raise the original "Smokey the Bear" who had been rescued from a forest fire in New Mexico and had burnt paws. He met Hopalong Cassidy, and he rescued a 1918 Stearns Motorcycle from the trash, and after restoring and then riding it for a few years, donated it to the Smithsonian Motorcycle Exhibit.

He moved to Texas to raise his children. He had two children, seven grandchildren and eight great grandchildren.

He had a dairy farm. He later traded that for a mercantile store that sold hardware, feed and clothes, and where he learned to make cowhide chairs. For several years, he exhibited them in the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio, the location of Bones Fest XV.

When the local newspaper got started, Bones took off his wonderful hat, pulled out \$200.00 and said, "Here's your start-up money." He was the first donor, and became a member of its advisory board. He would often shelter a person or two down on their luck at his small home.

Bones lived in Beaumont, TX for a while, and there he met John Henry Noble (read a story about John in Vol 10, No 1.) Bones said, "I saw him play from a distance. We got to be real good friends, but he never taught me." Bones recalled, "He sold bones for \$10 a pair, you know. Somebody would ask him to show them how to play them. John would say, "I sell them--I don't give lessons. He wouldn't show nobody, me included." John would say, "Just rattle them together until you like what you hear." So Bones taught himself how to play them. Since John Noble was also a regular at the Texas Folklife Festival, they must have played together there over the years.

Bones was a part of the Friday night "Jam Session" at the Longhorn Cafe. Bones wore his signature hat and sat near the door and greeted visitors and fans as they enter the cafe. He played two polished cow ribs, but was said not to be a great bones player. Bones said, "Over here in the hill country you can always find a dead cow." And then quickly added, "There are a couple of young buffalos that I'm keeping my eye on." He said, "I skinned a Zebra one time. They've got an exotic auction here once a month. I got the bones and they had a real good sound." He would also make bones out of oak when he had trouble finding real bone.

As shown in the photograph on Page 8, Bones loved kids and taught many how to play rhythm bones. One of his adult students, Pam Fisk, who gave him a RBS membership, said "He could play one-handed or two-handed, but said one-handed was more relaxing." She said, "He would give bones away to friends and acquaintances who showed interest."

The editor of that previously mentioned newspaper said, "We will miss Bones, the tourists will miss him, the homeless and hitchhikers will miss him. His spirit continues to linger and offer guidance." Bones was named the "Charles Barrett Citizen of the Year." *Steve Wixson* Parts of this article were extracted from an article written by Martha Stevens in the September 3, 2005, issue of *The Harper News*.

## An Update from Founding Member Deborah Brower

I'm still playing. The group I perform with released a CD last year. It was quite a project taking most of the summer, but I'm happy with the results. No bones, but I do play them in performance. The rest of my time has been taken up with doing historic research for the local historical society and programs for the group. I'm also doing quite a bit of work on slavery in the local area and the Underground Railroad. The one thing I've learned is the Underground Railroad is such a small part of slavery, but gets all the attention. It side tracks the real story, that there are no code songs or otherwise, when a slave escaped it was done with no help from anyone else, and the Underground Railroad only came into play (if at all) when slaves reached the north. What gets lost are the stories of people who bought their freedom and stayed in place working tirelessly to free their families. It's very rewarding to bring these stories to light and challenge teachers to be more creative in how they tell the story. The resources are out there you just need to look. It is amazing what you can learn.

Songs like the Follow the Drinking Gourd are 20th century and have nothing to do with slavery, but are about the great migration during the 20s and 30s. The words people sing now weren't written until the 1940s. Don't even get me started on the Quilt Code, the first Bush presidency is older than that. Yet the codes permeate lesson plans on slavery, because they have a nice built in craft and everyone can feel good, instead of telling real stories about real people.

So in a nutshell I'm having a really but very rich musical and intellectual life these days.

You can hear some samples here <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/taskerschance>. *Deborah Brower*

[Deborah's husband thinks he is related to Frank Brower, rhythm bones player with the 1843 Virginia Misntrels.]

## First Look at Mel Mercier's Thesis

The title of Mel's thesis is *The Mescher Bones Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape*, and it is a study of the development, transmission and performance of the Mescher style of rhythm bones playing. It is the first PhD thesis on the subject of rhythm bones.

Mel first heard Jerry Mescher at Bones Fest IV. Mel recalls, "Jerry stepped up on the stage and told us he was a corn farmer from Iowa. He played along to a tune called Maple Leaf Rag, and completely blew me away. I had never seen bones playing like that in my life, and I had never heard a story quite like his either. Jerry then went on to figure as the central character in my PhD research."

Below is the TABLE OF CONTENTS from Mel's thesis.

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Mel Mercier and daughter, Nora Kate, with her 'diggities' bones made by Steve Brown

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to have one made. I went for three summers to Java to study and then I was also interested in West African drumming, so I went to Ghana for three summers, as well, and studied there...I teach a range of courses; things like traditional Irish music, Indian, West African, or Indonesian gamelan. We have an Indonesian gamelan orchestra that I've been teaching since 1995, which is my favorite thing to do." What is the gamelan? "Gamelan is the equivalent of the Western orchestra. It's a set of bronze instruments...you sit on the floor to play it...some drums, but mostly tuned percussion, like xylophones...It is ensemble music." Mel also teaches performance courses and academic ones such as history and culture.

In 2009, Mel was appointed the head of the "newly formed school of music and theater" at UCC. "What this has meant for me is that I am busier than I've ever been in my life, because I've taken on a management role; I'm still doing the teaching; I'm still doing theater stuff, and for most of that time I was writing the dissertation. And, of course, there are now three of us in the family...So, life is rich... and challenging."

Mel had composed some theatrical scores in the 1990's. In 1999, he met Deborah Warner, an English theater director, who asked Mel if he would be interested in doing the music for a production of "Medea". He did compose the music, and the production "subsequently went to the *West End* in London, and then to *Broadway*, and toured the states." Since meeting Deborah, Mel has composed the scores for all of her stage productions. Earlier this year, he wrote the score for a production of "School for Scandal" that opened at the *Barbican* in London; and then it went to the Holland Festival in Amsterdam."

Mel does work with a Cork company called *Corcadorca*. "I've done a lot of shows with them doing music. Sometimes I record everything in the studio; sometimes I use live music. And, I'm just about to do another production with them of Shakespeare's "A Winter's Tale" that opens on Octo-

ber 10..."

Mel's brother, Paul Mercier, is a well-known Irish playwright ([www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com)). "... earlier this year I also did a play with him for the first time. He is an iconic figure in Irish theater; really developed and devised a form of "urban theater" for a new, young audience in the '80's with a company called "Passion Machine." I am a huge admirer of his work... I had never worked with him before, and I did this year for the first time. He wrote two new plays commissioned by the *Abbey* in Dublin, and I did the music for those... I'm about to do another play with him in November... Theater work is a different world. It is quite intense... because a theater production can be planned for maybe a year in advance." What is Mel's process in composing the score for a play? He never writes the music and then "just hands it over." He writes the score as the production is in progress. He responds to what is happening on the stage, and he is more inspired through conversations with the set designer, or the director, about what kind of production it is. "It's like painting. You've this drama unfolding and sometimes it feels as if you are highlighting the emotional content with sound."

Upon starting the dissertation in 2005-2006, Mel was juggling a lot of things. Nonetheless, one of the most "lovely, momentous occasions," and the first of the "two most significant events" in his life was marrying Maura O'Keeffe on April 21, 2007 (see newsletter Vol 9, No 2 for this story with photographs.)

By profession, Maura is a theatrical producer. Several of her credits include:

a. a play by the Brooklyn playwright, Will Eno, "Title and Deed," which played at the Kilkenny Arts Festival;

b. two international projects;

c. two plays since Nora Kate was born;

and, a new version of the documentary, "Man of Aran." Maura was the producer, and Mel wrote the new score.

In glowing terms, Mel explains how talented Maura is as a producer. "...she has a deep appreciation for



Maura and Mel Mercier and Jerry and Sharon Mescher with Mel's Diploma

creativity in art...and she has a great understanding of facilitation. She really knows how to take care of people who are making art, which means she's a god-send for those people. She understands the frailties and fragility of people who otherwise might have over-active egos...but still manage to make beautiful things...She is at her best when she is on the ground facilitating... That's a very difficult job. It's almost the hardest job, I think, to do if you're working in theater because... you've got to solve problems of all sorts of kinds; very few of them are glamorous. It's behind the scenes work... She's great with people... Maura remains active as a theater pro-

ducer; albeit in the last three years... she's not been able to give as much time to that." However, for the last year and a half, she has worked part-time as the marketing director for Lismore Castle, located in Lismore, Ireland ([www.lismorecastle.com](http://www.lismorecastle.com)).

On September 26, 2008, the second "most significant event" in the Mercier's life was the birth of their daughter, Nora Kate. As Mel relates, "Nora Kate has transformed my life, and Maura's as well... She moves quickly and I've got to move as

quickly. She's been a real joy, gift, and a revelation; a real wonder."

"The most remarkable thing about Nora Kate is how much of her own person she is... I had the fantasy that she would be an extension of me; but as it turns out, she ain't!!

From day one she was "this separate, complete entity... she's very articulate; headstrong; loves books; loves to role play; very precise; hard to keep up with her... She is an on-going revelation... There is this deep connection and the responsibility is

really profound; beyond words; and the care and the bond is indescribable. She has extreme power over you; we ain't the bosses! She has me wrapped around her little finger."

Mel has dreams and hopes that Nora Kate will play an instrument, or instruments. "Recently, we got a lovely package from Steve Brown and he had made Nora Kate a little pair of toddler bones... She calls them the "diggities," because when I would play them for her... I would say, "diggity, diggity, diggity... She has a sense of rhythm," and Mel hopes the musical genes have been imprinted.

Even though Mel has been quite

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busy with his teaching, theater, and performing over the last ten years, he shares that, “As I get older I am learning to prioritize...and the most important thing is family. I come from a big family. I’ve got nine other siblings, my mother...and my father died in 1991. We’ve always been very tight, very close.” Now that Maura and Mel have a “little one, things change and the future changes. So priorities shift...Somebody said a wonderful thing to me recently, “When you get to the pearly gates and you are met by St. Peter, or whoever it is, the two questions they are going to ask you are, ‘How did you treat your wife and how did you treat your kids?’”

It seems that the circle of life will continue: Nuala and Peadar Mercier passing on each of their legacies to their son, Mel; and, now, Maura and Mel passing on their legacies to Nora Kate.

With anticipation, we, the members of the Rhythm Bones Society, look forward to seeing how the future, with all its surprises, will unfold for Mel, Maura, and Nora Kate. *Sharon Mescher*



Member Hans Weehuizen teaching one of his rhythm bones workshops. See story on Page 4



The late Bones Fiedler—See Page 5



Member Michael Satterwhite Bones Workshop—See Page 5

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 13, No. 4 2011

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## Executive Director's Column

Never assume that you've told everyone you know about the bones, and never forget there are budding bone players lurking around every corner.

A few weeks ago we were off to a family gathering, my brother in law's 50th birthday, in fact. Now I love my brother in law, but having been busy for the three previous week ends, I would much have preferred to stay home and work on an over due bones order. But being the supportive family man (my wife isn't going to read this, is she?), I volunteered to drive her, my son Jeremy, and my mother in law the 50 or so miles over to his house.

I don't usually bring the bones to things like this, although I always have bones in the car. They tend to be mismatched, seconds I keep to

be ready when the urge hits and a good piece of music comes on the car radio, and I just can't not play to it. ????

But on this occasion, bone playing was the farthest thing from my mind, hoping to pay my respects and be home before dark.

I have a number of nieces and nephews all of whom I assumed are well acquainted with the bones, and have perhaps heard too much bone playing, which would make my hauling out the bones a torturous event, or so I assumed.

In one section of the kitchen, I sequestered myself next to several of my nephews, the oldest having been well indoctrinated into the bones, but the other two in their teens, and perhaps. I had always assumed they weren't inter-

*(Continued on page 3)*

## JC Burris, Bones Playing Blues Performer

As is sadly the case with much blues, recognition of the art of JC Burris has been extremely long in coming. He lived and played in the Bay Area for nearly twenty years, yet he remained a stranger to many local audiences. Thus, it did not seem particularly strange that Burris opened a radio concert by singing his composition, *'I'm a Stranger Here, Just Mowed Into Town.*

Born in 1928 near Shelby, North Carolina, some JC Burris' earliest memories were of music

as played by his uncle, the venerable bluesman Sonny Terry. Terry was frequently accompanied by Blind Boy Fuller or Big Bill Broonzy, both seasonal visitors to the Burris farm, and Terry remains the most important Influence on Burris' music.

Music was an integral part of the rural community of North Carolina. During harvest time, families from neighboring farms gathered to aid in corn shucking. Burris' father would motivate the helping hands by hiding jugs of white lightning' beneath the piles of

corn. As J.C. puts it, the white lightnin' seemed to stimulate the corn shucking so that the party could begin.

"There was no pay to shuck the corn." he recalled. "The lady folk would cook barbecue, and everyone'd have whiskey to drink. They'd bring out their guitars and the tub with a string and they'd play. I was a little boy and I'd stay out and watch 'em. If they tried to make me go

*(Continued on page 6)*



J.C. Burris playing harmonica and Joe Birl Rhythm Bones. Photo by Susanne Kaspar

# Editorial

I discovered JC Burriss when I researched rhythm bones in the Library of Congress just prior to BFIII in Brightwood, VA. I purchased a custom recording from Smithsonian/Folkway featuring JC, his uncle Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, all old-time blues musicians. More recently, I bought a copy of his *Blues Professor* CD, and while there are only two tracks with rhythm bones, they contain long bones solos that are great. Ed Michaels produced a video of Burriss, and helped with the article which starts on Page 1.

Mary Lee Sweet is hosting Bones Fest XVI. She worked hard trying to get us performing at Disney World, but they just don't know what to do with us. The Orlando area is a playground and the venue she had lines up is great.

The response to the November update to our website about the Klepperle is gratifying as reflected in emails and Letters to the Editor. See the brief story on Page 3, and then look at the video on our website. They have a tradition that gets children involved. Can we learn anything from them?

Member Dom Flemons of the Carolina Chocolate Drops performed at our 10 day spring festival called Riverbend (the Tennessee River runs through Chattanooga), and acknowledged me from the stage. In the audience was the Editor of the slick paper Chattanooga Magazine, and she became intrigued by the rhythm bones. The result was a story about me in the magazine, and if you haven't heard enough about me from this newsletter, check it out at [rhythmbones.com/documents/ChattMagWixson.pdf](http://rhythmbones.com/documents/ChattMagWixson.pdf).

This issue has the 2012 dues notice as an insert. After a couple of years of declining membership, we end the year with about 90 members. Some of the credit goes to PayPal, and you can use it to renew for 2012.

## Letters to the Editor

I just had a look at your homepage, it looks great! I want to set a link on

our Niggelturm Museum homepage to your homepage, so our members and visitors can then see what we have connections to USA. On 11/11/2011 we have our annual General Meeting of Narrenzunft Gengenbach. Greetings to you all from Gengenbach, Germany. *Reinhard Enderle* [Reinhard edited the Klepperle video.]

[Member Andy Cox forwarded a link to our homepage to a friend, and this was her reply.]

O Andy, that video is wonderful. I make them too with children! Not from bone but from wood.

The "kleppers" are not popular in the Netherlands nowadays, but they were very popular in the days my mother and father were young. They both play on family-occasions like birthdays. I have an uncle and an aunt also in their late eighty's who went until a couple of years ago to schools and tell the children about how life was before WWII. They also taught the children to play the Kleppers.

When I go with one of my choirs to perform in a home for the elderly, I take lots of kleppers with me, and there are always elder women who were klepperkampioen (I think clapperchampion) in their youth. So we sing the famous song you've heard (go to <http://www.gerardlenting.nl/Kleppermars/kleppermars.html> to hear it), and the public kleppers with us! Of course we rehearse first. You heard some louder claps, and places where the kleppers must be kept silent. You can imagine it's a lot of fun.

I live near The Hague, and in the Hague was until approx. 50 years ago a famous girls- band, called "De Ooievaartjes" which means "the little Storks". The stork is the symbol for The Hague. And storks clapper of course. They had lots of songs, and performed on the national radio.

The Dutch kleppers are made from different kinds of wood, and have no exact measures. It's just a rectangle piece of wood in the measures you like. Some like them a bit round, or longer than usual, or thin. Some put pins in it so the metal heads klepper even louder.

The tradition is that your father makes them for you out of some left-

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

over wood. Some ladies in my choir have beautiful old kleppers with a beautiful patina from using them a lot. I will send you some pictures, when I see the ladies again.

I like very much reading on your website about the kleppers, the bones and the klepperle, and I try to make and play them all. Thank you! *Dorine Maalcke*

## Website Updates

The October update featured the graduation of now Dr. Mel Mercier and a BFIII highlights video. November featured the Klepperle as described on Page 3, and the video was children making Klepperle. December featured the Adams and Corbett 19 Century Music Workshop (See Page ??????) in both photograph and video. (OR Greg & rowan video from BFXIV.)

(Continued from page 1)

ested. Video games, and intelligent phones were the topic of choice, and although I made a bit of small talk, I was mostly an observer.

"Have you ever seen him play the bones?" my oldest nephew asked the other two. Soon, he was launching into a description of bone playing and recounting some of my adventures, somewhat documented on YouTube. He went to the silverware draw, and produced two spoons, and holding them like bones, began to produce a very credible rattle. As the scene unfolded, I began to realize the awe, and sincere interest my younger nephews were displaying, all at instruction of my older nephew.

Off to the car to find as many bones as I could, and back with two or three very mismatched pairs, but workable.

The rest of the afternoon turned out to be a delightful teaching experience for me, and the beginning of their bones playing, which I think will continue on for some time.

When the afternoon was up, and leaving was impending, each one asked if they could "borrow" the mismatched bones to practice.

The next week, they both attended a birthday party for my mother in law at my house, and received their own pair, and more instruction.

So right in my midst, after I thought I had mined all the interest there was in my family, come two sincere, and budding bone playing students! And seeing the obvious delight in their faces at playing the bones, it has made me realize that there are many more people out there to reach, to teach, and bring into this bone playing experience. Never give up, the next youngster you meet just might be the next Sky Bartlett!

When I bounced up stairs after talking to Mary Lee Sweet, to give my wife the news that Mary Lee is seeking to hold the next Bones Fest in the Orlando area, you'd think I had just won the lottery. The idea of going to Florida, and all that it offers, had her dancing around the house. Mary Lee has some excellent idea's, and her hard work and persistence will pay off for us, I'm sure of it. Hope to see you all there! *Steve Brown*

# Bones Fest XVI

Orlando, Florida

August 9-11,  
2012

Host

Mary Lee Sweet

Preliminary  
Information Below

Bones Fest XVI  
Brings the  
Magic Bones to  
the Magic City of  
Orlando, Florida

Come on down to the land of Magic! If you are a sports fan, we are the home of the Orlando Magic. If you are a horticulturist, we have orange blossoms, orchids and air plants (Spanish Moss). If you like critters you can swim with Manatees, try to see the mockingbird's wings fluttering or watch the alligators - from a safe distance.

Come to the Land of Sunshine and create some Bone Rattling magic! Orlando is a city where people sing, play, dance and are waiting to discover how to play the rhythm bones. Amid palm trees swaying in the warm summer breezes the Rhythm Bones Society will bring a new experience to Orlando's city of entertainment. *Mary Lee*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XV.** August 9-11, 2012, Orlando, FL.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## Mitch Boss Gets a Nice Gig

I had the pleasure a while back of playing bones as the guest performer with the Philidor Percussion Group (see photograph on Page 8.) John J. Beck set it up at a concert in Greensboro NC. John teaches percussion at UNC School of the Arts School of Music and he is President Elect of The Percussion Arts Society. John is a new member of The Rhythm Bones Society.

The Philidor Percussion Group is made up of John, Wylie, Kris and Peter (last names evade my feeble brain). They are all teachers of percussion and performers in regional symphonies. At the Greensboro concert, I got to play bones with them playing marimbas (go to <http://vimeo.com/29967523> to see the performance.) I have to tell you these guys put on a performance of various percussion instruments that was mind boggling. John has asked me to come to School of the Arts December 13th to be 'guest artist and clinician' to talk to the students and play a few of the rags that we played with the Philidor Group. I would just love to see some of these young percussion musicians add rhythm bones to their repertoire.

*Mitch Boss*

## Website of the Quarter

## Greg Adam and Rowan Corbett's 19th Century Workshop

It was with great anticipation that I hopped into the car of my fiddler friend Bruce Reich on the morning of November 12<sup>th</sup>. Bruce and I were on our way to The Harpers Ferry Violin, Bones and Banjo Workshop Weekend, hosted by the National Park Service Harpers Ferry 19<sup>th</sup> Century Music Academy. I knew organizer and banjo instructor Greg Adams and bones instructor Rowan Corbett from Bones Fest XIV and simply couldn't wait to see them again. Anyone who attended that Fest knows what rare talents these two affable gentlemen are. Just the thought of a visit with these two and meeting the violin instructor Chuck Krepley was enough to get me up in the wee hours of a chilly November morning in West Virginia. But Greg's organizational skills, extensive knowledge of minstrel period music, early banjo history, and his ability to attract like minded individuals combined to produce a workshop weekend that will long be remembered by all those in attendance.

The workshop was held at the train station in the Harpers Ferry Historic District in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. One of the first exercises was simply to introduce ourselves. I was immediately struck by the distances some of the attendees had travelled. Harpers Ferry is roughly a 2 hour drive from DC or Baltimore and a mere 45 minute commute for me and Bruce. Others had come from Pittsburgh, New York State, Massachusetts, North Carolina and Michigan. Clearly they were expecting something special and the workshop did not disappoint.

Park Ranger Melinda Day welcomed us and reinforced the importance of engaging the public. Our historic sites are suffering record lows in visitors. As the stewards of a musical tradition reaching back through the ages we have not only the opportunity but also perhaps the responsibility to reach out and engage the public. This responsibility comes not only from the interest of preserving our shared musi-

cal tradition, but also in raising critical awareness as well as enthusiasm for the history that has defined our American culture.

This brings us to an interesting conundrum. Many of us in the bones community are familiar with and excited about minstrel music. Many of these tunes are just plain fun! But minstrelsy cannot be separated from its historical context. That context raises many issues that we generally aren't comfortable with in the framework of a modern society. While race, class, gender and political issues are often integral to almost any kind of music, with blackface minstrelsy these issues are punctuated by burnt cork, stereotypes, and repertoire that is often difficult to discuss or openly perform without explanation. Yet, without them blackface minstrelsy could not have existed. So how do you promote an inclusive discussion of this period in our history without perpetuating the racial, social, and political attitudes that were minstrelsy's foundation?

To shy away from these issues does a disservice to our shared cultural experience while bringing them up can often times be painful. Only by placing these musical pieces in their historical context can we hope to be true to our heritage by taking personal ownership of both the good and the bad. Whether we sing the songs as written or eliminate certain words or phrases it is important to call attention to how the piece would have been understood at the time. Ignoring the social implications of a piece of music written long ago, because it contains language or ideas that are out of our current comfort zone, does not help our society to move forward. Denying a trauma does nothing to help it heal.

This of course led us into a discussion of the history of the three instruments featured in the workshop. As there are many excellent sources and many individuals more qualified than I to speak on these topics I won't go into detail. Suffice to say that the evolution of Violin, Bones and Banjo in the context of the minstrel band was created largely through the confluence of European and West African interactions in a distinctly American way.

Our instructors did an excellent job in painting this picture for us.

After a break for lunch, the instrumental workshops began. There were two sessions so that attendees were not limited to joining a session for just one instrument. Banjo was by far the most popular. Violin and Bones were both well attended, though the number of banjo players interested in the bones probably made the bones sessions the second most popular. Forgive me if I'm expressing a personal bias here.

Rowan is an expert bones player and a patient teacher. Unsure of how to gauge the level of interest in the bones I had offered to assist in facilitating that portion of the breakout sessions. That turned out to be a welcome proposition. I don't have a completely accurate count of how many bones pupils we worked with but it was definitely in the double digits. Given that the total attendance was limited to 30 individuals, I'd say that was pretty good.

The first thing that struck me in working with these musicians was the high level of interest and motivation that they brought with them. I'm sure that most if not all of you reading this have encountered inquisitive individuals and given impromptu bones lessons on probably more than one occasion. The difference in the attitudes of these attendees was immediately apparent.

Working together with Rowan was a real treat. With an instructor and a teacher's aide, if you will, we were able to provide a high level of individual attention. Not only that, we were able to provide different perspectives on both instruction and approach. If someone was working with me and hit a wall, Rowan was able to lift them over it and vice versa.

This sort of tag team teaching approach proved highly successful. By the end of the weekend everyone that we worked with exhibited a fundamental grasp of the triplet with at least one hand. Even better than that was the fact that we started to field questions along the lines of "how do I integrate my left hand?" and "now that I have the basics, what do I do in a musical setting?" What a joy to be able to



offer insight and suggestions to budding bones players!

My friend Bruce was ecstatic to attend the violin sessions. He noted that there was plenty of individual attention from instructor Chuck Krepely. They worked on interpreting banjo notation for the fiddle as well as building repertoire, often by ear. Banjo was certainly the most attended workshop, along with supplying the bulk of the bones players, but I think it's best if I let Greg speak to this.

After the instrument breakout sessions came a dance presentation by Emily Oleson. Emily reminded us that it's impossible to look at modern Appalachian Flat Footing, Clogging, Tap or Irish Step Dancing to see exactly what these dances would have looked like. At the same time, there are threads of the minstrel tradition in all of these styles. Like its instrumental counterparts, dance in the minstrel era evolved from a mixture of European and West African influences. Emily's presentation established a framework that allowed for a greater appreciation of her husband's (Matthew Olwell) virtuosic dance performance, which came at the culmination of the weekend.

Following Saturday's dinner break it was time for what I generally consider to be my favorite thing – jamming! All of the attendees had something to offer musically. Early Sunday we continued this theme. Those who wanted additional time with the instructors were given access while everyone else was encouraged to continue to make musical connections and to sign up for the performance. I was fortunate enough to accompany some great players and thoroughly enjoyed every minute.

The weekend culminated in a public performance outside the station. We began with all attendees playing "Old Dan Tucker" as part of Greg's "How large can we make an ensemble?" experiment. Highlights are too numerous to name as all of the performers excelled. I will however point out a personal favorite of mine which was Rowan playing bones while Rhianon Giddens played banjo and sang "Georgia Buck". Another favorite was a medley by our instructors featuring the dancing of Matthew Olwell. You can check out the video of that piece here: <http://youtu.be/njAy2TjD1ts>

All in all I can't say enough about

## Steve Brown at the Lost Arts Festival

Times certainly have changed in this vast country of ours. Words like Web, and mouse have taken on a whole new meaning. People carry around phones, and do things with them that we couldn't have imagined even 10 or 20 years ago. Vinyl recordings look ancient and out of place next to a compact disc, not to mention an iPod.

But if we think things have changed in our life time, think about our fathers and grandfathers. My father was born into a world that most people got around on horses, and electric lights were a luxury.

That to a certain extent is the basis of the Lost Arts Festival sponsored by the Rutland Massachusetts Historical Society, and held on the Rutland Common on October 1st of this year. Blacksmithing, spinning wool, and weaving are only a few of the activities featured in an attempt to bring people back to a previous time in our history.

And for music what else could you have at a "Lost Arts" Festival, but the rhythm bones and the banjo! It was on that premise and at the invitation of the Historical Society that my good friend Andy Chase, banjo player extraordinaire, and I made our way to the Rutland Common to give people a taste of music of the 1800's as played on an authentic tack head banjo, and, of course, the rhythm bones.

It was, unfortunately, a misty, rainy day there in Rutland. The rain poured down as I gathered bones and 'period' clothing, and ran from the car to the organizers tent to announce our arrival. We were met with enthusiastic response, little effected by the weather, and within a few minutes we

had our own shelter of a tent constructed just for the music and bone playing instruction that we were scheduled to give.

But would there be anyone to play to or teach the bones to would be the question. At 10am we began our program, and slowly the rain drops started to disappear. With each tune, things became a little brighter, and gradually folks began to emerge, and make their way to the common. People really seemed to like the music, and a number of folks asked questions both of the bones and the banjo.

The rhythm bone playing workshop was scheduled for 11:30, and low and behold, 10-15 hearty souls had gathered

to learn how to play the bones. Undaunted by the rain, and clearly enthusiastic, a number of them were able to produce the rattle, and were well on their way to playing bones! After a brief intermission,



Andy Chase and Steve Brown at the Lost Arts Festival

Andy and I paraded around the common, which by now was completely dry, and even a few peaks of sunshine were starting to show. We marched down to the Blacksmiths tent, over by the sheep pen, up to the spinning wheel, and back by the loom, to the tunes of *Lucy Neal*, *Old Joe* and *The Boatman*. I began to feel like we were in another time, when this music and these instruments were more regularly heard and seen.

As the hour of two o'clock approached and we played our final tune, the folks of Rutland voiced their appreciation, not only of our music, but of the festival itself. We had many a heartfelt appreciation expressed to us, for which we were grateful. As we made our way off of the Common, and expressed our thanks at being asked to be part of this unique festival, we hoped that next year we would again be a part of the festival, and that the sun might make a longer appearance as well! *Steve Brown*

## Klepperle Video From Germany

There was an interesting video about Karnival in Germany on the television Travel Channel. It included a section on the Klepperle, what we call rhythm bones (see photograph on Page 8 and read Jonathan Danforth's article in the Vol 7, No 2 newsletter now on-line.) From the credits, I was able to contact the producers who gave us a copy of a video just about the Klepperle and permission to add it to our website. It became the centerpiece of the November update to our website, and got a big response from people (see Letters to the Editor.)

This is a wonderful video about the Klepperle (go to [rhythmbones.com/KlepperleVideo.html](http://rhythmbones.com/KlepperleVideo.html).) What you will see is Klepperle instruction, children making Klepperle, children competing to be the Klepperle King, Queen, Prince and Princess and children and adults marching in parades, the most important being part of Fastnacht, a Marti Gras-like event, where the Klepperle and other noise instruments drive out the evil spirits of winter. Four cities are highlighted; Gengenbach, Haslach, Radolfzell (see also [klepperle.de](http://klepperle.de)) and Waldkirch.

This is a tradition that goes back hundreds of years, and there are hundreds if not thousands of children and adults who play the Klepperle. The video is in German, but you will have little trouble understanding what you see. It is amazing!

Video credits: Narrators, Rudiger Stadel, Michael Bahr and Gerd Birsner; Photographs, Rutiger Stadel; Camera and Editing, Reinhard Enderle; Producer: Thomas Rautenberg; and Director, Reinhard Enderle. Released March 2011. RBS also thanks Jürgen Rappale for his help. Reinhard Enderle and I have exchanged several emails, and his last is a Letter to the Editor. Enjoy the video! *Steve Wixson*

## Nice Story from Hank Tenenbaum

What does this have to do with bones? Bear with me a moment.

Years ago I shared a house in Cabin John, MD with a guitar maker, Andy Adams, deceased last year. It was not uncommon to wake up on a Sunday morning to the whole Seldom Scene band or Doc Watson jamming in the living room or kitchen. From time to time I would go with Andy to visit his mentor, Sophocles, at the Guitar Shop when it was located on M Street in DC. Andy & Sophocles would talk technique (making or playing or both) and I would stare at the wood.

Years after I moved out and Andy moved to Shepherdstown, WV, Sophocles gave his shop to Steve Spellman. Steve later relocated the shop to its current location just off Connecticut Av around the corner from M Street.

About two years ago when Steve was tidying up his shop he found these (see photograph) stuck behind something and buried in the clutter. He knew of my avocation and gave them to my friend Carl to give to me. You can see from the photo they were opened and re-stapled. This is a pair of member Joe Birli's plastic bones with the PAT. NO. 2436283 on the bones. The instructions are still inside the package. How these bones came to be in one of the premier guitar shops in the country is certainly a mystery. Steve doesn't know. They came with the shop, buried and forgotten.

Simon and Garfunkel bought guitars here. Jim Hendrix left signature clothing (proudly displayed in the vault) for repairs. Charley Byrd used to "hang out". The list of renowned classical and contemporary guitar players that came thru this shop is staggering. And plastic bones. This ones for YOU, Joe Birli! *Hank*



(Continued from page 1)

to bed, I'd hide under the shucks because I loved music. They'd do the hand jive and play the two sticks or bones. During the day I'd practice on the bones when no one was around."

The hand jive and the bones are part of a family music tradition which J.C. Burris incorporated into his stage. The hand jive consists of a rapid hand slapping of the chest, legs, arms, and other hand. It progresses from simple rhythmic patterns into complex melodies, requiring immense concentration, stamina, and hand speed. Burris throws himself into the hand jive with such ferocity that on one occasion he loosened two teeth with one flailing blow.

The bones or African rhythm bones, are two sticks which are held in one hand and clicked together with quick wrist motions, establishing a basic rhythmic pattern. When J.C. Burris played harmonica, bones and sings simultaneously, he was indeed a busy man.

The harmonica was the mainstay of Burris' blues. He was only seven years old when Sonny Terry began teaching him the fundamentals of harmonica playing. He began seriously exploring the harmonica when he moved New York City in 1949. There Terry coached J.C. on the circle breathing method which allows him to play without pausing to inhale or exhale. This "loop breathing" technique let Burris play for hours without tiring.

In New York, Burris spent his days working in the garment district and his nights playing with such blues luminaries as Sticks and Brownie McGee, the Rev. Gary Davis, and of course Sonny Terry. Burris began to forge a distinctive style; and soon he was doing recording sessions with Sonny, Brownie, Sticks, and Lightnin' Hopkins for the Folkways, Prestige, and Bluesville labels.

A failed marriage forced Burris to leave New York. As Burris put it half seriously, "wife trouble got me to really start playing the blues". Hitching a freight headed west, Burris found his way to Los Angeles in October, 1959.

In L.A., Burris survived by passing hand bills and playing music In the

streets. That didn't last very long, however because his music drew such large crowds that Burris was soon arrested for 'creating a public nuisance.

"They took me to Jail." he says. "This being my first time in L.A. they didn't know me. The judge told me not to do it no more. He said that the harmonica makes a sound that people like, and you can draw a crowd especially out where the elderly people live, some young boy might think about stealing their purse. I said 'Yea you can keep it clean, but I'm getting' out of here.' And so I hit the road again."

J.C. moved to San Francisco in 1960 and made it his permanent home. He found day time employment unloading rice trucks in Chinatown, and in the evenings he played intermissions at San Francisco night clubs like the Sugarhill, the Jazz Workshop, and the Coffee Gallery. Burris was often featured at the original Matrix Club on Fillmore, and on some occasions played alongside a fledgling San Francisco rock band known as the Jefferson Airplane.

The years of hard labor extracted their toll, however, and in 1966 Burris suffered a severe stroke. While convalescing, he revived a toy figure which his grandfather had first built when Burris was eight years old. At physical therapy sessions J.C. created the dancing wooden marionette figure known as Mr. Jack. When tapped on the head, Mr. Jack dances a mad-leg jig or James Brown shuffle while producing a clicking syncopated melody.

Before his death, Burris did gain some of the exposure his music deserved. He performed in most of the Berkeley and San Francisco Blues Festivals and regular gigs at the Boarding House or Great American Music Hall when performers like Mike Bloomfield, Clifton Chenier and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee were in town. He also played a scene in the movie 'Leadbelly,' and performed in the San Francisco film 'Riverboat 1988.'

A live solo album, *J. C. Burris*, was released in 1976. It was recorded at the Northeast Community Center in San Francisco and the West Dakota Cub in Berkeley by local blues archi-

vist Chris Strachwitz, for the Arhoolie label.

Burris died of a heart attack on May 16, 1988, at age 60. He was in North Carolina for an appearance at the Greensboro Blues Festival, and was stricken while visiting his stepmother, Mozell, at the family's Kings Mountain home. He left 3 children.

In 2001, Chris Strachwitz, released on the Arhoolie label a CD titled *Blues Professor* that includes all but one of the songs from the 1976 album plus songs from a cassette that Burris had given him hoping they would be considered for another album.

The liner notes for the CD are full of information about Burris. Tom Mazzolini had written the liner notes for the 1976 album, and these were reprinted. Chris' Editor Notes has stories about Burris in later years including an invitation to perform at the National Folklife Festival. The CD is Arhoolie CD 497.

There are only two rhythm bones tracks on this CD, however, they both include long bones solos that are great. *Highway Blues* is one of them and it can be seen on the internet (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iADvf40k-rU>). The rhythm bones solo is about 2:20 minutes into the video.

Another internet video is *Smoke Filled Room* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edX\\_vVtmdTA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edX_vVtmdTA)) which starts about one minute into the video.

Another video titled *J.C. Burris: American Folk Blues* was produced by Ed Michaels from recordings made in 1978. Ed gave RBS permission to include *Highway Blues* on our website (see Resources:Audio/Video:Audio/Video on our Website.) Ed also helped with this article and provided the photograph on Page 1. The video can be purchased, and a DVD version is in the works (Ed Michaels—email to [drumsong@earthlink.net](mailto:drumsong@earthlink.net))

From the perspective of the Rhythm Bones Society, J.C. does something interesting—he calls his bones—African Rhythm Bones. The use of the term rhythm bones in 1976 seemed odd when they were normally just called bones. Then when I saw him play them on a video, I saw they

were really member Joe Birl's black plastic bones that carried an embossed 'Rhythm Bones' trademark. I'm sure when Joe reads this article he will appreciate that another well known person used his patented rhythm bones.

Ed Michaels remembers him saying they use to play beef bones when he was a kid. In addition to the Birl bones he used in Ed's video, he showed Ed a pair made out of galvanized aluminum, decorated with red reflectors that he said were made by a friend in San Quentin.

Though Burris has achieved the admiration of other musicians, his audience remains small, his fortune illusory—yet one can sense no bitterness in his demeanor. He was at peace with the world and himself, secure in the accomplishment of his music.

"There is a river somewhere  
Goes through the life of everyone.  
And it flows around the mountain  
Down though the meadows, under  
the sun.

There's a star in the sky  
Brightens up the life of everyone.  
And they see the life of happiness  
Long with the future of the lonely  
ones." 1976 J.C. Burris.

*Steve Wixson* [Many thanks to Tom Mazzolini who gave us permission to use his words. Most of this article is taken verbatim from his articles.]

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1. *J.C. Burris: Happy with the Blues* by Harton Firmin, Bay Area Magazine

2. *J.C. Burris: 1928-1988* by Tom Mazzolini, Calendar Magazine, Volume 7, Number 19, September 1-15, 1988.

3. *J.C. Burris* by Sheldon Harris, Blues Who's Who, 1979. Contains a short biography plus extensive list of performance credits.

4. *J.C. Burris: Blues Professor*, Liner Notes by Tom Massolini and Chris Strachwitz, Arhoolie CD 497, 2001.

5. Sonny Terry's Washboard Band, Folkway Records FA2006. Burris is not credited, but is probably the rhythm bones player.

[See a related story by Hank Tenenbaum on the opposite page.]



Mitch Boss performs with the Philidor Percussion Group. See Page ????



Still photograph from Klepperle Video ( See Page 1)

## It's Time to Renew Your Membership

Membership in the Rhythm Bones Society runs from January 1 to December 31 of the same year. The Dues Renewal Form is an insert in this newsletter, and if you do not have an insert that means your dues are already paid up for the 2012.

You may pay by check or PayPal. Go to [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) and click on the box 'Join the Rhythm Bones Society.'

Membership is up this year, and maybe PayPal is part of the reason. Thanks from the RBS Board.



Jonathan Danforth and our youngest rhythm bones player

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# *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 14, No. 1 2012

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## Executive Director's Column

I'm just back from Abbeyfeale and competing in the All Ireland Bone Playing Competition, and though the result weren't quite what I hoped for, it was a spectacular trip. I promise a full report in the next issue of the Rhythm Bone Player, but for now a couple of observations.

Rhythm Bone playing is alive and well in Abbeyfeale, and if it can be contributed to anything—one name comes to mind, David Murphy. David not only exhibits the finest bone playing, but he works tirelessly with the local children to ensure the tradition of bone playing in Abbeyfeale continues in fine style.

Look no further than the results of the chil-

dren's competition. Adrian O'Leary in first place (one of Davids students and his nephew), Jackie Murphy in second place (David's daughter) and John Ford in third place (David's nephew).

Beyond the weekly classes of his students, and extremely fine bone playing himself, is one exceptional person—fair play to you David!

The other is the fact that Junior Davey is another reason rhythm bone playing will continue in Ireland. He also teaches children in his own locality (one actually drove the five hours down to the competition), and adults during his

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Who Dat Knockin: Bones Playing During the American Civil War

The "bones" can be referred to as one of the earliest instruments. The idea of striking two bones together to produce a clicking sound, pretty much dates to early man. However, the ability to effectively produce complex rhythms came a little bit later.

Bones playing, in the United States, has existed for quite a while. Bones were present in Irish and English folk music for some time and naturally made their way across the seas with our colonial ancestors. However, it wouldn't be until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that the bones finally found their way into the popular music of the day. Initially played in old folk tunes brought by various immigrant groups, the bones quickly became the staple of the American minstrel movement. The introduction of this instrument can be attributed to one of the earliest American bones players, Frank Brower.

Frank Brower was born in Baltimore, Maryland on November 20, 1823. Interested in performance, Brower made his first musical appearance at Dick Myers' Museum in Philadelphia,

doing a song and dance, about 1838; subsequently he joined John Robinson's Circus, and later Raymond & Waring's Circus. In turn, this circus background prepared him for the showmanship and style of minstrel music. Brower's interest in performance also applied to musical instruments. It is said that in 1841, Brower sawed into 12-inch lengths the rib bones of a horse and proceeded to play them. His showmanship was even demonstrated while playing

*(Continued on page 6)*



Sailors on the USS Wabash taken in 1863. The sailor on left is playing the bones.

# Editorial

I was in dire need of a Page 1 story, and Rick Musselman bailed me out with a story beyond expectation. This is a story long overdue, and a big thank you to Rick for writing it.

The big news is, of course, Bones Fest XVI in Orlando, FL hosted by Mary Lee Sweet. This is the first Fest in a vacation city, and many of you, like myself, will come early or stay late to take in the attractions. It's been years since my wife and I were there. I hear it's grown since then.

You can learn more about our host, Mary Lee, in a story she tells about herself.

You may have seen the email announcing that Sky Bartlett was to be on ABC's Wipeout program and was also going to play his rhythm bones. Well he tell us what it's like to be on primetime television.

Deborah Brower is a Charter Member of the Rhythm Bones Society. I ran across her name, and wondered what she was up to, and she told me in a short article. By the way, she thinks her husband is a distant relative of Frank Brower, the first Minstrel Bones Player.

I was serious about my dire need for a story for this issue (Sky Bartlett also really helped me out.) I am amazed, when I look back over 13 volumes of the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, at the quality of its articles. Most of them are contributed by members like yourselves, and I make this plea that you send me articles or ideas for article so we can continue the high watermark for what is, at times, almost a journal. While it is just a little newsletter, it is housed and cataloged in the Library of Congress where future researchers will see these words.

## Letters to the Editor

Just want to let you know that I will be appearing on the TV show Wipeout -ABC on Thursday night January 12th. I will be playing the bones on the show. I look forward to seeing you at the next fest. *Sky Bartlett*

Enjoyed seeing Sky on Wipeout. Too bad it was so brief. *Dick*

*Jacobs*

We watched the program last night. It was fun to see Sky playing them bones. *Sharon Mescher*

How about bones in literature? In *Blue Highways*, by William Least Heat Moon, the author dips down to the Mississippi Delta during a cross country journey and meets a Cajun bones player in a tavern. *Rob Rudin*

I have attached a picture of "Johnny Bones" a street performer in the old west section of Tombstone, AZ. I got to play a couple of songs with him yesterday. He is an amazing performer and has been doing this in Tombstone for about 5 years. He is the one who told me about the Rhythm Bones Society a couple of years ago. The photographer is Dave Day of Bisbee, AZ. I thought this amazing picture would look great on your web site and got Dave's permission to use it if you are interested. Pretty nervy of me to suggest it I know but it is such a great picture, I had to try. *Gerry Hines*



## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XV.** August 9-11, 2012, Orlando, FL.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Bones Fest XVI Brings the Magic Bones to the Magic City of Orlando, Florida

Come on down to the land of Magic! If you are a sports fan, we are the home of the Orlando Magic. If you are a horticulturist, we have orange blossoms, orchids and air plants (Spanish Moss). If you like critters you can swim with Manatees, try to see the mockingbird's wings fluttering or watch the alligators - from a safe distance.

Come to the Land of Sunshine and create some Bone Rattling magic! Orlando is a city where people sing, play, dance and are waiting to discover how to play the rhythm bones. Amid palm trees swaying in the warm

summer breezes the Rhythm Bones Society will bring a new experience to Orlando's city of entertainment. *Mary Lee*

### **Preliminary Program**

Food and Beverage will be served either Friday or Saturday. When we have a better headcount we will decide what will be served and when. Changes will be added to the website as they occur.

#### **Thursday August 9, 2012**

- 3:00pm check-in at Rosen Plaza Hotel
- 4:30 - 5:00 Ish gather in the Bones Fest XVI Sweet suite ;-) Ask at registration desk for location.
- 5:30pm - ? Dinner and/or drinks at Raglan Road Irish Pub in Downtown Disney. Selected Bones Players perform between Irish dancer and house band Creel performances.

#### **Friday August 10, 2012**

- **9:00am - 10:00pm** conference room available with registration open except during meal breaks
- 9:00 - 12pm Workshops, individual performances, jamming
- 12pm - 2pm - Lunch on your own
- 2pm - 5pm Demonstrations, performances, presentations, jamming
- 5pm - 7pm Dinner on your own/or at evening pub/restaurant
- 7pm - ? Pub/restaurant "crawls" with stage performances by selected bones players

#### **Saturday August 11, 2012**

- **9:00am - 10:00pm** conference room available with registration open except during meal breaks
- 9:00 - 12pm Workshops, individual performances, jamming
- 12pm - 2pm - Lunch on your own
- 2pm - 3pm "Skin & Bones, Hair & Guts" presented by Spike Bones
- 3pm - 5pm Demonstrations, performances, jamming
- 5pm - 7pm Dinner on your own/or at evening pub/restaurant
- 7pm - ? Pub/restaurant "crawls" with stage performances by selected bones players

**Sunday August 12, 2012** - for those still around

- Brunch at 11:00am - details TBA

## Sky Bartlett Plays Rhythm Bones on Primetime Television

There I sat, in Bradenton, Florida, for the second time that winter. It was some time in January of 2011, and I had just got back from skiing in Colorado. I was sitting on my aunt's couch watching TV with my cousin Colby when Wipeout came on. We began to laugh at the contestants as they were relentlessly beaten and made fun of.

After a while my aunt, sitting at the computer behind us, began to tell me how I should go on the show. Why she felt this way I am not sure, perhaps for the \$50000 grand prize, or maybe posterity. She looked the casting details and requirements; good looking, high IQ, good taste in art, and such. It seemed I was a perfect fit.

I got into my truck and drove back to NH. I realized I had made a wrong turn. I reset my GPS to Hollywood CA. Once there (for the second time in the young year), I simply went to a specific address and waited with the other 300+ people who were hoping to make the cut.

I should mention the day before they screened over 1000 hopefuls at a different location, not to mention online auditions. When my "turn" came, I was lined up against a brick wall with three other people and was told by a friendly woman to say something impressive/interesting within 10 seconds. I had my bones in my hand ready to seize my opportunity, knowing that they would be the key to my success. But now was not the time for that, instead I simply said "I drove here from NH in my 1988 Toyota pickup truck, for the second time."

I was promptly sent upstairs to schedule further auditioning. I went back 10 days later after a quick trip up to Washington state. This was to be my on camera audition. I simply stood in front of a camera for 15 minutes while the same friendly woman asked me question after question.

At some point I had had enough questions and said "watch this." I played the bones, and there were no more questions. I was sent to fill out a

mountain of paperwork, then told I would be contacted in 90 days if they needed me.

Back to NH, 90 days came and went, no contact. I soon forgot about the whole thing, and life went on. Then in early October, the call came, "Our producer loves your bones, be here in 10 days if you want to be on TV." I got back in my truck. I did stop along the way in Colorado to see fellow bones festers, Jessye and Courtney, before continuing on to my destination.

I got to CA, got my paperwork and was told where to go and what to do, I had to wait a week. In my free time, I got a job and a place to live, seemed like a nice place to try living for a time. So eventually the day came, lots of waiting around, I won't go into much detail, the people running the show were good to me, so I'll respect their desire for secrecy.

I was ushered to the front of the obstacle course, were I had been told to play the bones and give a shout out to one of the shows characters. I was obedient. Then I ran like a chicken being chased by Col. Sanders as I was relentlessly beaten and made fun of. I made it through the course with the second fastest time out of 24 contestants. I was told to come back in two days for the next round. No bones playing, just bones breaking. I did not proceed to the next round. Oh well, no regrets about that.

This all took place in October, the show aired in January 2012, I was rather surprised at the response I got for my 20ish seconds on TV, dozens of people found me through face book wanting to know what those 'thingys' were I was playing. Considering they only showed me playing for 1 second, like a crazy person, to no music, it is a wonder anyone responded at all.

I stayed in CA into late January, then I drove to the deep south of Texas to play bones with Jay and Tammie Roy, always a good time. After returning to NH for a month I decided I missed CA. I got back in my truck. And here I sit, in Ventura County, wondering if the waves are big enough to go surfing. *Sky Bartlett*

(Continued from page 1)

bodhran playing workshops, and yearly school in Gurteen, his home town. Junior, whose personal history is steeped in the traditional music, took the time to review each competitor both in the Junior and Senior competition, and was very encouraging in each instance. Thanks especially to Junior and David for encouraging this tradition to continue!

I have been so fortunate in my life to have traveled around the country and the world, which has been almost entirely because of bone playing. That includes trips to Ireland, and to the US, including Texas, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri, to name a few.

Now I can include Florida in that itinerary, thanks to Mary Lee, and Frank Sweet and Bones Fest (what number is this) to be held August 9th-11th in Orlando Florida.

What an amazing opportunity we have not only to bring rhythm bone playing to another state, but to see what that state has to offer. I urge all of you to come to Orlando and avail yourselves of this chance. Mary Lee and Frank have out done themselves with the fabulous hotel rate, and many opportunities to play the bones. My son Jeremy is truly excited about the prospect of playing the bones in Disney World! See you there! *Stephen Brown*

## Rick Musselman Short Bio

Rick Musselman is the Education Supervisor at Carriage Hill Farm, an 1880s living history site. He has also worked for the Ohio Historical Society and the National Park Service. In addition, he has also been involved in Civil War reenacting for twenty years and has been a student of rhythm bones. He has over 10 different sets, including an original set of ebony bones that are dated to the civil war.

## Update From Charter Member Deborah Brower

I'm still playing. The group I perform with released a CD last year. It was quite a project took most of the summer but I'm happy with the results. No bones but I do play in performance.

The rest of my time has been taken up with doing historic research for the local historical society and programs for the group. I'm also doing quite a bit of work on slavery in the local area and the Underground Railroad. The one thing I've learned is the Underground Railroad is such small part of slavery but gets all the attention. It side tracks the real story, that there are no code songs or otherwise, when a slave escaped it was done with no help from anyone else and the Underground Railroad only came into play (if at all) when slaves reached the north. What gets lost are the stories of people who bought their freedom and stayed in place working tirelessly to free their families.

It's very rewarding to bring these stories to light and challenge teachers to be more creative in how they tell the story. The resources are out there you just need to look. It is amazing what you can learn.

Songs like the Follow the Drinking Gourd are 20th century and have nothing to do with slavery, but are about the great migration during the 20s and 30s. The words people sing now weren't written until the 1940s.

Don't even get me started on the Quilt Code, the first Bush presidency is older than that. Yet the codes permeate lesson plans on slavery, because they have a nice built in craft and everyone can feel good, instead of telling real stories about real people.

So in a nutshell I'm having a really but very rich musical and intellectual life these days. You can hear some samples here at <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/taskerschance>. Nice to hear from you. Hope all is going well. *Deborah Brower*

## Al Lemieux Obit

It is with great sadness that I have to inform you that our dear friend, fellow musician and bones player Al Lemieux, left us at 9:40pm last night after having been in the hospital for only 2 days. For those who would like to say good bye, there will be a wake [now long past] on Monday from 4-7 at the Grise Funeral Home, 280 Springfield St, Chicopee. The funeral home phone number is 413-594-4189 if you need to contact them for any reason. If you would like, you are welcome to send flowers or donate to a charity of your choice. On Tues, the funeral will be at the Assumption Church in Chicopee. The time is not finalized but will be near 9:30am, followed by another service at the Mass. Veterans Cemetery in Agawam at 11am. The obituary will be in the newspaper tomorrow with all the final details. The Family will also have a gathering of Al's family and friends after the Agawam service. More information about this get together will be announced at the service. Would you please pass this information along to all those who knew him from the Rhythm Bones Society? Thanks, *Robin Unger*

[Al Lemieux played the bones, and washboard. I know he attended several regional fests, but don't think he made it to a national fest. He was a friend of Richard Clifford, rhythm bone player from Connecticut. *Steve Brown*]

## Mary Lee Sweet Rattling Bones Made of Sticks and Stones

### **Mary Lee Sweet Rattling Bones Made of Sticks and Stones**

Performing as Backintyme <http://backintyme.com/performances.php>

I was standing in a grassy field in front of a Civil War sutler's tent the first time I saw bones. To the sounds of cannon and rifle fire and the thunder of horses hooves as the cavalry



*(Continued from page 4)*

raced into battle, I surveyed boxes and more boxes filled with multi-colored sticks. The vendor told me what they were and demonstrated how to play them. Unable to master a stringed instrument, I was sure my musical fortunes would improve as I learned this new instrument. Since Frank and I do nineteenth century music and storytelling, the bones would be a perfect fit. Two years later, I managed to keep them from flying across the room as I practiced, but my performances were not riveting.

Then I discovered the Rhythm Bones Society and entered a new world of adventure. Frank and I began to travel to cities that we had not visited before as we attended the annual Rhythm Bones Fests. Greensboro, North Carolina was our introduction to the world of Boners with all its variety and cast of characters. As we practiced our performance songs in the hotel room, there was a knock on the door. A man I did not know stood at the door smiling and said, "I hear a bones player in this room." It was Don DeCamp, one of the best bones players around, and he had called ME a bones player!

At Guilford College, where the Bones Fest was held, we discovered that "It's a Small World After All," when Hank Tenenbaum from Virginia said to us, "I hear you're from Florida. Do you happen to know VGO?" We do! Hank and VGO, a Florida Folk Festival favorite, had performed together in the D.C. area 30 years ago. Russ Myers, also from Virginia sat down and showed us his whalebones and how he could change the pitch by moving his fingers. I loved the sound of the whalebones and Russ loved the sound of my cow bones that I had bought in Ireland. He wanted to make a trade, but to my suggestion, he said, "No! You can't have the whale bones!"

We have not missed a Bones Fest since that first one in 2002. We've been to nine now, and with each new one we meet more friends to add to the ones we already have. Our travel log includes Louisville, KY, Reston, VA, Signal Mountain/Chattanooga, TN, New Bedford, MA, Newburg/Milwaukee, IL, St. Louis, MO, and

Old Town Alexandria, VA.

With each Bones Fest, I learn new tricks and improve my playing. I went from one handed playing to two handed playing and from a few on-the-beat clicks to a rhythmic style all my own that makes people stop and look and ask how it's done.

In Milwaukee we performed with Bones Fest on stage at the Irish Festival and marveled at Dave "Black Bart" Boyles' combination washboard and bones playing. In St Louis we did NOT get to take a riverboat cruise because presidential candidate Barak Obama made an unannounced appearance down by the riverside. But I met Ida May Schmich who, at 94, rattles the bones, plays in the St. Louis Banjo Club, and drove us back to the hotel! In Old Town Alexandria we were treated to the first Bones Fest wedding, where the bride walked under an arch of Bones players' raised arms holding their bones aloft.

My bones playing and my performance skills have been greatly influenced by the magic of Bones Fests. There is inspiration in the air and a family reunion atmosphere. Like all families, there are young and old, and shy and bold. If there were a royal family, it would be the Cowett Clan of North Carolina. Everett Cowett is the "Founding Father" of the organization. There's also Al, Dan, John, Martha and Tom Cowett. Here a Cowett, there a Cowett, everywhere a Cowett! Playing bones, manning the registration tables, running sound, mc'ing, and welcoming everyone with miles of smiles.

Jonathan Danforth, whose grandfather Percy Danforth helped preserve the art of playing bones, is known for whistling or singing accapello while playing bones. Spike Bones Muhrer juggles tambourines and plays bones in the dark while wearing a skeleton outfit. Sky Bartlett started playing when he was 16 with Shorty Boulet, a master player, and Ernie Duffy, and is leaving the rest of us in the dust! The Mescher Trio dresses in matching clothes and performs in perfectly choreographed unison. Bill Vits, a professional percussionist plays so fast that his bones look like mockingbird wings floating vertically upwards. Kenny Wolin of the President's Own

Marine Band keeps trying to teach us polyrhythms. Tim Reilly, from New Bedford, can make the bones talk and taught us the art of scrimshaw. Who can forget the year Gil Hibben, known for martial arts and knife design, played the bones while dancing the hula! John Cahill wowed us all with his Uncle Sam outfit as he strutted around playing his bones. Walt Watkins rattles his bones and leads others in his famous "pass off" which lets players share the spotlight and then "pass" the play to the next person.

Johnny Perona, who played bones and silver spoons, will live on in our memories, as will Vivian Cox and Mary B. Seel. I had the privilege of meeting and watching these fine folks perform at Bones Fests. While in her eighties, Vivian was playing for tourists in Indiana with a band at the Boggstown Inn. Mary traveled the world to provide health care and shared her bones playing wherever she went.

Dedication and expertise are rampant in the Rhythm Bones Society. Steve Brown has won the bones competition in Ireland. Steve Wixon is an outstanding bones player and has also contributed by researching the history as well as publishing newsletters and producing videos of the shows. Scott Miller makes and sells bones and related products and is a champion bones player.

There are so many wonderful, unique players that I cannot list them all. At Bones Fests each year they share their talents and provide a very professional show for the public. Among the many things I have learned is that bones (or spoons) players are not always welcome in a session. You must be tactful and respectful, as illustrated by this poetry, which is part of a song titled The Spoons Murder by Con O'Drisceoil.

"Without waiting to ask our permission

He took out a large pair of soup-spoons.

Our teeth in short time we were gritting

As he shook and he rattled his toys,

And the company's eardrums were splitting

With his ugly mechanical noise."

*Mary Lee Sweet*

# A Rhythm Bones Story From Dennis Zech

I guess we share a mutual interest in playing the "bones". Here's some history:

My dad, Clarence Zech, showed me how to play when I was about 10. That's about the same age he was when he decided to learn (about 1922). His dad was a carpenter and they built a lot of barns in the area and then they would have barn dances to celebrate and that's when he saw Alfred Wagoner playing the bones to a Polka beat. He said he got such a kick out of the sound he went to the butcher shop the next day and asked for some cow rib bones and practiced and practiced and that's how he got his start. We still have those thick old bones around, but he likes his ebony bones as they are much easier on the hands. He says that after he learned how to play with both hands at same time the audiences got really excited about his playing.

He became quite well known in our area of Wisconsin as the "BonesMan" and would occasionally put on "one-man shows" back then with a little record player and loud two-fisted clacking at conventions and meetings that wanted some entertainment.

After he retired from 25 years at the Badger Army Ammunition Plant in 1975 and Mom died a few years later, he says and I know, that "Bones Playing" saved his life, as the music pulled him from a dark hole of depression when Marsha, the accordion player of the Senior Seranaders Band, asked him to join them. They toured all over Wisconsin and I think they must have played at just about every Nursing Home - and when Clarence wasn't there they would always ask "Where's the BonesMan?" He gets such a kick out of that. He's 90 years old now, still lives at home, and is slowing down just a little.

Well now, about me - the beat goes on: When I was a kid and I had to do something for a required Talent Show in our Fifth Grade at Baraboo

East School I played Camptown Races on my harmonica with the left hand and rattled those old cow rib bones with my right. This shy guy (still am) was so nervous it was hard to stop rattling. Anyway, I guess, as they say, I awed the audience that glorious day and they dragged me all over the school to show off.

Of course, later in my youth, I left the bones behind for drumsticks. But about a year ago now, I rediscovered the joy of making old-time music and I knew I wanted to carry on playing the bones so I picked them up again and started practicing. I haven't gone public again yet but now whenever I feel down or tired I'll just put on a CD to play along with and pretty soon my wife says I'm getting "all hepped-up". Seems like the bones can really punch up the rhythm for some Polka, Bluegrass, and Celtic music (we love the Natalie MacMaster Cape Breton Music).

I like the nice "tap-pet-ty" sound I'm getting from a Shooting Star rosewood paired with slightly smaller ebony wedge. Dad says it's not loud enough but I want to try to learn play nice with the rest of an acoustic group and not take-over. But I think I will have to try and make my own bones because I want them to fit my hands better.

Also my wife has taken up the fiddle (she played "violin" in her youth) and we really hope to get to one of your Bones Fests someday.

Thanks for your interest, See Ya,  
*Dennis Zech*

## Website of the Quarter

**<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL82F9FC5A01D448F8>**. Scott Miller has a collection of rhythm bones instructional videos that is different than those on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. Skeff Flynn says "check them out."

*(Continued from page 1)*

as he was skilled at tossing one of the bones in the air, catching it, and continuing on with the song.<sup>1</sup> This interest in showmanship would eventually lead to him making the acquaintance of Dan Emmett.

In 1843, Brower, along with Dan Emmett, Billy Whitlock, and Dick Pelham, formed what was known as the Virginia Minstrels. Their first performance was at Chatham's Theater in New York. The group decided on presenting to the listeners a performance of true southern negro music. A combination of dramatics, excitement and traditional banjo music presented the first minstrel show. Soon after, this performance was repeated at the Bowery Amphitheatre. Afterwards, the America minstrel movement had begun.

While other minstrel groups started to appear throughout the 1840s-50s, the formula for minstrel music had already been set. While the banjo and fiddle provided the melody, the bones and tambourine provided the rhythm. Whereas in traditional Irish or English music, the bones are played in one hand, Brower had popularized the idea of using two hands to promote intricate rhythms. Rather than just provided a steady rhythm, the American minstrel bones player kept the basic rhythm while adding in a certain flair. Not only were the bones for playing, they became an integral part of the showmanship. In addition, it became a standard part of the overall show that the two "end men", the bones player and tambo player, were the cut ups, while the banjo player, or interlocutor, kept the show moving along. The antics of the bones player were a large part of what made the minstrel show so popular for the American public to watch. Between his witticisms, antics and continual motions, the audience was both entertained and spellbound. This was evident in a manual written by Brower, in 1863, entitled "Frank Brower's Black Diamond Songster and Ebony Jester: New and Original Songs, Pathetic Ballads, Stump Speeches, Specimens of Ethiopian Oratory and Witticisms". Overall, this formula for minstrel shows would

remain in place during the civil war and into the turn of the century.

The creation of the minstrel show would mean that this type of performance and playing would be finely honed and at its peak during the 1860s. With the advent of the civil war, in 1861, the American public had come to love minstrel music. A combination of catchy tunes and exciting performances portrayed a romanticized version of southern life. Naturally, this popular form of music would accompany both armies as they marched off to war. The American civil war is typical of most wars, in that the bulk of both armies were composed of young men. These same young men also had interests in the latest or more popular forms of music of the time. For this reason, minstrel music would become a favorite of soldiers from both the north and the south.

A typical soldier during the civil war would be issued a wide variety of items that they were expected to carry on a daily basis. This included ones rifle, equipment and rations. Extra items were very quickly discarded as extra weight. However, musical instruments still managed to find their way into a soldier's knapsack or pockets. Out of all of the popular instruments, the bones were the easiest to make and to carry. The two traditional materials, bone and wood were both easily accessible to a typical soldier. Constantly having to procure wood for fires, a typical soldier would have easy access to a wide variety of hard woods. In turn, the handy pocket knife could easily produce a pair of hickory or maple bones in no time at all. Today, there are quite a few hand-carved artifacts produced by soldiers that show the remarkable skills that they had. Bones are found, documented to the war, in a wide variety of woods and styles. However, the 12" bones used by Frank Brower are seldom found, and a more reasonable 6-8" are more common. In addition to wood, the traditional style made from animal bones was equally common. Either through foraging, or issued meats, soldiers had easy access to a variety of bones. Beef, pig, goat, or even horse bones could all be obtained. In Remi-

niscences of A Banjo Player, written in 1893, Mr. A. Baur writes about his experiences in 1864. He said, "In addition to the banjo and accordion, a set of beef bones were obtained and a sheet iron mess pan answered for a tambourine".<sup>2</sup> With these simple items, a soldier could replicate the popular tunes of the time around the camp fire. This entertainment also helped the soldiers cope with both the monotony and horrors of war.

Evidence of bones playing around camp is evident through different first-hand accounts written during or after the war. This is evident in an account written by the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Colored Cavalry, "Many of them had fine voices, and the bones and banjo concerts they gave, attracted many people to the camp". Confederate private John O. Casler of the famed Stonewall Brigade describes the playing of the bones in a winter camp performance in 1864, "Noble T. Johnson, of the 5<sup>th</sup> Virginia, was one of the end men, handled the bones, and was one of the most comical characters I ever saw. He could keep the house in a roar of applause all the time."<sup>3</sup>

Not only did soldiers in the ranks enjoy the banjo and the bones, but the officers also expressed their pleasure at the sound of these instruments. Confederate general J.E.B. Stuart was so fond of music in camp that he purposefully surrounded himself with a variety of different talents. Minstrel player and banjoist Sam Sweeney, the younger brother of famous minstrel singer Joe Sweeney, served as his personal musician. He was joined by Stuart's servant Bob who accompanied him on the bones. Mulatto Bob was known for his bones playing during his performances. In addition, Samuel Moorman Gregory was Sweeney's infantry contemporary in the Army of Northern Virginia. "Flannery and Mayhew" played a banjo and bones duet in a Confederate soldier's show of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Alabama Volunteers in Norfolk, VA., in Sept. 1861, as recalled in the New York Clipper, Nov. 21, 1874.<sup>4</sup>

Through the influence of minstrel style music, the bones were introduced to the American public via popular music. However, they still

kept their place in traditional Irish music during the Civil War. During the war, both sides experienced a large number of Irish-Americans joining the ranks. The union army had over 150,000 Irish serving to fight for the cause. Numbers for Irish serving in the confederate army are somewhat sketchy, yet their representation was quite evident.<sup>5</sup> With this large number of Irish serving in the ranks, they not only brought their eagerness to serve, but they also brought with them customs and culture. Traditional Irish songs and music were also a part of our culture that showed through during the civil war. Popular tunes such as "Minstrel Boy" were popular amongst the troops whether they were Irish or not. With this influence on popular music, it is only natural that instruments in camp were played for a variety of different types of music. Thus, not only would the bones be played for banjo tunes, but just as much for traditional Irish songs.

Even though the bones have a long history, it can be said that the birth and influence of minstrel style music helped expose the American public to the instrument. This was especially evident during the American Civil War, when a large portion of the male population was involved. This infusion of various cultures, whether they be Irish or southern, came together to display different styles of popular music. Due to its simplicity, and at the same time its uniqueness, the bones had proven to be a valuable part of the fusion of styles. Simple, yet effective, the rattling of the bones kept a beat for any tune while displaying their uniqueness as an instrument. *Rick Musselman*

#### Footnotes:

1. Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Families Claim to the Confederate Anthem by Howard and Judith Sacks, 1993.
2. Reminiscences of a Banjo Player by A. Baur, 1893.
3. Music of the Civil War Era by Steven Cornelius, 2004.
4. New York Clipper, Nov. 21, 1874.
5. The Civil War Society's "Encyclopedia of the Civil War", [www.civilwarhome.com](http://www.civilwarhome.com)

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Claude Bonang makes a variety of things utilizing various marine organisms and driftwood which he refers to as Marine Motif Art. His latest creation is of creature which he refers to as Venus-mytilus (the scientific genera of the quahog and blue mussel) playing the bones. He fashioned the bones from an old piece of wooden lobster trap lathe.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 14, No. 2 2012

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## Executive Director's Column

Well the Brown Family are actively planning our first trip to Florida. Rattling the bones with Mickey Mouse! Our bone playing community has an amazing opportunity to come to Florida to experience all that the Orlando area has to offer, and to show Florida what bone playing is all about. Please take advantage of our first Bones Fest in Florida, bring your family, bring your friends, and above all bring the bones!

With the tremendously exciting prospect of our first bones fest in a major family resort, time now to think about next years fest. As you may know, the Board regularly reviews proposals for bones fests at our yearly board meeting at the fest, and though we are not always able to make a decision at the Fest, it's always good to start planning as early as possible so that members

have time to make plans. Several idea's for future fests have been mentioned, the elusive fest in Ireland, expanding to new frontiers in Arizona, and returning to old, stomping grounds in New England are all possibilities, but as your Executive Director, I want to put the question to the membership, what do you want for a Bones Fest?

Bones Fests, as I'm sure you are aware, sprouted from the humble confines of Everett Cowett's back yard, and have travelled to major cities around the country, including St.Louis, Milwaukee, and San Antonio. We have now been to almost every major section of the country, from the West (Texas) to the East (Massachusetts) the South (Florida) to the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Bill Vits

Born in the Chicago area in 1957 (which Bill Vits now realizes coincided with the birth of rocknroll and the plastic drumhead), his Dad was transferred to Nashville, TN as a salesman for Mirro Aluminum Company. His earliest memories recall being sent home from religious preschool for calling another child a liar. The next day he returned and successfully called the child a prevaricator.

At 6, Bill started piano lessons with a very hip lady, June Wolfe, who could read a book while playing background jazz in the strip clubs of Printers Alley. One day he heard her son playing drums in his bedroom and he asked if he could have drum lessons. Bill promised he would practice more than watching TV, which was easy when you only had 3 channels. Jim Wolfe was the funkier white kid who played with all the area soul bands. The first record he gave Bill was "Green Onions" by Booker T. and the MG's. He would stack 45's on Bill's record player and play along with Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Beatles, Stones and Bill's favorite, James Brown.

Jim got Bill involved with Vanderbilt's Blair Academy of Music where he started lessons with Farrell Morris, who was a Nashville studio and orchestral percussionist. This lead to Bill becoming the youngest member (11 years old) of the

Nashville youth symphony playing along side high school players.

Once again, Bill's Dad was transferred and they moved to Indianapolis. His mom found the Paul-Mueller Percussion studio and Bill became a student of Erwin Mueller. The drum set took a back set for a while as Bill worked on his marimba and timpani playing. Jazz band and marching band led to him becoming drum major. His summers were filled with music

*(Continued on page 7)*



Bill Vits at Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY

## Editorial

Bill Vits has magical wrists. Of course he should as a professional percussionist, and others have them too. I first thought that when I saw him play quadruplets, and then tried to play them his way and could not. This nice story about our Assistant Director starts on Page 1.

Skeff Flynn has some thoughts about what to do after you learn the basics and have reached a plateau in your playing.

Mike Passerotti's YouTube Page on our website is something I look at when I need a break. He, with the help of our members, has collected all of the known rhythm bones videos (at least that is his goal.) Members were asked which of these are their personal favorites and why and these choices are presented in this issue.

Bones Fest XVI in Orlando is just around the corner so to speak, and host, Mary Lee Sweet, gives us a last minute update. We have many first timers this year.

## Letters to the Editor

Hello. I will be playing bones with Bruce Carver in Austin, Texas at a clinic workshop for the Percussive Arts Society International Convention on November 1-3 this year. The clinic is entitled 'Bones and Bohdran Beyond Tradition.' *Brad Dutz*

Hope you all have a great time in Orlando - wish we could be there but we have just a month to play away from home the rest of the year and we're going to Washington State. Don't give up on me just yet .... I think that I've found the perfect music for my bones playing and have adopted a new technique for bones placement in my hands that might just raise me a step or 2 on the bones playing greatness ladder. I'd be more likely to appear in some back woods place than a big city - as a guy from Tellico Plains I have difficulty being somewhere that there are more people in their cars at a 4 way stop intersection than in our whole town! Have fun. *Mike Hannan*

Just got back from a four day Ac-

cordion festival in Moncton N.B. Our band "Le Vent Des Cantons" (The Township Breeze) played a total of 6 different stages in Moncton for this event.

The Bones were prevalent in each show and people just loved to see them played. Four of the events were widely covered by the C.B.C. T.V. --- Global T.V.--- C.T.V., as well. Tough to do so many shows in such a short period of time. One show at the Lions' Club lasted almost four hours backing up some 35 Accordion, Guitar, Mouth Organ and many other players.

Taught bones playing to six new would be interested players who bought bones that I make. Told them all they would be invited to play on stage with me next year as motivation to get them really interested..

Unfortunately, I will not be able to go to Orlando this August (I would have loved to go) as the band is booked for three different gigs around Quebec, then Sept 8th we will be in Woonsocket R.I. for two more concerts there. This really fills our schedule up for a bit.

If anyone is interested in getting a copy of our latest CD, just look at our Web page [www.leventdescantons.com](http://www.leventdescantons.com) and we would be pleased to sent one along to ya. Keeping the beat---*Bob Goulet* "The Quebec Boner"

Hope you like my video--- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jijXsW6gt0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jijXsW6gt0), Rap! Rap! On Your Minstrel Bones' by Ed Meeker---From old wax cylinder recording.

How have you been? Sorry I haven't been involved with the Bones Society for a while, but I had a career change and haven't had time for much of anything but that for a few years now. I do still play my bones!

I've collected old record players and records for 45 years, but that is the only bones-specific record of which I'm aware. It's relatively easy to find if you'd like me to find you a copy. Would probably run between \$10-\$25 depending upon the circumstance. Best, *John Meader* [We last saw John at BFIX. Also you can Google the recording name and find two higher quality versions]

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Recording of the Quarter

In a Dave Scott review of the Diamonds in the Rough CD, he says "it has a unique compilation of outstanding harmonica driven blues." The harmonica is played by Harmonica Knan, who was influence by Sonny Terry (who also influenced JC Burris---see Vol 13, No 4 for a story about JC.)

There are 2 tracks (5 and 9) on this CD featuring Harmonica Khan and me, and whilst the bones playing is raw and hence not technically brilliant, the overall effect is great from a blues perspective. *Dennis Rigg*

[To listen to these tracks, copy this link into your internet browser--- [www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/6875651/a/Diamonds+in+the+Rough.htm](http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/6875651/a/Diamonds+in+the+Rough.htm).]

(Continued from page 1)

North (Wisconsin), and I personally have the bones to thank for getting me to parts of the country which I know I would never have been to, but I'm concerned about leaving some of our members on the side lines, wishing, but unable to attend a Fest. It's true we can't be every where, but I am wondering what format would allow for greater participation? We would want to see each and every RBS member at each Bones Fest, the only time that could claim to have happened would be at Bones Fest III, when the organization was founded, and it's probably not possible, but having seen Fests which boast 50+ bones players in attendance, it may be possible to bring more of us together on a regular basis.

One possibility is to look at our format. Bones Fest has traditionally been proposed and sponsored by a single member, independent of the Board, who presents a plan, reviewed and approved by the Board, and carried out by the member and their spouse, or in some cases, co-sponsored by another member. While this has been successful for the most part, it places a lot of responsibility on the sponsors, and creates inconsistency in location. The question of selecting one or two more or less permanent sites has been raised. This might require the Board to become more involved in the planning, and utilization of a planning committee, rather than the reliance on one or two individuals. The major question for me is, what is going to get more people at the fests, what is going to bring out as many of our members as possible? I have benefited so much from the current format that I almost feel biased from making a decision on it, but ultimately we (the Board) have to focus on what's best for the membership, and I believe we are more than willing to do this but we need to hear from the membership, what do you want? A Bones Fest that moves around the country, discovering new locations as invited by a member, or one that swings between two locations, more or less permanent, presented by a committee overseen by the Board? I want to hear your thoughts on this topic so that we can discuss it at our

upcoming Board meeting in August. Please feel free to contact me: [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com), 36 Royalston Road North Winchendon, Ma. 01475, 978-297-1104

Bones Fests are the one opportunity to bring our bone playing family together, lets bring as much of the family together as we can! *Steve Brown*

## Update on Bones Fest XVI in Orlando

Orlando - Rhythm Bones Fest XVI. Please save the date - August 9-11, 2012 and plan to attend the Rhythm Bones Fest XVI in Orlando!

Registration forms are available on the Rhythm Bones website: <http://www.rhythmbones.com/documents/BFXVIRegistrationForm.pdf>

Our July 10th deadline for booking online is past, so please call for reservations to get our special rate while rooms are still available. 1-800-627-8258. You must tell them your reservation is for the Rhythm Bones Fest XVI to get the special GUESTROOM RATES of Single/Double: \$89.00 Add'l Person: \$20.00.

Thursday night, the 9th, will begin the Fest with an excursion for dinner or drinks (you decide) at the Raglan Road Irish Pub in Downtown Orlando. <http://www.raglanroad.com/> Raglan Road Irish Pub & Restaurant, Orlando's only authentic Irish pub, built entirely in Ireland, shipped Lock, Stock and Beer Barrel to Downtown Disney! They've agreed to let us rattle the bones a bit in between the Irish dancers and the songs of the house band Creel.

All Bones Fest XVI events and sessions will be in the air conditioned comfort of a Rosen Plaza Hotel conference room or an air conditioned restaurant/pub. Pointe Orlando is across the street from the hotel - 5 minutes walking time. <http://pointeorlando.com/dining/> There you will find great places to do a Pub Crawl. Arrangements are being made to perform on some of these stages.

Adobe Gila's <http://orlando.adobegilas.com/> B.B. King's Blues Club <http://www.bbkingclubs.com/index.php?>

page=orlhome. The Pub <http://www.experiencethepub.com/orlando>

A preliminary schedule is listed here <http://www.rhythmbones.com/nextFest.html>

Visit our Rhythm Bones Society homepage to learn more about playing rhythm bones. <http://www.rhythmbones.com>.

Don't miss the opportunity to join the Rhythm Bones Society in an unforgettable Fest in the City Beautiful. See You Soon. *Mary Lee Sweet*

## Here Comes the Judge

A friend of mine in Abbeyfeale once said to me, and rightly so, we can't have a competition with out the competitors, but clearly, we can't have a competition with out the judge.

Judges or adjudicators are used widely in competitions in Ireland on the local, regional and national level to judge the Fleadh Ceol (feast of music) competitions through out Ireland. Established in the 50's they have grown into the major competitions in Ireland culminating in the All Ireland Championships in a variety of categories, and including almost all instruments played in traditional Irish music, but not the bones. Rules for the competitions are complex, and rigid. The New York Ceili Band was disqualified in the 60's for borrowing a drummer. I saw a Ceili band penalized for playing two reels in a row at the Mid Atlantic Fleadh here in the states.

The All Ireland Bone Playing Competition which was established out side of the Fleadh system has been held since the mid nineties. Judges are hired by the Fleadh committee, and are expected to utilize their own system of rules. The committee has gone out of it's way to hire judges that are well known, and experienced bone players, not an easy feat when you consider how rare the instrument is in the music, and rarer still to be played well. Mel Mercier and Tommy Hayes judged the contest on opposite years, each being asked to judge on alternating years. Mel is of course well known to RBS, having learned the

(Continued on page 5)

# I Know How to Play Triplets . . . Now What?

I'm sure that many of the folks reading this are often asked to demonstrate how to play the bones. For me it has reached the point that I have a fairly standard presentation down. Typically I start by demonstrating my grip, explaining the mechanics and then seeing if the inquisitive individual in front of me can get a single click. If they can we move on to the triplet. It's not often that someone makes it past this point in my presentation. However when they do I almost always get the same question, "now what?"

While this question is almost universally heard from beginning players it is also echoed by experienced players looking to branch out from the musical styles they are most familiar with. So without getting into too much detail on specific rhythms or patterns I'd like to share a few thoughts on what to do once you can play triplets.

The first thing I recommend is to commit the basic mechanics to muscle memory. In order to play in a group setting you need to be able to execute your techniques. This may seem fairly obvious but what may be less obvious is that while you are committing techniques to muscle memory you are also (or should be) committing them to aural memory. Knowing how to play a triplet isn't always enough in a musical setting. You also need to know what it sounds like before you play it. That way you'll have a fair sense of whether or not it's appropriate. Start with single clicks and triplets and expand what you commit to memory as your bones repertoire expands. Can you recall the sound of one triplet? Two? Do you have a specific pattern of single clicks you like to play? As you commit patterns to memory they become a part of your bones vocabulary. That means you'll be able to speak up when the time comes.

A few months after I first picked up the bones I was fortunate enough to get to see the Carolina Chocolate Drops in concert. After the show I asked Dom Flemmons if he had any advice for a beginning bones player.

He asked if I had the single and the triplet and when I said yes he told me to watch dancers. There are definitely great bones players out there who play with a very controlled range of motion and whose playing bears little resemblance to dancing. Like all of the thoughts I'm sharing today this may not be for everyone, so take what works and feel free to disregard the rest. For me this advice was perfect.

There are two important components that made this tip so useful. Bones playing requires movement and if you're moving like a dancer you're probably getting a sense of the underlying pulse of the music you're playing to. The act of dancing and allowing the bones to flow as an extension of your movement is an excellent strategy for developing a playing style. The other element that thinking like a dancer brings is showmanship. When you watch players like Dom Flemmons and Spike Bones you'll notice that their movements are almost as important as what they're playing. Their flamboyant gestures almost can't be separated from their musical styles and they add a whole new dimension to their performances.

Regardless of whether you move like Fred Astaire or have two left feet there are definitely some other guiding principles that can help you in developing your ability to play with other musicians. For me the most important of these is to add without subtracting. Every time I pull out the bones in a group I want to make sure that they add an element that is appreciated. My motivation is simple; I want to be able to play with that group again. If I constantly play really loud rolling triplets over everything regardless of the context I probably won't be welcome the next time I see them.

So when you play with people try to add something to the music without taking anything away. That may sound a little clichéd but it's generally a good approach. How do we achieve this? I think there are a few good, simple strategies to employ. But before we pick a strategy, I think it's good to take note of something that will be pretty important to how you fit into the ensemble. Are you the only (or at least primary) percussionist?

Being the only or primary percussionist in a group allows a certain amount of freedom but it also comes with a certain amount of responsibility. In situations where I am the primary percussionist I actually tend to play less busy or flashy lines. Instead I tend to accent the strong beats. This works in any style. Find the strong beats of the tune accent those beats. Add flash only occasionally.

Think of it this way, drum fills can be really cool but most of the time a really good drummer is just accenting the strong beats of the piece. If the drummer played fills over the whole song the listener (not to mention the rest of the band) is in danger of losing the pulse. So if you're the primary percussionist I recommend thinking like a good drummer and accenting the strong beats.

This approach can work in ensemble settings where you're not the primary percussionist as well. However, if there is another percussionist already accenting the strong beats I generally like to look for space and add flair. If a drummer is always hitting the snare drum on beats two and four I don't necessarily need to hit those beats. Instead I tend to look for spaces in the music that aren't already filled up by a lot of other instruments and I try to play something in that space to further the groove. Aural memory is really helpful here. If you have a repertoire of patterns in your aural and muscle memory it will be easy to arrange them in the spaces you find.

There is another approach that's usually appropriate for either situation. Pick out a thematic line and try to mimic it. This could be the melody or it could be a figure played by one of the accompanying instruments. My only word of caution with this approach is to be sure you don't overwhelm the line you're mimicking.

The last thing I want to consider when thinking about what to play with other musicians is the setting. Is the session public or private? Are you or some of the other musicians being paid to play? If you're in public and (or) you're playing with folks who are getting paid to be there I would tend to advise playing more subtly than if you're at a house jam with a group of

friends. Of course if you're offered a solo then by all means play your heart out, but if you're not, remember this mantra: add without subtracting. On the other hand if you are at a house party with friends remember to experiment. Go for that new pattern you've been practicing that you're not totally sure is going to work. Experimentation is generally necessary for growth. But again, in public settings with paid musicians you're generally going to want to keep that experimentation within reasonable levels.

Playing with other musicians is always a learning experience and can be extremely rewarding in many ways. Now that you can play triplets try committing the basic mechanics and a few of your favorite patterns to aural and muscle memory. Dance if you have the inclination. Ask yourself about the setting and whether you are the primary percussionist. Always do your best to add something to the music without taking anything away and above all, have fun! *Skeffington Flynn*

## Michael Satterwhite's Arizona Workshops

RBS member Michael Satterwhite taught two "Musical Bones" workshops again at the Arizona Highland Celtic Festival (<http://nachs.info/festival.shtml>) on July 21-21, 2012 in Flagstaff, Arizona.

The festival is produced by the Northern Arizona Celtic Heritage Society (NACHS). Michael has taught this workshop on prior years and loves introducing curious folks to the fun of playing bones. He uses 'penny bones' {see *Dutch Penny Bones* article in online newsletter, Vol. 7, No. 4} so everyone can begin to learn the basic mechanics of playing, and they are affordable enough for the festival to send everyone home with instruments. The workshops are full of giggling and banter as players realize they too can deliver a basic rhythm and bones can be flying every which way.

Michael's final request of his new bones players is to observe them playing their new bones as they take in the various musical offerings of the weekend. Wooden bones from various sup-

pliers are offered close to cost. Any profits go into the NACHS scholarship fund - which has dispersed over \$67,000 to deserving students of Celtic culture through the years. Recipients can study, music, culture, language with Celtic orientation. Indeed Michael received a small scholarship to offset travel expenses to attend Bones Fest XV last year based on the anticipation it would strengthen his workshop leadership. Michael was amazed by his fellow players at Bones Fest, learned a huge amount and was able to carry back more knowledge to share with his students.

Michael also taught a bodhran workshop and assisted with a spoons workshop taught by another local, Nicole Bauge. The festival makes the bodhran workshop affordable by dispensing small cardboard pizza boxes and dowel 'tippers' for the students to use during the workshop.

This family-friendly festival is a lively offering of music, children's activities, bagpiping competition, traditional athletic games, visiting clans, vendors and Celtic-oriented food vendors. But near and dear to NACHS is the festival's strong educational component which is exemplified by the bones, bodhran and spoons workshops. They are joined by whisky-tasting, language, storytelling, genealogy, Celtic attire, Celtic plants, the history of salt and much more.

*(Judge—Continued from page 3)*

bones from his father Peadar Mercier, former member of the Chieftains. Tommy Hayes is a world renown percussionist, former All Ireland Champion on the Irish drum, and well known bone and spoons player. Other judges who have taken over the duties are Seamus O'Kane, Bodhran maker, Gino Lupari, Bodhran and bones player with Four Men and a Dog, Ronnie McShane, bone player with the Chieftains, and Sean O'Riada's group Ceoltori Culannan, and Junior Davey, 5 time All Ireland Bodhran Champion, and bone player.

I think the judges really set the Abbeyfeale contest a head of the other bone playing contests held in the World. The Australia contest is totally

unknown to me, so I would defer on that contest, but the Bones and Spoons competition at the Missouri Valley Old Time Music Festival and Contests use of judges is better known. Holding more than a hundred contests over the course of the week, Judges are asked to judge multiple contests, and expertise on an instrument is not a requirement, and the judges remain anonymous both during and after the contest. Judges in Abbeyfeale by and large are well known players with performance, and recording track records who value the bones, and it's place (albeit a small place) in Irish music. The most recent Judge, Junior Davey, has a long history of adjudicating competitions, and competing himself.

In 2005 I was asked to judge the Junior Bone Playing Competition in Abbeyfeale. I had given some thought to it, but had expected to receive some guidelines regarding the judging process. As I sat behind the adjudicators table, one of the Festival Committee members placed a booklet in front of me, "ah here are the rules," I thought. Opening the booklet I soon found it to be blank! "Excuse me" I said, "where are the rules?" "You're the adjudicator, you should know the rules," they replied. It was then I realized that in this competition, the judge sets their own standards and methods. I devised a 5 category point system quickly, and I was happy when several of the bone players present told me the judging was, "Spot on".

Competitions can help to focus attention, and further interest, and I believe that to be true with bone playing. The unfortunate thing is not every can win, or even place for that matter. I think it's important for competitions to continue, and would like to see renewed interest in the bones and spoons competition in Iowa. But make no mistake about it, the judges opinion is what rules on that day, and we know what they say about opinions, every one has one. *Steve Brown*

[Steve Brown has participated in 8 separate competitions playing bones, coming in first 3 times, second once, third 3 times, and 5th once.]



## Members Favorite YouTube Videos

Here's a bit of fun. Mike Passerotti edits the Rhythm Bones YouTube Video Summary Page on our website. On that page he says, "Rhythm Bones is a musical instrument, and yet playing bones is a performing art. Take a walk through videos of many bones artists and discover new styles, new movements, new/old costumes, and new sounds. I spent some 15 years thinking that bones was only a blues and jazz type instrument. Thanks to the internet and RBS, the truth is now known that rattling spans every continent, every tongue, every music style. See what others are playing, and post your own video. When you post your video, make sure you tell us about it so we can add it to the growing list. (Please send additions or corrections to [mikepasserotti@hotmail.com](mailto:mikepasserotti@hotmail.com))"

Recently Mike said, "The YouTube video collection is growing, and rhythm bones playing is showing up in so many places. I am hearing from players who have watched the videos and learned a lick or two. With rhythm bones playing, sometime you just have to see it before it clicks. I've been watching for new videos and new players.

Some players just don't know how to publish YouTube videos. We all want to hear and see you perform dem bones. Go to [youtube.com](http://youtube.com), follow the instructions for creating an account. Then follow the upload link to add your video. Don't forget to tell the rest of us about it. Email your video link to me and I'll include it with the others.

"The Bones Fest is recorded by so many people who attend, and I am hoping that those recordings will show up on YouTube. Please don't delay and upload as soon as you can.

"My favorite, for the moment, is Dom Flemon's video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMokBr9cTxM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMokBr9cTxM)"

Also recently members were asked what their favorite rhythm bones YouTube video is and why. The result—a lot of good video to check out.

The first reply was from Ana

Mitchell, and she likes [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gNt9Jocpqk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gNt9Jocpqk)—"Junior Davey & John Joe Kelly, Bones & Bodhran duet, Coleman Bodhran School, 2011." She likes the rhythm bones and bodhran duet, and Junior Davey's playing looks effortless and he only used one hand!

Debbie Duffy likes [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp4sVvDfdUQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp4sVvDfdUQ)—"Down Yonder with Bones." She doesn't say why, but the video features Sky Bartlett and husband Ernie Duffy

Michael Satterwhite likes [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWvpfc28i88](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWvpfc28i88)—"Carolina Chocolate Drops: The Briggs Medley (FolkAlley.com.)" "The Carolina Chocolate Drops are a wonderful band that has some roots in Arizona. Dom Flemons (on the left) was born in Phoenix and went to Northern Arizona University here in Flagstaff. He was a steady part of our Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music and regular participant at our annual Flagstaff Folk Festival. He's been into old time music from day one I think. I'm not sure if he was playing bones before I sat in with he and Riannon maybe 4 years ago at the Folk Festival in one of many jams on the grounds. I was trying my best to rattle bones then...and still am but at least playing two-handed now. As you can see from this video Dom has become a solid bones player, as is his new band mate. Enjoy!

Gerry Hines favorite rhythm bones video is [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_R9FvUQtG](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_R9FvUQtG) - "Jack Frost Plays the Bones" because it reminds me so much of my grandfather playing and how he just loved to entertain.

Steve Wixson likes [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1hoRz-Aa2o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1hoRz-Aa2o) - "The Wish" Music Video (HD.) Go to the 'Ninja Bones' section at about 3:30 into the video. It's a guy thing!

Sharon Mescher's pick for favorite video is [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jjqXsW6gt0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jjqXsW6gt0), The Russ Myers Memorial Video. Here are the reasons why:

Within that short video, one can experience the "larger-than-life" per-

son that was Russ. He was a "walking encyclopedia," as his wife, Wilma often opined. Ask him anything about history. He certainly knew the history of the bones.

Russ had his own unique way of playing the bones. When Russ would play at the bones fests, I found myself just staring at his hands; trying to figure out how "he did that". In the video he explains how he changes the pitch without moving the bones. Russ was a master bones player.

I'm thankful that the Rhythm Bones Society has this memorial video of Russ. *Sharon Mescher* [This video is on our website in widescreen format.]

Steve Litsios likes [http://](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)  
—Rick Franklin & Mike Baytop / Eastern Market #1, 22 July 07.

Although not a bone tutorial this video remains one of my favorites. The lazy late morning weekend atmosphere goes so well with a great song - Stop and Listen Blues - played by Rick Franklin and Mike Baytop. I stumbled on this video a few years ago just after learning the basics of bone playing and was wondering how to apply those rhythms when playing with someone. Mike Baytop's bone playing is so cool, beautiful and modest/beautifully modest it blew me away; and it still does every time I watch it. [We saw Mike Baytop at BFXIII. A few years ago he suffered a stroke, and has made a recovery.]

## Website Updates

Not a lot to report other than promotional images and test to advertize Bones Fest XVI.

By the you receive this newsletter, the website will have one more BFXVI update and a photograph and video of Assistant Director, Bill Vits.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVI.** August 9-11, 2012, Orlando, FL.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

(Continued from page 1)

campus at Ball State University.

Dr. Mueller taught at Ball State and suggested Bill start in the summer and do an undergraduate degree in three years. This led to him doing the same at the University of Michigan for his Masters Degree with Charles Owen of the Philadelphia Orchestra. This is when Bill first met Percy Danforth (1978) as he played with their ragtime ensemble and gave all the players a lesson on the rhythm bones. Bill had never seen or heard of rhythm bones, but was very interested and bought two pair! By age 22, Bill had degrees and had performed at Carnegie Hall and the Montreux Jazz Festival with University of Michigan ensembles.

After winning (and declining) a position with the US Coast Guard Band, Bill took several orchestral auditions and won the job with the Grand Rapids Symphony which at the time paid \$26/service. His bones playing was slowly improving, but it still took a couple years before he learned to relax and get both hands under control. He settled into Grand Rapids and began teaching and playing jazz to supplement his income.

Opportunities to perform on the rhythm bones with orchestra have included using them in *Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony* as "holzklappers" (instead of the often used slapstick). In ragtime numbers, like *Xylophonia*, Bill will often play the breaks on rhythm bones. He has even performed Morton Gould's *Tap Dance Concerto* using rhythm bones instead of tap shoes.

Bill's technique is obviously rooted in drumming techniques and rudiments. He can do most things with rhythm bones that he can do with sticks. He says the opposite is NOT true as nobody can play with one drumstick the fast triplets that rhythm bones can accomplish. He loves to play rhythm bones at the drum kit, sometimes with a brush in one hand.

After 34 years of playing the rhythm bones he says, "I'm still amazed how few people know about them." The first thing most people say is "oh, they're like the spoons". To this he replies, "no, with the spoons you have to self flagellate!"

His organization is spreading the

word and high profile players can help educate the public. He says, "Learning the bones is not easy and many people don't have the patience or coordination to crack the code."

"As a player I often feel I've barely scratched the surface of the rhythm bones potential. I've never practiced the rhythm bones as seriously as classical music as I enjoy improvising and being in the moment. I think we will see young players in the future that really push the envelope of what is possible. Hopefully, this will keep the bones alive for generations to come."

Being a professional musician, Bill has amazed everyone at annual Bones Fests. There are many ways to play quadruplets, but Bill has a way that is fast and hypnotizing, and to date no one has duplicated it.

While not a Charter Member, Bill has been a member of the Rhythm Bones Society since its beginning, and currently serves as Assistant Director.

Bill is the Principal Percussionist for the Grand Rapids Symphony. He has led a musical outreach program for Michigan youth called "Percussion Discussion" for the past 15 years. In addition he performs in the rock band "The Concussions."

## Book Review Traditional Notes—A Celebration of Irish Music and Musicians

In my opinion, books on Irish Traditional Music can fall into two categories; books written by the devoted, the scholars, the believers which are excellent connections to the tradition, and good introductions to the music, and the culture of the music.

They include the *Blooming Meadows* with text by Fintan Vallely, and Charlie Piggott and Photo's by Nutan, *Last Nights Fun* by Ciaran Carson, and the recently released *Companion to Traditional Irish Music*, 2nd edition edited by Fintan Vallely.

The second group would be written by hangers on, people who really don't know the music, and are attempting to

profit from what little they do know. The recently released book, *Traditional Notes* most definitely falls into the first category. I can't think of a better example of a book which lovingly describes musicians, instruments, and instrument builders.

Stephen Power has gone to great length to feature exceptional musicians, and to connect us with the essence of the music.

The book is a show case for his beautiful photography, displaying each instrument by chapter, and featuring some of the best musicians on each instrument, for example Noel Hill in the concertina chapter, and Kevin Crawford in the flute chapter.

In addition, each chapter has text which describes the instrument, and some of the prominent players. Nearly every instrument regularly seen in the music is included from the pipes to the bodhran (Irish drum), each featuring a major player, and most featuring a maker working in their natural environment.

The really exciting news for those of us which are practitioners of rhythm bone playing, is that the bones are also included in the chapter which also features the bodhran. At one point in the music every major player of the Irish drum also played the rhythm bones.

Our dear friend Mel Mercier's father Peadar Mercier blazed the trail with the Chieftains, and Johnny McDonnagh of DeDannan, and Tommy Hayes of Stockton's Wing, carried the tradition on in their performances, and recordings. You'll be interested to note that not only are both Johnny and Tommy represented in this book, but our own Yirdy Machar is also featured quite prominently, and is wearing his RBS cap from Bones Fest IX.

The rhythm bone playing section is short, only three pages, but that might also speak to the rhythm bones place in Irish music. My only complaint is that Sport Murphy is not represented, although my understanding is that the book was not under production until after his death.

But the great depth on the instruments (a separate section for the low

(Continued on page 8)



Johnny Ringo McDonagh

(Continued from page 7)

whistle!), and great musicians tastefully, and caringly represented both in picture and in text, far out ways any minor exclusions.

For those of you looking for an introduction to the music, and the instruments which comprise the music, you could not be better served than to get a copy of this book. For those of

# Bones Fest XVI

Orlando, Florida



August 9-11,  
2012  
Latest Update in  
This Issue



Yirdy Machar

you who have been bitten by the bug of Traditional Irish Music, this book will help feed your addiction and keep you coming back for more.

Authors note: This book is available from major book sellers in the US. I purchased my copy from [www.bookdepository.com](http://www.bookdepository.com). Steve Brown

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 14, No. 3 2012

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Editorial

## Executive Director's Column

I had been avoiding going to Florida for years, but after the spectacular time at Bones Fest XVI, I can't wait to go back. Mary Lee and Frank Sweet did a stellar job hosting the fest, and giving us some top notch places to play. We had numerous first time Bones Fests attendee's, including the inspirational Jim Steakley just two months short of his 100th birthday. And great musical contributions from Just In Time, Barry Brogan, and the inimitable Vgo, one of the most knowledgeable folk musicians I have ever met.

But what might sum up the Bones Fest in general is the ecstatic look on my son Jeremy's face performing at BB King's Blues Club Saturday afternoon. He truly represents the joy we all experience playing the rhythm bones.

Thanks to all who attended, new and old, per-

formers and audience. Thanks to the Meschers, Bernie and Tom, Dave Boyles, Skeff, Hank Tennenbaum, Dennis Reidhisal, the Danforths, Steve Wixson and all you Bones Fest regulars for giving of your selves and making each of our new attendee's feel at home. And most of all to Mary Lee and Frank Sweet for all their hard work to truly make this the "Sweet" Sixteen Bones Fest.

I had the great pleasure of meeting Dom Flemons and his group, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, and seeing them perform. Dom is bringing the rhythm bones to many people who might otherwise not see them. His group is extremely talented, and the bones duet with his band mate Hubbie is not to be missed. I under-

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Highlights from Bones Fest XVI

Our "Sweet Sixteen" Bones Fest XVI was celebrated in Orlando, Florida, at the elegant Rosen Plaza Hotel. Cuisine from gourmet to deli fare was available in the hotel, as well as a game room and a nightclub for the night owl bones players. Across the street was Point Orlando, with a myriad of restaurants and pubs.

Our weekend began on Thursday night, when 31 bones players and guests ventured into Pleasure Island, Downtown Disney, to have dinner and play bones at the Raglan Road Irish Pub. Colin Farrell and Damien McCarthy of the house band Creel gave us

*(Continued on page 3)*



On stage at BB Kings Orlando are Skeff Flynn, Mitch Boss and Dave Boyles with the 'Just in Time' band.

## Editorial

I am again at about 33,000 feet, flying home from another Bones Fest. There is a commonality and a uniqueness to each Fest. Fests have receptions, workshops, individual performances, stage time and that family reunion feel, and Bones Fest XVI had all of these with stage time at Ragland Road Pub in Downtown Disney and BB Kings across the road from the Rosen Plaza Hotel where we stayed and most other events took place. And it had Orlando with all of its park attractions. I, like others, extended my stay and the Harry Potter ride at Universal Studio was outstanding.

On behalf of all attendees, I want to thank host Mary Lee Sweet and husband Frank for a most memorable Fest. And as always, I am refreshed and ready for another productive year for the Rhythm Bones Society.

I met Hank Tenenbaum at Bones Fest VI, and have enjoyed talking with him at various Fests since. His knowledge of rhythm bones and his playing experience (including the White House) make him a valuable resource that I hope to mine in the coming year. In this issue he remembers his first meeting with rhythm bones legend, Percy Danforth.

As I have in recent newsletters, I ask you for articles and ideas for future newsletters. I cannot believe that we have written all there is to write about rhythm bones. I'm running dry, and need your help.

*(Continued from page 1)*  
stand they are traveling around the country, so check their schedule. Dom expressed an interest in attending a Bones Fest as his schedule allows, so who knows, you may see him at the next Fest.

Speaking of the next fest, look for the Bones Fest to return to the North East next year. Several locations in the North East are being considered, and watch this space for an announcement in the next news letter.

Thanks as always to Steve Wixson for all his hard work in putting out the newsletter, and keeping us a professional and well organized organization! *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order at 6:50 PM in Salon 4 of the Rosen Plaza Hotel by Steve Brown.

The minutes of the last membership meeting as printed in the Vol 13, No 3 newsletter were approved. Steve Wixson noted that we have almost \$3,200 in the bank.

There was an election of Board members. The Nominating Committee nominated the current Board to serve another year. The floor was opened for further nominations. The motion was made and seconded that nomination be closed and nominees be elected by acclamation. This was approved. Those elected were Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, Board members, Jonathan Danforth, Skeff Flynn, Mel Mercier and Sharon Mescher.

Steve Brown presented his idea about the next Bones Fest.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:05 PM. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors

The meeting was called to order at 4:50 PM in Salon 4 of the Rosen Plaza Hotel with Steve Brown, Jonathan Danforth, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, and Steve Wixson present.

The minutes of the last meeting as printed in the Vol 13, No 3 newsletter were approved. Steve Wixson presented the Treasurer's report noting that we have almost \$3,200 in the bank. A copy of the report and all supporting documents was given to Executive Director Steve Brown and the report was approved.

The Board sitting as the Nominating Committee moved that the current Board be nominated for another year.

The Board discussed the location for Bones Fest XVII. To date, no one

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

has volunteered to host this event. Steve Brown has two locations in mind, and would try to setup a small committee to share hosting responsibilities. He will pursue this and have a recommendation by early November to give members lots of lead time for travel arrangements.

Old Business. Steve Wixson reported that Doug Rideout was not interested in using the \$400 that the Board authorized last year to scan some of the film he shot of the life of Percy Danforth with the purpose of producing a DVD to get funding to edit the film into a high quality video. Jonathan Danforth will pursue this.

Skeff Flynn has looked at improving our website with new web tools, better navigation, and as a first step will add Google Analytics that will give us an idea of how the website is being used.

The meeting was adjourned at 6 PM. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary



# Hank Tenenbaum Meets Percy Danforth

One day I ran into Mike Holmes, near my place in DC. He started a music magazine called Mugwamp. He said, "Hey Hank, Percy Danforth is playing tonight. You gonna go see him play?" I said, "Sure, where's he playing, "Tryworks." "Never heard of it, where is it?" "Maggie Peirce's Coffee House, New Bedford, Mass." "Sure, why not."

When I left DC, it was 80 degrees, and by the time I got to New Bedford it was COLD and drizzling. There were few street lamps and the light they threw was dismally small. Off in the distance I saw a light brighter than the rest. It was a small restaurant with 8 stools and a few small booths.

In I went. I warmed up with some bean soup and asked if any of them heard of a coffee house around here. Nope, what's it called? Tryworks. Nope. It's in the basement of a church. What church? Dunnoe. Well, there's a church across the street.

I went across the street and saw an older skinny little guy with white wavy hair and glasses too big for his head (large lenses, thin black or brown frames). He was huffing boxes from a car and walking them up the stairs on the side of the church. I asked him if he knew of Tryworks. He said yes, this is it and he was putting on a show here, that night. I asked him if he wanted some help and he thanked me. So, there I was, huffing boxes out of the car, and up the stairs. I had just met Percy Danforth.

Standing outside the door was some old timer dressed in a blue tux with the smell of somebody who had too much to drink. This individual said "I heard there was going to be somebody playing bones tonight. I'd like to see that. I used to play bones."

Percy and I struggle with a table to set up his boxes of bones and boom box. The guy in the blue tux found a table, opens up a chair & sits down. Head on his hands on the table, pretty soon you can hear him snoring.

After about 30 minutes, the owner, Maggie Peirce (pronounce PURSE), introduces Percy. Percy gives a short

spiel, and rattles off a few. Cranks up the boom box. A medley, Celtic, some contemporary followed by baroque and another short spiel. More people wander in. More kids. Back to the crowd for Q&A about favorite music. Celtic & contemporary win and Percy goes into a few kids tunes on the box and asks who would like to learn? More people and kids wander in.

Percy starts working the crowd, announcing he's handing out bones for people to learn on and after they learn how, those & others will be available for sale if people are interested. He goes to one couple with a kid and shows them, then another, another, another, another.

He gets to me. Do you want to learn how to play the bones? By now the place is jammed. There are so many people there you can hardly move. Sure, I say. He puts them in my hands and says "now all you have to do is this" so I try to imitate. I'm purposefully not doing well. He looks at me a little frustrated and I say "maybe if I try with these... I pull out my walnut set, and let go one CRACK, leftie, and another CRACK, rightie. The whole place gets QUIET for about a second. Without missing a beat Percy says "OK, now go over there and see who you can get going." So off he goes, showing people how to play and off I go, showing people how to play.

SUDDENLY, there is a snort and a cough from the guy who had been sleeping it off for the whole event. "I used to play bones a long time ago." So he starts humming/singing *Me & My Shadow*. He reaches into his jacket inside pocket and pulls out THE MOST GORGEOUS SET OF ROSEWOOD BONES I HAVE EVER SEEN (to this day)! So, humming and singing, he plays. Not fast. Not loud. He is playing exquisitely, and EVERYBODY in the room REALIZES it! He stole the finale. His name was Mitchel Jameson. He played in Burlesque. Never heard of him before and never since, and I think of him often.

Some kind people put me up for the night so I wouldn't have to drive two 12 hour drives in one day. Back home I got a call Bob Devlin. "Hey Hank, I got a gig in the White House - want to play and have some free food?" More on that later... *Hank Tenenbaum*

(Continued from page 1)

céad míle fáilte "a hundred thousand welcomes" and invited RBS members to play with the band.

The first to go were Jonathan Danforth and Skeff Flynn. They did a "talking bones face off" and wowed the crowd. Their bones danced in their hands and the call and response conversation of the bones kept us all wondering what would happen next.

Then came the four showmen – Hank Tenenbaum, Mitch Boss, Spike Bones Muhrer, and Black Bart Boyles - who asked the band to play Bill Staines' song "All God's Creatures Got a Place in the choir." Demonstrating four different styles of bones playing, they rocked the pub. They played low, they played higher, they played loud and they were on fire! Off the stage they came, conga-line snaking through the tables. Imagine our surprise when they boldly climbed on top of the Irish dancer stage among the dining tables! Spike returned to the main stage, strutting gracefully while Hank, Mitch and "Black Bart" Dave turned back to back and played their bones facing audience from all directions. The crowd roared, whistled, hooted and applauded! The band grinned in wide-eyed wonder. Everyone loved it! The three made their way back to the stage, and a foursome once again, they ended their tune to a standing ovation from about 160 people in the audience.

We finished the show with our champion All Ireland bones player, Steve Brown. The Band Creel cranked up the music and played a lightning fast set as Steve matched them note for note. It was fast and furious and everyone could clearly see how the champ won his title. Steve and the band raised the roof! The crowd was on its feet stomping, dancing and clapping to the rhythm of the bones. Bones Fest XVI players created an unforgettable night for all at the Ragan Road Irish Pub.

Friday we spent the day in our conference room at the Rosen Plaza. Music was provided by Brogan's Blues Band and Just In Time old time music band. Sharon and Jerry Mescher kicked off the informal workshops by

(Continued on page 6)



Bones Fest XVI Group Photograph. From left are Jim Steakley, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet, Chuck Spano., Carol Taktikian, Ron Whisler, Pat Spano, Spike Bones, Jeremy Danforth, Kathy Whisler, Phil Chan, Jonathan Danforth, Emmet Danforth, Skeff Flynn, Gerry Hines, Dennis Riedesel, Vgo Philip Terry, Hank T



Hank Tenenbaum and Vgo Philip Terry on stage at BB King's



Steve Brown plays whistle for 99 year old new bones player Jim Steakley



Grand Finale at BB Kings. On stage are Jeremy and Steve Brown and the Just In Time' Band. From the left are Phil Chan, Kathy Whisler, Jonathan Danforth, BB King Manager Flynn, Ivan Browning?, Sharon and Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, Hank Tenenbaum, Bob Gross, Larry Benson, Vgo Philip Terry, and Spike Bones. Dave had just be





Steve Brown, Steve Brown, Tom and Bernie Worrell, Jerry and Sharon Mescher, Bob Campbell, Nancy Kelly, Larry Benson, Sarah and John Davis, Brenda Rowland, Melissa Penenbaum and Steve Wixson. Not shown are Dave Boyles, Ivan Browning, Jill May, and Ted Ramsaur. Steaker and Wixson are Photoshopped in.



The Mescher Trio of Sharon and Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell



Bob Campbell plays bagpipe for the traditional Conga Line Finale



Bob Campbell, Mitch Boss, John Davis, Gerry Hines, Skeff Hines led the group in a Conga Line through the restaurant.



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet sing Gospel songs from the 1800s

*(Continued from page 3)*

demonstrating and explaining how to hold the bones and how to make the first movements to get sounds. Sharon then asked everyone to think about and share “what you know” and “how you do it.”

Throughout the day methods were shared by Mitch Boss, Steve Brown, Steve Wixon, Skeff Fynn, Dennis Riedesel, Jonathan Danforth, Jerry Mescher, Sharon Mescher, Dave “Black Bart” Boyles, and Darryl “Spike Bones” Muhrer. Many others shared ideas during the jams and Hank Tenenbaum quietly circulated offering one-on-one instruction. Chuck Spano, who played percussion with both our Bones Fest XVI bands, let the non-musicians know about the importance of ending at the same time as the music. He pointed out that if you watch the musician’s feet, when it’s time to end the song, one of them will kick a foot in the air so everyone knows that the music will stop at the end of the current part.

“Spike Bones” explained that you have to “feel it in your bones.” Steve Wixon and Dave “Black Bart” Boyles demonstrated how to keep a steady blues beat as the audience played along with them. Find the rhythm and stay on the beat. Steve Brown told how Percy Danforth taught two elements of play - the tap and the rattle. Steve added the double tap to those instructions. He emphasized that there is no substitute for repetition. Dennis Riedesel demonstrated the “fly swatter” technique and stressed flipping back and forth. But his unique contribution to the workshops was his lecture on the “science of playing the bones.” We’ll expect him to repeat that at future bones fests for those who have not considered this side of bones playing.

Every Bones Fest is different. A fest personality develops from the camaraderie of those who come, and you never know who will come. We were all surprised and delighted by new bones player Jim Steakley from Sanford, Florida. At 99 years old, he decided to learn to play the bones. His daughter, Jimi, saw an ad for Bones Fest XVI on Lark in the Morning’s website. She came from Alabama to

get her father there. I suggested that since mornings were workshops, she might prefer to come in the afternoons when jamming and performances would be the order of the day. She said no, that her father specifically wanted to attend the workshops so he could learn to play better.

Jim explained that he had played guitar and other instruments, but with age, the ability to play those instruments was “fading away.” He remembered that in 1948 in West Virginia he had seen a coal mining man playing the bones. To the music of a jukebox in the restaurant, the man played with three bones in each hand. “I went to the restaurant just to hear him play the bones; came today to learn. Don’t know if I will learn, but I have the opportunity. I tried to straighten the bones, but they don’t straighten!”

Jim played the bones and Steve Brown got the audience to clap a rhythm. Then Steve played a waltz on the penny whistle while Jim rattled his bones. Jim Steakley’s opportunity to learn more about playing the bones will surely be one of the “precious memories” that BFXVI attendees will treasure. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJF3cGpxdSM>

Dave Boyles performed with his washboard and bones to different types of music. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBfu47OoSka>

“Spike Bones” taught us a flat clap, a cup clap and a flat cup clap to show different sounds one can achieve. Skeff Flynn said one should pick out the melody and accent it with the bones. It helps to track only one instrument and ignore the others to simplify things. Mitch Boss joined Skeff to demonstrate a duo sound. They did the same beat, then different beats at the same time. They took turns and they played in tandem. Steve Wixon showed different styles of play and different types of bones.

Jonathan Danforth played fiddle while Steve Brown gave tips on playing Irish. It is important to lead with your left hand and to understand the Irish beat, which is different than most music. While Barry Brogan played a slow blues song and sang, Jonathan demonstrated how to listen for the

opportunities to insert bones rhythms and how to use varied patterns of play. He pointed out that while the performer is singing, you should use quiet beats. During the musical bridges, you can increase volume and complexity of patterns.

The Mescher Trio threw caution to the wind and stepped forward, requesting that Bluesman Barry play Dark Town Strutter’s Ball. Jerry said, “Normally we play this with a CD. A CD is the same, every time. We’re in dark territory here.” (using live music). When it was over, Barry declared, “It worked!” So it did, much to everyone’s delight.

Bones jamming, singing and stories highlighted Friday evening. The bands played and everyone rattled their bones while experienced players found new players to coach. Dave Boyles started a sit-down pass-off, a traditional pass-off and a conga line.

Dennis Riedesel, Jerry Hines, Steve Brown, Larry Benson, Bob Gross, Ivan Browning and Mitch Boss shared bones stories. Steve Wixon gave a one minute history of the bones. Jonathan Danforth fiddled while the Happiest Bones Player, Jeremy Brown, played his bones. John Davis from Virginia, who has played bones for 66 years, wowed us with his expertise! Larry Benson asked all bones players to back him up while he sang the old country song, “I’m My Own Grandpa.”

“Black Bart” (Dave Boyles) was the man in black, with black pants, black shirt, black hat and a silver “washboard” tie! The Mescher Trio were dressed in matching outfits in black and red.

First time Bones Fest attendee “Vgo” Philip Terry, a Florida musical treasure, played and sang while Mitch Boss, Sharon Mescher and Dave Boyles played in their different styles. Bob Gross played ukulele and sang how ukuleles are not allowed in bluegrass music because Bill Monroe never had one.

Hank Tenenbaum, who played with Vgo busking on the streets of D.C. 40 years ago, rattled his bones while “Vgo” did the traditional ragtime Talking Hard Luck. Dave Boyles got everyone on their feet in a conga-line

leading to the exit and a good night to some while others did a bit of pub crawling. Rumor has it that one young man, after the pub crawls, spent the rest of the night dancing the Zumba with the Zumba Conference ladies at our hotel!

Saturday morning's catered breakfast buffet was very elegant. The food was beautifully presented and delicious. Host Frank Sweet set up a screen and played a slide show of photos from past events.

Back in the conference room, bands played, bones rattled, Steve Brown, Hank Tenenbaum and others provided coaching, and ninety nine year old Jim Steakley enjoyed practicing his bones and getting individual instruction. Many thanks to his daughter Jimi Johnson for bringing him. In the smaller conference room, Steve Brown presented a workshop on making bones and how to choose the right bones. Then we all headed to B.B. King's for our Blues Bones Show.

Josh Pender, manager of B.B. King's Restaurant and Blues Club at Pointe Orlando, graciously sponsored the Bones Fest XVI Sweet Sixteen Party on Saturday afternoon, August 11, 2012. We presented a one hour rhythm bones performance in the bluesiest style we could muster. Blues and jazz music by Barry Brogan, Florida legend Philip "Vgo" Terry and old time mountain blues by Just In Time provided the rhythm and the beat for a variety of bones players. It might have been the first time a blues club featured a banjo player.

Steve Brown emceed with his traditional style and grace, keeping the audience's attention while bands changed and bones players rotated on and off the stage. The fast paced show highlighted our Mescher Trio, all members of the Country Music Hall of Fame, the "bone off between "Black Bart and "Spike Bones," the talking bones of Jonathan Danforth and Skeff Flynn, the old time skills of John Davis.

Hank Tenenbaum, who played with Vgo's music, made it look smooth and easy as he matched any beat played. He had bones in his shirt pocket and a bag of bones hanging from his belt. Dennis Riedesel joined Spike for

some talking bones and Mitch Boss played on Kansas City Blues with Black Bart and Skeff.

Other highlights of the Bones Blues show included Jonathan Danforth entertaining the crowd when Steve wasn't talking and the band wasn't ready. He looked over his shoulder, put his hands against the edge of the stage and began a "warming up for running" stretching routine! During Alabama Jubilee, Mitch, Spike and Black Bart showed their entertainment chops. They played to the left, they played to the right, they wiggled in the middle, did a circle 'round and a butt bow!

Jeremy Brown was introduced from the stage as "the happiest bones player" and his smile lit up the room. Then everyone was invited to join the traditional bones conga-line. Even General Manager Josh grabbed a pair of bones and joined the parade, which finished up on the lower stage, where all bowed and retired from the stage to order some of the most excellent food served by B.B. King's. Memories are made of this!

Saturday night we told stories, played music, performed bones playing to CDs or the bands and got to know each other a little better. Philip Chan told us a story and played his harmonica for us. Skeff Flynn told a story and played bones, as did Mitch Boss.

Kathy Whisler boldly played bones while singing the ballad of Anne Bonny. She ended with a smile that should be on a poster advertising bones playing! Frank & Mary Lee Sweet told the story of Florida cow-hunter Bone Mizell and sang Camp Town Races. Larry Benson treated us to a humorous song about a medical expert, and Jerry Hines told us his example of a "moral story" about his Aunt Mary.

Jonathan Danforth showed us how to play with palm frond bones (suggested by son Emmett) as he whistled a tune in his talented style. Spike took his clothes off in the dark, revealing an amazing ability to stand on one foot and his glow-in-the-dark skeleton suit. The skeleton danced, the audience applauded and the bones rattled.

Skeff Flynn began with a story of spoons players in West Virginia and then played bones and sang Country Roads, accompanied by Just In Time. "Dopplegangers" Mitch Boss and Steve Brown clowned around as they played bones to the music and amused us all.

Our night ended, for the first time ever, with the music of the bagpipe. Bob Campbell played his pipes as everyone tried their hand at a new sound and beat. Black Bart led the conga-line parade as we bid another Bones Fest adieu.

Bones Fest XVI participants gathered at the hotel's Cafe Matisse restaurant and enjoyed the breakfast buffet on Sunday morning. Then, those who didn't have to leave celebrated the end of Bones Fest XVI with an hour of Gospel Bones. Hosts Frank & Mary Lee Sweet displayed the lyrics of the songs on a screen and everyone joined them in singing and playing the bones. Frank played banjo, Philip Chan played harmonica, Steve Brown played the penny whistle and Jonathan Danforth joined in a bit with fiddle. Amazing Grace was requested and proved to be challenging on the bones, but as Hank Tenenbaum noted, Jeremy Brown "nailed it!"

A Special Thank You To

All the spouses who came and joined us for shows and meals.

Jonathan & Melissa for bringing Emmett, great grandson of Percy Danforth.

Pat Spano for designing our Bone Playing Gator T-Shirt.

Chuck Spano for having the T-Shirts produced and playing percussion with two bands.

Frank Sweet who provide the sound system and served as sound man.

The Mescher Trio for the precision, artistry and matching outfits that make them stars.

Dave "Black Bart" Boyles for keeping the show moving and leading the conga-lines.

Steve Brown for being the best emcee a Bones Fest could have.

Darryl "Spike Bones" Muhrer for the showmanship and star quality performances.

Hank Tenenbaum for one-on-one

*(Continued on page 8)*





Hank Tenenbaum, Mitch Boss and Dave Boyles center stage at Raglan Road Pub, Downtown Disney

(Continued from page 7)

instruction to so many and for bringing his friend "Vgo" who shared so much talent with us.

Steve Wixon for being the man behind the curtain. He provided information, answered questions, made suggestions, listened, printed name tags and programs, helped with the fest proposal, the budget, and the financial report, did incredible things with the website and reimbursed me for out of pocket expenses.

ALL of YOU who came and shared your stories, your songs and your love of playing rhythm bones. *Mary Lee*



Steve Brown playing with Raglan Road Pub Band



Spike Bones' Extravaganza



Melissa, Emmett and Jonathan Danforth

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 14, No. 4 2012

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## Executive Director's Column

I am sad to announce the death of RBS Founding Member, Joe Birl. I first met Joe Birl at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, and was immediately impressed by his amazing bones story and the big band music he loved to play with. His story of learning bones with the left over pieces of his parents wooden floor resonates with me.

Over the years Joe was a constant. Although he lived to be 96, he remained the same old Joe to me. He was almost always at Bones Fests, and he seemed to defy aging.

The thing I will always remember Joe for came after Bones Fest X. A few days after the Fest, I picked up a package from the mail box addressed to my son Jeremy. Jeremy who has Down Syndrome, had thoroughly enjoyed the

Fest, and had begun playing the bones in public only recently. Joe had sent Jeremy two pairs of bones and an amazing letter. We called Joe, and he spent some time on the phone with him. Joe always asked about Jeremy, and spent time with him when he came to Bones Fests. We always say if you want to know what someone is made out of, put them next to Jeremy, and Joe certainly showed us. He will be sorely missed.

From 1989 up until 2002, I had a bones booth, and gave workshops on bone playing at the North East Organizers Music and Dance Festival held each year at the Newtown High School in Sandy Hook, Ct. It was a great festival, and one my whole family has fond memories of.

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Rhythm Bones Makers

Where would rhythm bones players be without rhythm bones makers? We, of course, are and would be making them ourselves, but missing out on the vast array of rhythm bones styles and materials that we would never think of or make.

This article will introduce some of our rhythm bones makers, and future issues of this newsletter will profile others. It will concentrate on makers whose rhythm bones were marketed on a wide scale. You can help by letting me know of rhythm bones makers not mentioned in this article or on our website.

As a Society, our first introduction to a rhythm bones maker was Joe Birl who gave a presentation at Bones Fest III on his black plastic rhythm bones patented in 1948. Joe told us of the difficulty of getting such a patent and followed that up by giving RBS a copy of all of the documentation that was required to get the patent and then market it. This documentation can be found on our website under the 'Resources:History' tab.

There was a feature article on Joe in the Vol 6, No 3 issue of the newsletter that is on-line at the 'Resources: Newsletter' tab. His bones were made from a mold using a plastic called spaldite. The curve was copied from bones he bought in a music store. His patent was the notch at the top

of the bone to keep it from slipping out of your hand. He shortened the bones to keep the cost down. Joe sold over 100,000 bones.

Joe lived in Philadelphia and made a wood version of his plastic bone. In 2000, I bought a pair of plastic bones for \$4.50. You can occasionally find a set on Ebay.

*(Continued on page 6)*



Bones maker Ido Corti died May 19, 2012. Story on Page 8

## Editorial

As you know, I am having trouble finding new stories for our newsletter. I was perusing a stack of old papers, and ran across an email that Mardeen Gordon sent to then Executive Director, Ev Cowett, telling him about the Shooting Star bones she makes.

Bingo! How about an article on rhythm bones makers I says to myself. And with the help of many of them, the article on Page 1 was born. I gave Mardeen a separate story space since she was my inspiration.

The last rhythm bones maker story that arrived is also an obituary for Italian rhythm bones player and maker Ido Corti. Ido's story is on Page 8

One interesting thing about Ido's story is the grove that he made at the top of his Tuscan castanets, i.e., rhythm bones, that is similar to Joe Birl's black plastic rhythm bones. We will probably never know whether Ido thought of that independently or was inspired by Joe's bones. If inspired, there would be the question of how Joe's bones traveled to Tuscany, Italy.

My wife and I have taken several bicycle vacations in Europe. Recently we received notice of a trip in 2013 to southern Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the land that Jonathan Danforth described in his article on the Klepperle/Chlefeli, (online newsletter Vol 7, No 2.) Guess what? We are going, and I will meet some Klepperle players in Germany and some Chlefeli players in Switzerland. I would like to go during Karnival when the children are competing, but can't pass this up.

In that article, Jonathan got help from Dieter Ringli. I contacted him, and he provided more information on the Chlefeli and an interesting recording, soon to be on our website.

Dean and Della Price came to Bones Fest XIII in Louisville with a slightly different style of playing (hold in the middle and tap on both top and bottom.) We had fun with them and they had fun with the rest of us. We have not heard from them for a while, so I sent Dean an email. I got back an update from a band they play with.

Crystal Rice is a new member with an interesting father/daughter story that sounds a bit familiar.

## Letters to the Editor

A BIG thanks to everyone at the festival. My dad loved every minute that he was there and was extremely disappointed that he did not stay at the hotel so that he could participate in more. You made my dad feel very special. He is playing every day and trying to get better. Thanks again for all that you and everyone did. *Jimi Johnson* [At age 100 less two months, Jim Steakley attended Bones Fest XVI and became a member wanting to learn something new.

I'm so sorry I couldn't be at BFXVI, Bones Family! I am very happy to say, that for years, not a gig has gone by that some of the audience does not ask me how to play those things. I am always happy to teach them what they are, give some background, and show them some stuff. This past weekend of 3 gigs, I showed over 11 people. Always clicking and carrying on! *Dan Griffin*

Good video [BFXVI on website]. Looks like everybody had a grand old time at Sixteen. I'm still playing the bones, occasionally anyway, whenever an opportunity presents itself. Few people in the small towns of central Kansas have ever seen or heard them, so I always get an enthusiastic response when I play them.

It's been a lot of years since we first met in Avoca, Iowa. You and all of those involved have done a whale of a job with the Rhythm Bones Society. My compliments to you all and best wishes for the future of the society. Former Member *Bill Rexroad* Hutchinson, Kansas

[Check out Bill's articles on getting kids started playing bones in online newsletter Vol 2, No 1 and finding bones in Egypt in Vol 4, No 3.]

"I can't believe there is a whole society for bones playing! That's so cool! Last year I played at Symphony Space and Town Hall and in each place I did a bones solo while running and jumping all over the auditorium - you would have loved that one. I'd love to join the Bones society - what does that involve? I'll check out your website in the meantime. *Raquy*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Danziger [Her website is [www.raquy.com](http://www.raquy.com). She is a talented percussionist as shown in this YouTube video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PL5CF7EA1BF8689169&v=P1hoRz-Aa2o>. Her short, but interesting rhythm bones playing starts at 3:32 into the video.]

## Website Updates

Our homepage was updated with videos from Bones Fest XVI in Orlando. The September video was overall highlights, October video was highlights from the BB King performance, November video was highlights from the Raglan Road performance, and the February video will be highlights from everyone making sure the new attendees are included. The January update will be all about the late Joe Birl. Mike Passerotti's YouTube Summary was updated.

(Continued from page 1)

I remember the people of Newtown as being open, friendly, and very interested in learning how to play the bones. I had anywhere from 25 to 50 people at each workshop, and remember some of the high school kids who volunteered there.

I can remember having conversations with the police and fire personnel who are stationed at big public events like this, more for precautionary purposes. One in particular spent quite some time listening to my own family problems. We usually stayed in the area for the week end, and would have breakfast at the same restaurant each Sunday.

Now the name Sandy Hook and Newtown bring an image of unbelievable horror. Over the last week, I've often thought of my time in Newtown, and wonder how many of the people effected by this tragedy I came in contact with. Of course it was too long ago to have had contact with any of the children who were victims, but I remember the high school and the middle school vividly. I'm sure you all have the people of Newtown in your thoughts, as we do, and hope their community will survive this horrible attack.

It's funny how this bone playing journey has taken me all over the country, and to other parts of the world, but the memory of Sandy Hook will stand out for a long time.

Looking back over the year, it truly has been one of ups and downs for me. We had one of the best Bones Fests in Orlando, Fla. This year, I traveled again to Ireland to participate in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, and while the outcome wasn't quite what I had hoped for, the pure pleasure of the experience was well worth it. I lost two family members, one quite unexpectedly, but our bone playing family seems stronger than ever.

My apologies for the lack of information around Bones Fest in Massachusetts this year, and look for complete information in the next newsletter. Please accept my most sincere wishes for a Happy Holiday Season, and a joyous New Year! *Steve Brown*

## More on the Chlefeldi

Chlefeldi [or in English, rhythm bones] in Switzerland are used in two ways: a) As a children's toy, mainly in the Catholic parts in the Lent season (i.e. after the Karnival in contrast to Klepperle in Germany). Schools organize competitions for the pupils. You can find some information here: [www.chlefelde-schwyz.ch/](http://www.chlefelde-schwyz.ch/)

b) Chlefeldi are also used as an instrument in the Swiss country dance music (called "Ländlermusik"). There are also some examples for that on the above mentioned page or on youtube for example

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqMvkZU60hU>

or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqVJyt0YWq0> (this is me playing the Guitar. The chlefeldi player is too fast, but we needed someone for this TV live performance (in the Studio I play the Chlefeldi myself as in the mp3 -example on the rhythm bones website (see below), which we play also on live gigs.)

In Switzerland, Chlefeldi players are not normally members of the bands; it's the audience that plays Chlefeldi or Spoons, if the band and the vibes are good.

The Chlefeldi tradition in Lent has in fact nothing to do with the schools or better: it has no direct connection. The Lent-Tradition almost died out in the 1950s. A wealthy man sponsored a Chlefeldi-competition for children to revitalize this tradition in the early 1960ies in the town of Schwyz where every participant got a sausage with bread. From that time on, several teachers of the public schools started to follow his example (there are no private schools in the countryside, almost every child goes to the public school and the teachers are traditionally important cultural people, for example leader of the local choir, organists in the church, etc.) So we have until now in some schools in Central Switzerland these competitions for the children at the age of 7 to 12 years. (Of course only there, where the teachers can play the chlefeldi themselves.)

It would be an honor for us if you

put our example on your website. The title of the track is "De Truempi-Chlefelder," and it's an improvisation for Jew's harp and chlefeldi. The Band is called "Zweidieter", a duo consisting of Dieter Ringli (Guitar, Chlefeldi, Backing vocals) and Dieter Sulzer (Lead vocals, Flute, Jew's Harp) For information about the band see <http://www.zweidieter.ch/>. To listen to the track go to <http://rhythmbones.com/DieterRingliTrack.html>. *Dieter Ringli*

## Joe Birl Obituary

Just as I was finishing this newsletter, I got a call from Joe Birl's son telling us that Joe died on Christmas Day at age 96. Joe's influence on the Rhythm Bones Society is large. His gave us his patented black plastic bones trademark "Rhythm Bones" to use in our society name. He attended seven Bones Fests several times with his son also named Joe and was a founding member. In this newsletter, I mentioned him twice. He entertained us for many years with his outgoing personality and rhythm bones playing. The next website update will be all about Joe Birl. He will be missed. *Steve Wixson*

## Recording of the Quarter

[http://www.cduniverse.com/productinfo.asp?pid=1179742&style=music track 2 &9](http://www.cduniverse.com/productinfo.asp?pid=1179742&style=music%20track%20&9). The album's centerpiece, however, is stripped down even further -- "Gol Na Mban San Ar," an epic track in 13 sections that recalls the hero Alastdar Mac Colla Ciotaig, is performed only on bones and tin whistle; it takes some listening, but the experience proves to have remarkably rich depths.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XV.** Summer 2013, New England area.  
**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2013. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## The Wildwood Dean and Della Price Story

Having read this publication for the rhythm bones enthusiasts, I have come to realize that even though there isn't a large number of "bones" players out there, that number is growing. Also growing is the enthusiasm that this particular instrument tends to generate with its participants.

Allow me to set the stage if you will. I own a "Country Music Opry." Here in Southern Oklahoma, we enjoy old country music from local talent mixed in with good old family fun. No alcohol here folks, just good music and lots of fun for all ages. I tell you this because it was here that an ambassador for bones players everywhere appeared at our show. Dean and Della Price, a couple from across the Red River started coming regularly to our Saturday night dances. After a few such visits, Dean approached the band just before show time with a gift for each member. It was a set of hand crafted "bones" made from extremely attractive Bois d'arc wood. We didn't know for sure what we had but we all expressed our gratitude for the gift and after eying the little slats and looking around at each other with that what-the-heck-is-it look, we went back to tuning up for the night's show. Don't get me wrong, we appreciated that someone liked us enough to go to the trouble to give us a handmade gift. After all, I was already thinkin' how much easier it was going to be to eat Asian cuisine with the wider, flatter, chop sticks. Finally I would be able to get full at the China Bear restaurant! That's when we heard it. Click, click, clickety-clickety click. This wonderful percussive progression wafts over the stage. I look up from my amp, and there is Dean and Della, waving their arms like they are about to fly and making this terrific "beat".

My bass player, Connie begins thumping out a bass line to match. Larry, like all lead guitarist that refuse to be outdone, started playing along with the trio adding a nice bluesy

whaling to the music. That was all the invitation I needed to back everything up with a common 12 - bar blues progression. The drummer started looking in the want ads for a job and wondering if he was going to be eligible for unemployment, (sorry Marty, no such luck.)

After a couple of minutes we all fell apart laughing and the Prices promised to show us how to play the "bones" after the gig, a promise they gleefully (and patiently) kept. That was our introduction to the "bones".

That was somewhere around six years ago, and though I have by no means mastered the playing of the bones, I have really developed a love for the sound of them, as well as a respect for those that can bring them to life. Dean showed us how to hold them. He related the history of the bones to us with such enthusiasm that even if you originally had no interest in them you did by the time he was finished. He showed how he had designed his own bones with little adjustments to the creation that made it easier for a novice to play a little and a pro to play a lot!

After a couple of weeks of monkeying around with the hardwood sticks it hit me. Every dance night we have a couple of songs that the crowd line dances to. This type dance requires a strong beat that allows the dancers to perform some of the more popular routines like "four corners", etc. I thought what a great format to showcase our new found friends! So, we invited Dean and Della onstage during the show and our crowd loved em! They have become a main staple here at That Country Music Place. Whenever I announce a line dance, the band waits for our "honorary members" to come onstage to perform their magic. I am including a photo of the couple performing with the band.

Two to three years after our first introduction, Dean had been refining and polishing his product. Once satisfied it was what he wanted, he has now applied for a patent on his clicky sticks. Perhaps someday you will be able to purchase your own "Wildwood Dean's Clicky Sticks" rhythm bones right off the rack at a music store near you! I visited with Dean and Della to

gain permission to write this article and he gave me further information about how they came to be players. They were visiting a mountain music retreat in Arkansas when they first ran into a bones player. An "old feller" as Dean described him "whose name I can't recall showed me how to hold and play em". Being an accomplished author and quite the bookworm, when Dean got home he delved into the history of the bones and learned all he could about the origins of the little percussion pieces. It is because of this historical knowledge as well as their ability to play that, (in my opinion), the Prices are great representatives of this musical genre.

It is true your numbers aren't in the millions, but if the fire and devotion to playing the bones is the same with others as with the Prices, it will continue to grow and grow. The next time someone hears you play and expresses interest, take a moment to embrace their curiosity. It just might mean another player is added to the fold, or perhaps as in the case of the Prices, a weekly gig will appear! Happy clicking! *Boyd Newton*  
[See photograph on Page 8]

## New Member Sid Hausman

[Sid is a fairly new member.]

I remember hearing bones in acoustic blues bands when I was a teenager. The idea stuck in my mind for years, but I didn't do anything about it.

In the eighties, I was touring in Europe with my wife Cappie and we met an ex Irish priest turned folk singer who played bones. Cappie learned to play from him and plays Celtic style bones that she taught me. My style tends to be a little more bluesy, and I use them often for songwriting.

I have a couple of you-tubes featuring bones. We'll have to pick or clack together some time. My Youtube videos are, "Bill Picket" - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP3BWxlyrvU> and "Ain't No Worrying Me" - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zArsh9aRg2A>. Best, *Sid Hausman*



## A Familiar Story From a New Member

[We received a Membership Application from Crystal Rice with a story similar to Bernie Worrell's story ("One afternoon she felt as if her Dad were in the room telling her to pick up the bones and give them a try). Crystal's father died and she found an old set of rhythm bones that he played. The following is from a follow up email.]

I feel honored to have found my dad's old bones. It was a delight trying to play them while my brother played the guitar. Of course at the time I had no idea how to hold them, much less play them so they did go flying across the room a couple of times, and still do. But in my heart, I can just picture my dad laughing down at me and my efforts.

A few lessons from your website helped me figure out how to hold them and make them clack, then double clack and finally on occasion even a triplet clack here and there. I've been practicing playing the bones daily with music and am becoming more comfortable with them. But I don't think I'll ever be as good as I remember my daddy being.

I don't know what type of bones they are. A dark wood with a deep sound. He also played the spoons and both electric and acoustic guitar and harmonica (which I have never been able to master), and the accordion. But somewhere deep inside me, the desire to play the bones has been awakened and now.....I'm having a blast with them, and driving my poor husband crazy.

Eventually, I hope to get really good at this and share it with everyone I love. We should never let things like this die. I hope to pass this little known skill on to my friends and loved ones and keep it going forever!

I look forward to receiving your newsletters. I also look forward to hopefully seeing a future Bones Fest in Phoenix or Flagstaff!!!! I am excited though to be a part of something so unique. *Crystal Rice*

## Jim Lande Wood Bones Maker

[Jim Lande is a friend of the Rhythm Bones Society. He taught a rhythm bones making workshop at Bones Fest XIII bringing in lots of tools from his workshop.]

I have a great deal of fun making bones, but I don't actively market them. It has given me an excuse to buy and try all sorts of interesting woods. Last year I bought lifetime supplies (i.e. a big board each) of American Chestnut, Kentucky Coffee Wood, fiddle-figured maple, Persimmon, Ipe, etc. There is a box full of bones on sale at the Saturday jam and occasionally I'll bring some to events such as Blues Week.

Altogether I probably sell a dozen pairs a year, the money all goes to the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, which is a 503-C, which, like most non-profits, is always looking for money. Fortunately, the organization has other sources of funds.

I have taught a couple bones making workshops at the shop, but so far, attendees tend to treat this as a do-it-once activity. Most people don't like sanding.

I have not wanted to sell mail order for two principle reasons.

1) I don't use wood shop techniques. I start with rough cut blanks -- several different patterns, and bone widths anywhere from 3/4" to 2 1/4". I am shaping them a little with wood gouges, but mostly with wood rasps.

My bones are relatively short because that tends to work better with the one - four grip that I favor. My bones are not symmetrical. The tops generally have more curve and the bottoms more weight. I don't like to pair up similar looking bones. I like pairs that sound different if switched around. As I shape the bones, I am trying to get them to play well with my hands.

If you already play bones, then you'd probably want to search through the pile to make your own selection. I don't like the idea of me picking out

a pair for someone, sight unseen. I tell folks who buy a pair at the shop that they can come in a swap anytime.

2) It takes between an hour or two to make a pair of bones before I start to sand and finish. They play fine unfinished so the ones at the shop are unfinished and sell for \$15 a pair. That is pretty cheap, but it seems silly for someone to shell out a lot more for two pairs of finished bones that they end up tossing in a drawer.

I am willing to finish bones for \$20 a pair. Finishing means sanding with 80, 120, 220, 300, 400, 600, 800, 1000, 1200, 1500 and then 2000 grit papers; marking with my barbershop stamp; and then using at least six coats of walnut oil.

As I mentioned, I don't think they play better, but they sure look better. Either way, that is a lot of effort for the money and there isn't a lot of satisfaction if they don't get used. I have a flyer that goes with the bones.

*Jim Lande*

## Jim Lande on 'Mr. Bones' Bones

Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas who played with Archie Edwards made his own bones. He would buy long cut beef ribs from a butcher, carefully scrape the meat which of course he would cook and eat. After that he would wait a long time for the bones to dry out. Then he cut to length and then sanded the ends with 100 grit sandpaper. I don't believe that he did any shaping -- he just selected the section that most looked like it would play. I'm sure he simply tossed ones that didn't play well -- I once noticed that he had about a dozen in his bag, varying sizes. I know that he once went over to The House of Musical Traditions and tried some pairs that they had. Wood bones mostly were too light or too quiet. The ones he used were pretty hefty.

I ran into the keyboard player in this clip at Blues Week, and he remember that he had this recorded. He just posted it to youtube. I think rhythm bones society members would enjoy it. This clip really brings me some joy.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRN4zWPhlkk&feature=youtu.be>  
*Jim Lande*

# Mardeen Gordon's Shooting Star Bones

I learned to play the bones when I was dancing with an English Country Dance Troupe at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Agoura, CA. A man whose name I don't recall was playing spoons and bones in the evening after the Faire had closed, and my husband and I were both intrigued.

My husband actually got the first pair, some Percy Danforth bones, which were given to him at the Renaissance Faire with a very brief lesson. We both struggled to get a triplet with them for several weeks and had actually succeeded not long before we ran into Percy at a Dulcimer Festival. Watching him play two handed to classical music on his boom box, we both said "So that's how you play the bones." I hung out with him for what felt like hours, learning everything I could.

I think I made my own pair before then, because I didn't know where to get them, and I was frustrated by waiting until my husband was done with them. I traced the curve of Percy's bones and made mine the same length, but I preferred them to be thinner, because the thickness of Percy's was uncomfortable between my fingers. I have experimented with different lengths, but finally settled on 7.5" to create the perfect weight and balance for both speed and sound quality. I make two widths, both 1" and 1.25" for smaller and larger hands.

I briefly considered eliminating the wide ones because it is difficult to get wood planks 5/8" thick, and there is so much more waste when cutting the wide blanks out of a 4/8" board. But I continue because many players prefer the wider pairs, and there aren't many other bones makers offering them. I might even be the only one.

So many people wanted to try them, I found myself making and then selling them at the Renaissance Faire. Soon, I hooked up with Lark in the Morning, and they started selling Shooting Star Bones in their catalog.

The name Shooting Star came from

the way I wrote my name as a teenager, with the "M" in Mardeen written as three vertical lines and the "S" in Smith (my maiden name) written as a star below them. I have experimented with many different woods and after eliminating some endangered species, I have narrowed it down to 25 kinds of hardwood that offer a range of colors, some with beautiful figuring, and each with their unique variations in tone quality.

I enjoy combining high and low toned woods when I play with two hands. I prefer one-handed playing, however, finding it easier to concentrate on dynamics, tone changes and rhythmic variations along the melody line.

I have been playing, making, and teaching hundreds of people to play the bones since 1983. My favorite music to play with is Celtic, followed by folk, world beat, bluegrass, reggae, jazz and some rock (especially Jethro Tull). I have never played with a band, but look forward to jamming all night at the Strawberry Music Festival in Yosemite every Fall.

About a year ago, I attended a workshop at a local music store, where I got invited up to play along with Brendan Power, harmonica player extraordinaire. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pWZX1zS6gE>.

Playfully, *Mardeen Gordon*

*(Continued from page 1)*

Joe's trademark for the plastic bones was 'Rhythm Bones' and it was moulded into each bone. It was that trademark entered into an internet search that lead me to Ev Cowett and Bones Fest II and the next year to being a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Joe gave us permission to use his trademark name as our society name.

It was not long afterwards that Nicholas Driver joined RBS, and Nick came from three generations of English rhythm bones players and makers. There is a story about him in the Vol 3, No 2 newsletter. Nick's favorite material was whalebones, however in later years his bones were made from cow shin bones.

He said, "The ultimate material for bones must be whalebones, though not politically correct, as it combines the hardness of bones with the easily worked qualities of wood, its special hollow membrane giving an unique sound."

Nick at his peak made as many as 3,000 bones a year. Unfortunately, he no longer makes bones, but I am fortunate to own a couple of sets of his cow shin bone.

Another player and maker from the late 1940s was Ted Goon, and we have featured him with many stories (see the Resources:History:Mr Goon-Bones tab.)

He was a recording artist and needed rhythm bones that would sound good when recorded. Ted experimented with woods and plastics using professional recording equipment to evaluate the sound. He selected a maple from a section of Northern Wisconsin.

He said the shape and length came from research on bones playing in England in the 1400s. He made his bones under the trademark of 'Goon-Bones,' and sold about 20,000 sets of two pair with instruction book. He had an order for 200,000, but had no way of producing that many. You can occasionally find them on Ebay.

The King of rhythm bones makers in the last several decades was Percy Danforth - that is Ray Schairer who made bones for Percy. There is a story about Ray with a photograph of him in his workshop in the Vol 5, No 2 on-line newsletter. There is a story about Percy in Vol 2, No 1, and references to him can be found in many other newsletters.

He made more than 35,000 bones in many woods and exotic woods. He was a craftsman in the old tradition, though he used power tools.

It is unclear how Percy came up with the design for his bones. Sandor Slomovits said Percy gave Ray a piece of wood with the curve that he wanted (Sandor still has this) and possibly the two of them refined the design together. The article mentioned above describes his technique in some detail.

Ray died last year, but his tradition continues with member Sandor

Slomovits, a protégé of Percy.

If you want cow shin bones, RBS Executive Director, Steve Brown, tells how he makes his.

Well to begin with, I'm not handy, and never intended to make anything much less bones out of any material.

From the first time I met Percy, he took 25 pairs of bones and put them in a bag and told me to go sell them, and send him the money when I could, so I was used to selling the things out of the gate.

I had several partners who made them out of wood, first Doug Reiner, a wood worker, and later Ralph Sweet, the well known flute maker. I would play the bones at their booths, and eventually I had my own booth.

I was selling bones at the annual "Fiddle and Flea" Flea Market, and a strange old character came up to the booth and asked questions about the bones, "Ever make them out of bone?" he asked, and that's how I hooked up with Milton Shipanka.

He was an old merchant marine sailor who processed bone and made things out of them. He made a few pairs, which were awful, and I offered to start working with him to guide him on shape, he cleaned and worked the bone. He was an interesting guy, but very cantaceros, and our relationship didn't last too long.

I learned a bit from him, but Sandy Sheehan, a music shop owner convinced me I should start doing it my self, probably 82' or 83.

First I started getting the bone from a farm, Blood Farm in Groton. Cleaning was a dirty horrible mess. I lived in an apartment, and I would take a little electric motor from a washing machine with a drum sander on one end and grind the bones in the only place I had, the bathroom! I'd sit on the toilet with the seat down and balance the sander on the tub, why my wife didn't divorced me, I don't know.

Gradually I made my way to shops, first in my father in laws basement, and then borrowed the shop of my employer.

Those days I had no idea what I was doing, I just got the bones raw, whole, cleaned them, cut them in fours, and tried shaping them. I barely polished them, they were pretty basic.

It gradually turned over the years. I moved to my own house, worked out side and in the cellar at times. Finally got my own shop, purchased a variety of machines.

About 15 years ago I found a source of clean bone, and I haven't cleaned a bone since.

It has taken me some time to tell which bones make the best ones, but I can look at them and know which ones are the best. To a degree the cow dictates what the bones will look like.. Sometimes it's like sculpting, the rhythm bone is in there and you have to let it out. I'm always amazed when I finish and they look so good.

It's not always easy to tell which ones sound the best, some of the best looking ones don't necessarily sound the best.

Some great players have some of my bones; Tommy Hayes, Mel Mercier, Cathy Jordan, and Junior Davey to name a few. Well, I guess that's the story. *Steve Brown*

Whamdiddle Bones. I first learned about bones from Hank Tenenbaum in Washington D.C. in 1975. I was busking in Georgetown on hammer dulcimer and Hank would come by and play bones with me once in a while. I got interested, and so he taught me how to play and make them. I have been doing it ever since.

I started playing bones when I could not play hammer dulcimer because it was out of tune or I did not know the tune in a jam session. Selling bones gave me an extra income at craft fairs, and made nice gifts for friends.

I use my scraps from making bones to make interesting laminate bones and then I use the scraps from the laminated bones to make art pieces, including note cards.

I make bones by cutting the curve on a band saw, rounding off the edges with four passes with a custom made router bit, belt sanding to 120 grit, scraping with a sharp knife, and finishing with a mixture of marine spar varnish and Watco that I brush on and then wipe off.

I have marked every bone I have made with a "W" for Whamdiddle. I have had lots of fun with bones on many fronts. *Rick Fogel*

Gillette Bones. Almost 14 years ago, I gave my brother Pipp the instructional video "Bodhran & Bones" by Mel Mercier for Christmas. Pipp was learning the Bodhran and the Bones segment inspired me to try and learn to play bones.

We are ranching in Texas (we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the ranch this year), and I knew where an old Brahman cow of ours had died about a year earlier. I went and got her now dried rib bones and brought them home, and made my first pair of rhythm bones. Since then Pipp and I have made many a pair of bones all from cow ribs and sell them through our Camp St. Cafe & Store and at our musical performances in Texas and around the country. *Guy Gillette*

Black Barts Bones. I was 30 years old when I was visiting my folks in Toledo. For whatever reason I remembered my Dad playing what I thought were sticks. I asked Dad what was that you once did with those sticks that made that click, click sound. He said, "that's playing the bones". He showed me basic triplets on a couple of flat pieces of wood.

Then he made me a pair from some old hickory. He soaked them in some water, settled some weight on the middle so the curve was right, varnished them and gave them to me on the next Christmas. I played the bones as best as I could figure them out while I traveled Wisconsin as a salesman.

After a little research, I found out they were called bones because they were originally made out of "bone." I got to be almost obsessed with the concept. I started getting cow rib bones from my local butcher. I boiled them in a pot, then boiling them in a bigger pot. Now I boil them in a pressure cooker and dry them out on the roof of my garage. Then I dump a pile of bones on the garage floor and start matching single ribs that somewhat match. From there I sand and shape and polish the pair so they look good together. I finish the bones with my scrimshawed Black Bart logo. I figured that anybody could make bones out of anything so I wanted my bones, my process to be

special. I wrote the story *The Legend of Black Bart*. I started to go to old time music festivals as my character to see if anybody was interested in my bones and my story. They were and have been ..thus the legend of the original "Black Bart's Bones." *Dave Boyles*

Rhythm bones players influence makers. Percy Danforth influenced Mardeen Gordon, and Mel Mercier influenced Guy Gillette. There will be more of these stories in the next newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

## Ido Corti Obituary Italian Player and Maker

Ido Corti had played the Tuscan Castanets [what we call rhythm bones] since he was a boy, but it was only later in life that he started to construct this percussion instrument. He worked on its traditional structure innovatively and he experimented with many different types of wood. In an interview he said, "I start working on two slender, roughly outlined pieces of wood. Obviously, the wood must be well seasoned."

He modified the structure of castanets by changing their thickness and width, and by making the surface concave to allow the nuckle to rest in it. In addition, he tied them together by using a small cord attached to the upper end, "They would always slip out of my hands, so I suddenly thought that I could keep them together by tying them up." Corti labelled each pair of castanets that he constructed with the construction date, the type of

wood and his own initials, I. C.

During his final years, he also experimented with the use of three castanets, which he played at the same time, alternating between two and three in some musical passages to highlight the intensity of rhythm. "When they are ready, before finishing them off and before making the hole for the cord, I test and weigh them to see if one of the two is heavier. For instance, I have noticed that the heavier one should stay below" (i.e. on the external part of the handle).

Ido Corti passed away on May 19th, 2012. He was born in France in 1926 to Italian parents, but when he was thirteen, he moved to Italy, where he lived until his death. *Paolo Casini*

[For more information on Ido and Tuscan Castanets, see online newsletter, Vol 9, No 4, titled 'Nacchere Toscane.']



Wildwood Dean Price (second from the left) and Della Price (in middle) with Too Long in the Saddle Band. See story on Page 4

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 15, No. 1 2013

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## Executive Director's Column

Well Bones Fest XVII is starting to take shape right smack in the center of New England. The City of Leominster is embracing us and we have commitments to use City Hall for our Saturday night concert, and the possibility of a live feed over their Cable Access Television, perhaps a first for a bones fest. I'm hoping that the site of our Friday and Saturday activities will be the Leominster Environmental Center, a lovely building on 20 or so acres of land, about 5 min drive from the hotel I'm negotiating with. Possible performances are being worked on including television spots on Thursday night, visit to the city run camp programs to teach children, and a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to view the Bone Player, William Sidney Mount's mid 19th century painting. The dates are August

9th through the 11th, and while we have availability through the city and the hotel, it's not written in stone yet. Stay tuned!

This is the perfect time to travel to Ireland to compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship in Abbeyfeale. First it is the year of the Gathering and many activities and incentives are planned for getting people there. Secondly this is the best and most comprehensive bone playing competition we have. They hire well known and extremely qualified judges (our own Mel Mercier is one), and there is not a spoons player in sight! Thirdly and perhaps most important, if this contest is not supported it just might die out, and that would truly be a shame. So if you have always wanted to test the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Joe Birl - Rhythm Bones Inventor & Promoter

1999. I saw an old music store and went in to see if they had rhythm bones for sale. Bought two pair of Joe Birl rhythm bones (should have bought their entire inventory), saw 'Rhythm Bones' embossed on the black plastic bones, entered it into my browser only to discover Ev Cowett was about to host Bones Fest II in Greensboro, NC, attended that Fest, and have attended every Bones Fest since. Has Joe Birl been an influence in my life—you bet!

Joe has influenced an untold number of people having sold over 200,000 sets, and Scott Miller of Dry Bones Music Company says Joe's wooden rhythm bones (announced as new product in 2002) are his biggest seller. You will read personal stories from people below, and I bet you have a Joe Birl story of your own.

Joe Birl was born in Philadelphia on August 20, 1916, and died there on Christmas Eve, 2012. His story is told in online newsletter, Vol 6, No 3, Page 1. While you are looking at our online newsletters, do a Adobe Find search using 'Birl' and you will find lots of references to him. For example, check out the story about when he taught a ballet company to play rhythm bones for a performance. Joe Birl was an inventor, promoter, teacher, rhythm bones player and friend. The photograph to the right was taken at Bones Fest X, and shows a big version of him

with some of his friends in the background. RBS presented Joe the Meritorious Service Award at BFVIII for his many contributions to rhythm bones. See another photograph of Joe playing with friends on Page 8.

Joe has the only patent issued for rhythm bones. He told us about it at Bones Fest III, and this talk and the documents he showed us have been preserved in the History section of our website. You can view the talk at

*(Continued on page 7)*



Joe Birl with 100 of his Rhythm Bones Society friends



## Editorial

The January website update announced the death of 96 year old Joe Birl, and in this issue several members reflect on Joe and the impact he had and continues to have on rhythm bones players. The story begins on Page 1, and there are side stories from Aaron Plunkett, Hank Tenenbaum and Walt Watkins on Pages 4, 6 and 8. Bob Goulet sent the Popular Mechanics Ad on Page 7.

Bones Fest XVII, yes that is seventeen, hosted for the second time (first was BFV) by Executive Director, Steve Brown, will be in Leominster, MA. Preliminary information in Steve's column on Page 1. Our largest Fest, BFX, hosted by the Danforths, was in Massachusetts. This looks to be another great Fest. Mark your calendars.

An unusual thing happened to me a few weeks ago—I was asked to play rhythm bones at a funeral. Rhythm bones have long been associated with ritual and the church, so it is historically appropriate. Member Tim Reily in a BFIX video interview noted that there is a spiritual connection when playing real animal bones as we sort of give them a new life by playing them. I played real bones.

I taught a rhythm bones workshop at the Chattanooga Folk School, and one of those attending came up and show me a picture of his bones playing grandfather. I asked him to write up a story which he did and it is on Page 4.

English member Nail Roche volunteer an article about bones in literature. I hope it inspires others to submit material that helps document the history of rhythm bones. Thanks, Nail

There are five more rhythm bones maker stories, Rob Boer, John Huron, Robi Kessler, and Randy Seppala with a short story by Walter Messick.

Membership in RBS is up this year with 7 more than last year at this early time of the year. That number includes eleven former members whom we welcome back. We pick up a few members throughout the year and several at our Bones Fest. If you know of someone who should be a member, encourage them to join.

## Letter to the Editor

Member Mel Harvey, age 78, died April 23 of this year after a courageous fight with cancer. His wife said he was playing bones in his last days.

He held his bones in a bit unusual style with his index finger holding the stationery bones against his palm. His favorite bones were rosewood. He taught hundreds of people how to play rhythm bones. He learned of RBS from a music store in Coshocton, OH.

## Klepperle Video

Several months ago the Video of the Month was about the Klepperle, the German version of rhythm bones. When it was taken off, it was not linked back in. It is back now and to find it go to our Homepage, click Resources, then Audio/Video, then Audio & Video on our website. Scowl down to the bottom of the page and click Travel Channel Klepperle.

## Rob Boer and Dem Dry Bones

I found you when I got rolling as a bone craftsman. I use real bone. The different densities along a stretch of cow ribs makes for a huge variety of tones, depending on where you hold them, on which end and where on the length. I have pictures of the process at <http://demdrybones.biz/crafting-bones.html>.

Last week I sold my 101<sup>st</sup> pair, and had to take my wife and daughter out to dinner. At least my 8-year-old got excited and claimed "Denny's" so it didn't break the bank.

About half of my sales have been on eBay, and others at sales or consignment at Acoustic Corner (Black Mountain, NC), Song of the Wood (Black Mountain, NC), and Skinny Beats (Asheville, NC). By the way, up here would be a great place to have an annual conference!

Along with the sales, I've given away about 40. The most recent was to David Holt at a concert he did here in Black Mountain a few weeks ago. Dem Dry Bones, *Robert G. Boer*  
[www.demdrybones.biz](http://www.demdrybones.biz)

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## Website Updates

The January homepage update announced the death of Joe Birl, and presented highlights of his career.

The February update was the last of four videos with highlight from Bones Fest XVI in Orlando, and announced the death of Jim Steakley, a new 99 year old rhythm bones player, with a short video of Jim talking and playing.

The March update had a fun video of Walt Watkins and Mitch Boss playing together at Bones Fest XIII with the Rascals of Ragtime Band. The Photograph of the Month show Swiss Chlefeldi (see Page 5) maker, Robi Kessler and when you click on the photograph it takes you to a video that shows how he makes them plus a lot more. It also announced that a previous Video of the Month on the German Klepperle is back on our website (see Page 5).

# Randy Seppala and Dem Bones

"Dem Bones" was born in 2004, in Covington, Michigan, when I, a rhythm bones player, asked my friend Jim Lohmann, a world class architectural wood carver, if he could make rhythm bones on his CNC machine (computerized router).

Over the past nine years Jim has experimented with various methods and jigs and has brought the making of wooden rhythm bones to a state of near perfection. Bones now come off the machine requiring very little sanding and with minimal waste, of often high dollar woods

The resurgence of bones playing in the 1950's may have been deterred by the fact that bones makers were not able to develop a process capable of putting out large quantities of bones quickly. 'Dem Bones now has a set-up and production process that could yield up to 500 pairs of quality bones (sanded, finished, polished and packaged) in a day; if that should ever become an issue. We are now capable and ready to handle large orders.

Thus far 'Dem Bones has been mainly a retail outlet, selling bones at festivals and workshops through out the region. Bones and various accessories are also sold via the internet, [www.playdembones.com](http://www.playdembones.com), and are shipped out across the United States and the world. 'Dem Bones has sent products to almost every state in the union and to France, England, Ireland, Australia, Canada, Spain, Italy, Finland and Czechoslovakia.

Our new website will be out in the spring. *Randy Seppala* "Da Bones Man." [randyplaydembones@jamadots.com](mailto:randyplaydembones@jamadots.com)

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVII**, August 9-11, 2013. Leominster, MA. Host is Steve Brown. If you have questions, suggestions or want to volunteer contact him at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com)

**NTCMA and Bones Contest**. August 26-September 1, 2013. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

*(Executive Director Continued from page 1)*  
European waters with your playing, make this the year. *Steve Brown*



# Bones Fest XVII

Heart of New England  
Leominster, MA

August 9-11, 2013

Host  
Steve Brown

John Huron of Noteworthy Instruments

When I started making bones, a little over twenty years ago, I was a Civil War re-enactor. I became very interested in the music of the period, in particular the music that would have been going on in the soldier camps. This led me to build my first instrument, a homemade pattern fretless mountain banjo. It also led to information on minstrel shows and to bones. Research is sometimes an avalanche waiting to happen. About that same time, I came across some recordings of banjo and bones music that perked my interest in bones. Not long after that at a craft show I ran across a guy selling bones, watched him for a bit, bought a set and spent the next several months trying to get the "lick" down. Again, this was twenty years ago. No internet. No YouTube. No websites. The libraries had big oak cabinets full of long narrow drawers filled with 3x5 note cards that directed you to where you could find a particular book. I'm not

even sure we even had indoor plumbing. I digress. Anyway, all I had was a few images of minstrel musicians and a "sound" off of a cassette tape. Then one morning it happened! A real roll. I stopped and looked at my hand to mentally record the exact position of my fingers and when I restarted, it was gone. Don't know where it went, but it took about a week to find its way back

So about this time I was making a few more banjos and some less expensive three string instruments and going out to some local craft shows to try and sell them. I generated a good bit of left over hardwood scraps so instead of using it to heat the house, I spun the scraps into bones (figuratively of course) and would sell them at the craft shows. Sometimes that was all that would sell but I would make enough to buy enough gas to get back to the house.

All the woods I use are indigenous Southern Appalachian hardwoods, including some American Chestnut that I reclaimed from an old timber frame barn that was built before the blight that killed all the Chestnut trees. I've always sawn out the basic shape, length, curve, thickness. I do a pair, side by side, in one slab, rough sand them to get out the saw marks then cut the slab in half. I round the edges, different radius inside and out, on a router using a little jig I've made to keep my fingers out of the machine. Then they get finish sanded and I use urethane oil to bring out the natural color and grain of the wood. *John Huron*

[I asked John for more about music in soldier camps and here is his reply.]

First, the music did not differ much between Union and Confederate camps. "Dixie's Land" was a minstrel show tune and pro ported to be one of President Lincoln's favorite. Likewise, I believe the instrumentation in the camps was driven by the cultural entertainment phenom of the day, the minstrel show; fiddle, banjo (fretted banjos were not common until the 1880s), bones and tambourine. The guitar, although it was around was used for "parlor" music and was not a component, i.e. no 1860's string bands.

## Old-timer Bones Player

Here is a picture of my Grandpa Kenneth Frazier, my Mothers' Dad. He was from Laurelville, Ohio, but lived most of his life 40 miles away in Logan, Ohio. He worked at Sears & Roebuck Stores in the hardware Dept and small-time farming while raising 4 children.

He played most rhythm instruments including the bones and Drum trap set. He played in the Panhandle-Fiddlers Band as drummer (rhythm instrumentalist) and sang also. The band played every Sunday morning for several years on WHKC in Columbus, Ohio (65 miles North of Logan). The WHKC Studio was on the top floor of the AIU Building (American Insurance Underwriters Co), later called the Leveck-Lincoln Tower. It was the tallest building in Columbus, Ohio from the early 1900's until the mid-1980's when the Ohio State Office Tower was built.

I was only 6 years old when he passed away in 1956, but was very close to my Grandmother who lived to be 94 yrs. I probably get most of my musical abilities from Kenny, as I play many instruments including drums.

When Grandma gave me his set of bones, I recall my her saying that he played RB on various songs when it was more appropriate than the drums. He would practice out by the barn to get a rhythm he wanted for a particular song, hence the picture of him by the barn. I'm guessing some Latin beat songs etc. we're played with the bones. The band would also play special gigs and I'm sure there were times that did not accommodate the drum set, so the bones were used instead. Appalachian music with Irish jigs for dancing were popular. He must have been pretty good to be in a band on a regular Radio slot. I remember he had a great singing voice and Grandma said he was always dancing around even when he was guiding the old walk -behind tractor plow. Lucky for me I inherited some of his musical abilities. Remember, the 1940's still played a lot of folk and country tunes



(carter family's , the McCoys, the Browns and others) on the radio , as R&B was just getting started and Rock wasn't around yet. The big band sound was still in and Bill Monroe cut his first record that year, In what was to become known as Bluegrass music

Hope to get more involved with the RBS in the future. Thanks for the rhythm bones instruction and the interest in my Grandfathers' musical heritage. *Tom Bumgardner*, Signal Mtn. TN

### Just a Bit of Ipe from Joe Birl

At Bones Fest XIV in Alexandria, I had a conversation with Joe about making bones in a wood I was having a hard time finding, ipe. Joe was telling me that ipe would be some pretty tough wood to work with and suggested 3 or 4 alternatives. I had to nix them all because of my concerns for the environment, sustainable resources, trying to stick with domestically available woods and so forth. We both agreed that ipe is not endangered, yet.

Before the party ended in the 'hospitality' room he was still telling me how tough the wood was to work

with and I told him the closest domestic I thought had the characteristics I was looking for was black locust and he countered with tulip wood. After the fest was over we all went our separate ways I didn't give the conversation any more thought.

Some time after that I got home & there was a priority mail package, from Devereaux Ave in Philadelphia, PA, dated 7/28/10, postage on it was \$6.65. Just enough ipe to make one set.

Many times those that do the most good do their best work in the background and under the radar. I believe that Joe did not actively seek the lime-light as much as he appreciated the respect and admiration he received from those in the Rhythm Bones Society that knew him.

Try to imagine the look of surprise on my face when I went to the LOC (Library of Congress) to see the Carolina Chocolate Drops and on their table of sale items was about a half dozen packs of Joe Birl Bones! They sold out. Dom Flemons told me they always do. Dom was so busy with the CD's and fans they were not able to do as much teaching on the bones as they would have liked. I was able to take a few minutes with one kid, parents in tow, and one adult, kids in tow, and get them started with the basics. Think of the sounds of Joe's bones resonating thru the halls of the LOC and in front of the Capitol as they made their way to their cars...

The impact that Joe had on bones players around WORLD the will resonate long after you and I are one.

The significance of Jimmy Durante's reference to Mrs. Calabash seems especially relevant to Joe at this time. Over the years he has done so much for so many people that the effects are incalculable. "Thank you and GOOD NIGHT, Joe Birl-- wherever you are!!!" *Hank Tenenbaum*

### Walter Messick

I make the Cabin Creek Music bones - every one of them. I made a jig for my band saw to cut them out so I cut out hundreds at a time and then sand them as needed. *Walter Messick*

## Bones in Literature

Further to Steve Brown's previous interesting article on a bones related literary theme, I came across another passing literary reference to the bones, this time in a novel. It is contained in *The Real Charlotte* by Somerville and Ross, which was published in 1894.

Edith Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, were distant cousins and they were members of the Anglo Irish gentry. Somerville's family had property and lands in West Cork and Ross' family had lands in County Galway. They wrote their stories and novels about Irish life together and these were published in both their names. The income from their works was needed as their family fortunes declined. Somerville and Ross were also concerned with the place of women in society and the restrictions they faced, even if they were from privileged backgrounds.

There has been some criticism of their works for including Irish stereotypes in the portrayal of peasants and servants, although it has also been pointed out that they also lampoon the Anglo Irish gentry, as well as British people. Much of their work is comic and episodic, with the Irish RM stories perhaps being the best known; these were adapted for television.

*The Real Charlotte* is generally regarded by literary critics as being their best work and some consider it the first great Irish novel. One of the themes in the novel is the decline of the Anglo Irish gentry, or the ascendancy, which was evident in the late nineteenth century as a result of the impact of the famine and the land wars. Another theme is the aspirations of the Irish middle classes and their desire for social advancement.

The reference to the bones is somewhat curious in nature. An account is given of a character entering a room and playing the spoons "like bones." This seems to be illustrative of one of the motifs in the novel that the men can be sociable, good fun and friendly but also frivolous, unreliable and not to be trusted with a woman's affections. There may be men like that amongst bones and spoons players!

I have tried to play the spoons using a bones technique and it does work, although a lot of rosin would be needed to do this at length. Playing the spoons this way does, mean that unsurprisingly, some traditional

spoons techniques can't be used. Give it a go and see what you think, if you haven't done it already.

Whether the reference in *The Real Charlotte* is meant to be taken literally in terms of the technique used is debatable. It could, of course, simply be a reference to a similarity in the rhythmic playing of the bones and the spoons. It does indicate though some knowledge of traditional Irish music on the part of the authors.

In conclusion, *The Real Charlotte* is in print in the USA. If you would like a long novel about nineteenth century Ireland to pass the winter evenings then it might be one for you.

I'll keep an eye out for any other references to the bones, or related matters, in works of Irish or English literature. *Niall Roche*, Yorkshire, UK

## Joe Birl Remembered by his Son

My dad was always passionate about his bones. He would always have them with him, and would demonstrate to people.

If he had his car worked on and the mechanic was friendly, he might give him a pair of bones and a little demonstration. If he went to the casinos in Atlantic City, he would give the maître d' a pair of bones, and he got a real nice seat to a show.

When I was 12 at Christmas time, he would go to Woolworths and sell bones. They loved him.

My first memory of him playing bones was with a string band at Merrill's on weekend nights.

When he retired at age 80, my mom and dad went on quite a few cruises, and he would play the bones on their talent shows. That kept him young I think.

In fact right up to the end, I found a guy with some ironwood from the Atlantic City Board Walk, and he was going to manufacture new rhythm bones for my dad.

I have the history of how he patented his plastic rhythm bones.

Two weeks ago I saw the Carolina Chocolate Drops and showed it to Dom Flemons and Hubby Jenkin who are selling dad's wooden bones at their concerts. *Joe E. Birl*, his son.

## Malachy Kearns Bodhrans and Bones

I always saw bones played at home as a kid. Ann Ward our great family friend loved playing the poons .. That was regular Ireland then ... No I phones etc ! I make the ebony ones, grenadilla grade ...

My friend here, Franjo Reid, makes the Rib bones for me, as he has a great sense of balancing a set of bone - a magical player too ... We use cow rib. Gently treat the bone not damaging its density etc. it's all a love of music and life really. Soulful. Making them for 35 yrs now. Beir Buaidh *Malachy Kerns*  
[www.bodhran.com](http://www.bodhran.com)

## Robi Kessler Swiss Chlefeldi Maker

The Chlefeldi is the Swiss version of rhythm bones, and one maker is Robi Kessler from Schwyz, Switzerland. There is a video that shows exactly how he makes his Chlefeldi, and it can be found at <http://www.chlefeldi-schwyz.ch>. Click on the Chlefeldi? Tab, scowl to the bottom and play the video.

In addition to clips on how he makes his Chlefeldi, there are clips of bands and dances that reveal some nice Swiss culture.

At 2:00 minutes into the video there is a very good player and at 6:10 there are three girls who play together.

Robi does not speak English and I do not speak German. We communicate via email and use a language translator—for me, <http://microsofttranslator.com>. It actually works quite well. You can also use this translator to translate parts or all of the web pages into English. *Steve Wixson*

## My Friend, Joe Birl

I was saddened to learn of Joe's passing on Christmas Eve. But, if it is your time to be called home, it could not have been a better day to go.

Joe did not ever say much about his faith, but he celebrated life fully and that is what faith is all about. He carried his 96 years very well indeed. He looked much younger and seemed to be in good health. If I had just met him I would have guessed he was 68 to 75. His outlook was always upbeat and positive.

I always bought a 24 pair box of his bones for my inventory which I resold at Six Flags and other venues. Every now and then Joe would phone looking for another order.

He last called about two months ago, but this time he was wanting a copy of a CD he knew I had which included one of his favorite bones playing tunes. The CD is called "Dixieland Hymns", and his favorite tune was "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." The tune begins slow and softly as most hymns do, but soon gets ragged into a very nice rhythm bones beat.

When he first heard it at Bones Fest X I told him it was just a great match for his bones playing style. He loved it. So I burned him a copy and on the Avery cover I listed all the tunes on the CD and inscribed it "To Joe from Walt". It took about a week for the CD to arrive at his home in Philadelphia, and when it arrived Joe phoned

and thanked me profusely. He was very happy having that CD. His passing was only about six weeks later.

I had made Joe's acquaintance around 1985. I had a pair of his black Bakelite ones which I had acquired from a music store in Virginia about 1967. They had a polished click which I liked as an alternative to my noisy standing rib roast beef bones.

Fast forward to 1985, I carried the Bakelite bones in my hip pocket usually and foolishly sat on them, breaking one bone in half. We lived in Texas then and I went from music store to music store trying to find those bones.

My wife, Joy, took up my quest and through great research and a music store in Fort Worth she found Joe's name and address but no bones. She wrote him and he replied that he had sold his business but had some pairs laying around and he sent her two pair. Joy surprised me when she gave me them as a birthday gift!! I wrote Joe a thank you note and there began a running dialog between us.

Fast forward to 1999, Joe had learned of the effort to form a society of bones people, and he phoned to tell me all about it. I sent my name in and was all set to go to the charter Fest when Joy suffered a disk problem and had surgery on her neck to repair it. Joe did go and saved a copy of all the papers related to it which he mailed to me. My first Fest was IV.

I have treasured my friendship with Joe Birl. He was a class act. *Walt Watkins*

## Scott Miller's Joe Birl Reflections

My first set of bones were those small black plastic "Rhythm Bones" with Joe Birl's patented notch. I found them on a display rack at the local acoustic music shop. They cost \$3.75 a pair. "This is a musical instrument I can afford," I exclaimed at the time. That was well over 20 years ago.

The first time I met Joe personally was in 2003 at Bones Fest VII in Louisville, Kentucky. It was during a break in the scheduled activities. I was perusing the bones marketplace area in the lobby of the historic Kentucky Theater in downtown Louisville where Bones Fest was hosted that year by Gil and Linda Hibben. Joe was standing beside his table which had wooden "Rhythm Bones" on display. The wooden bones replaced Joe's ubiquitous black plastic bones which have been sold in music shops since 1949 (but went out of production because the mold broke). As I made my way around the marketplace tables I stopped and chatted with Joe...and being curious about these newfangled wooden style "Rhythm Bones," I gave them a rattle before moving on.

The next time I saw Joe was in July of 2006 at Bones Fest X which was hosted by Jonathan and Melissa Danforth in New Bedford, Massachusetts. It was there that I myself first offered items for sale at the Bones Fest Marketplace. Joe was also there selling his "Rhythm Bones". I stopped by Joe's table and inquired about selling his "Rhythm Bones" at my soon to be opening online bones shop.

A little while later Joe dropped by my table. He took out a slip of paper with his contact info and jotted down his wholesale rates on the back. Then he explained his quantity rates and advised me that the best deal was on orders totaling at least 72 pairs. Joe cautioned me that bones are not a big selling item. I still have that slip of paper.

A few months later I called Joe on the phone and placed my first order for 72 pairs of wooden Joe Birl "Rhythm Bones" (48 black; 24 natural). In addition to sending the bones,



Walt and Joy Watkins with Joe Birl at Bones Fest VI



Joe also mailed me a photograph showing him and Brother Bones in 1949 at the Paramount Record Shop in Philadelphia. It is a marvelous and historically significant photo. With Joe's blessing I produced a commemorative photo magnet of the event. The keepsake memento magnet appeared on March 31, 2007 in my online shop's first newsletter. It was also the shop's first product promotion - and it helped launch the online store. The photo magnet promoted Joe's "Rhythm Bones" of course, plus several Brother Bones items offered at the shop.

Since that time, the shop has sold more than 1,055 pairs of Joe's wooden "Rhythm Bones" (425 black; 630 natural). In fact, Joe's natural wooden maple version are the shop's top selling individual musical bones. The next top selling bones are Joe's black style which are no longer in production and have become a collectors item.

The last time I talked with Joe was in December, just weeks before he passed away. Joe had called on the phone to let me know a price increase would take effect the first of the year. Joe was his usual happy and radiant self. And the call became especially memorable when he mentioned that only two distributors sold his bones: Dom Flemons of the Grammy award-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops - and myself.

Over the past 64 years Joe's famous "Rhythm Bones" with the patented notch have helped at least 150,000 folks (including me) learn how to rattle the bones. And Joe's legacy will continue to live on. That's because Joe's "Rhythm Bones" are now produced under the direction of Joe's son, Joe Birl, Jr.

Yes, it's comforting to know that Joe Birl's "Rhythm Bones" will remain available indefinitely to help even more generations of players take up our favorite musical instrument.

Joe Birl was an iconic figure in the world community of bone players. He was always lively and upbeat and took delight in helping anyone get a grip on the bones. Joe was sharp as a tack and we will certainly miss him. *Scott Miller*

(Continued from page 1)

<http://rhythmbones.com/BirlPatentTalk.html>.

Here are some tidbits. Kenny Wolin bought a set of Joe's bones from Percy Danforth in 1979. Mel Harvey had several of Joe's bones. Ev Cowett's Birl bones were stolen. Old time bluesman, JC Burris, played what he called his 'black African bones,' but when you see JC on a video you can see they are Joe Birl's patented black plastic bones.

Mel Mercier played a cow rib-bone and one of Joe's bones for years until they broke. Mel told that story at Bones Fest III not realizing that Joe was sitting on the front row only four feet away. Mel went back to Ireland with enough of Joe's bones to last a lifetime thanks to Joe's generosity. You can read that story online in Mel's well written words in newsletter, Volume 8, Special Issue 2006, Page 4.

Joe was the reason Walt Watkins joined RBS, and read Walt's story on the page to your left.

Michael Ballard said, "I don't have much in the way of specific memories of Joe except that he was a very friendly guy with a big voice and a passion for bones. At one of the first Bones Fests that I was able to attend, he gave me a pair of his patented plastic bones. At each subsequent Bones Fest, he found some occasion to chat with me and he really wanted to know what I had been up to since he saw me last. I will miss him."

Lee Formicola said, "I had the pleasure of meeting Joe when we were at the Bones Fest in Virginia. We were in the lobby of the hotel, he came over and introduced himself, and from that point on he had our un-

divided attention. He told us about the Birl bones and of course as he spoke we were very envious of those who owned them. I am very happy to have had the opportunity to spend some time with him. He was so willing to share his knowledge and stories with us. What a wonderful guy."

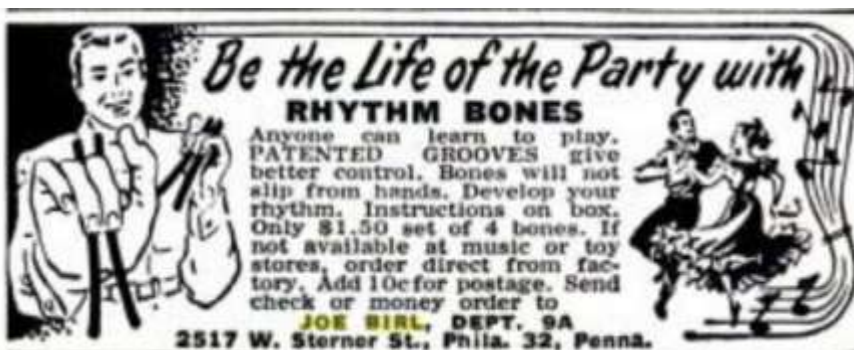
Sharon Mescher said, "I am sad about Joe passing away. At the same time, I am just thankful that we had the privilege to get to know him. They just don't make 'em like him anymore. I will think back on the times that we spent with him, and smile."

Bernie Worrell said, "This picture [see page 8] was taken at Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY in July 2003. I believe it shows Joe's vitality, warmth and interest in all those around him."

Former member Dan Griffin said, "What a great life he led! I have some of his rhythm bones. I've always wanted to add them to one of my children's books, and still intend to. He will be well remembered."

Bob Goulet bought first pair in 1957. How that happened is a story Bob wrote titled *Chance Meeting with Joe Birl* printed in online newsletter, Vol 9, No. 3, page 3. Bob had polio as a child and played bones, that is rulers, to strengthen his arms. Later his dad bought him his first real pair of bones, of course, Joe's bones. At Bones Fest X, Bob got to meet Joe and tell him that story. It's a touching story—go online and read it.

Percy Danforth, Ted Goon, and others made significant contributions to the history of rhythm bones in the last half of the 20th Century. The case could be made that Joe Birl is at the top of that list due to selling over 200,000 bones. I have three pair left. How many do you have? How many are left in the world? *Steve Wixson*



Advertisement for Joe Birl Rhythm Bones from 1954 Popular Mechanics magazine



Photograph of a video promotion to advertise Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY, July 2003. From left are Steve Brown, the late John Cahill, Bernie Worrell, Michael Ballard, ??, Joe Birl, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet, Steve Wixson and Gil Hibbens

## Aaron Plunkett's Tribute to Joe Birl

Joe Birl has contributed much in the field of bone playing and pioneering his creation, plastic Rhythm Bones. Joe's Rhythm Bones, and his vast fountain of knowledge, in turn, have brought us closer together by

helping to preserve the ancient art form of bone playing. Art forms honor humanity, as well as history, and create a direct link to the past, present and future, a human collective consciousness, and sea of timeless knowledge. It is in that sense I honor Joe Birl, his knowledge, and his joyful spirit. Wishing you well. Your friend,  
*Aaron Plunkett*

[Aaron also sent a poem. There is not enough room to include it all.]  
TOGETHERNESS by a Reike Master. *Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. Whatever we were to each other, we still are. Call me by my old familiar name. Speak to me in the same easy way you always have. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes...*

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# *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 15, No. 2 2013

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## Executive Director's Column

It was sometime in the 90's that I first heard the name Ev Cowett in a "News Letter" from Fred Edmonds. He mentioned "the bone playing Cowetts from North Carolina" which certainly was intriguing. It wasn't until 1998 that I exchanged some emails with Ev himself, and in the spring of 1999 Ev, Val, and his daughter came east to attend the New England Folk Festival.

This was a great gathering with Russ Myers, and a number of other rhythm bone players. Ev was absolutely ecstatic at the number of rhythm bone players attending, and his absolute enthusiasm for rhythm bones, rhythm bone playing and rhythm bone players became obvious.

This is how I will always remember him, with his bright smile, and sparkling eye's, delighting in another Bones Fest, a rhythm bone player

uncovered, or a bone playing performance.

The Rhythm Bones Society is Ev's vision, rhythm bone playing taught to children, and rhythm bone players gathering and sharing was his true delight. We can never replace him, we can only carry on his vision by doing what he loved, playing the bones.

Bones Fest XVII will be a tribute to Everett Cowett. Early birds are welcomed to come Thursday night where we have been invited to play on Mayor Dean Mazzarella's cable TV program. Friday morning presents an opportunity to share bones playing with the Summer campers of Leominster, something Ev would have loved. Workshops on Friday and Saturday, as well as a performance at City Hall on Saturday night. Please Come! *Steve Brown*

## RBS Founder Ev Cowett Remembered

"Mr. Everett Ronald Cowett, "Ev", 78, beloved husband and father, joined the Angels on May 13, 2013."

"Ev was born in 1935 in Ashland, Maine to the late Amelia Rioux and Lynwood Cowett. He married the love of his life and wife of 52 years, Valentina, in 1960. Ev earned his Doctor of Agronomy degree from Rutgers University in 1961 and started his career with Geigy in 1963.

"Ev moved his family to Greensboro, NC in 1973 and helped his family build many joyous memories at "The Ranch". Ev embraced life to the fullest and instilled that love for life in his children. He was a competitive cross country skier, made two holes in one, enjoyed "choir practice" with friends on Friday nights, was a member of the Greensboro Civitan Club, founded the Rhythm Bones Society and valued his Country and community.

His life of abundance includes, but is not limited to: his wife, Val; children, Dan and Bonnie, Al and Kim, Tommy and Jo Ann, Martha, John and Biz; grandchildren, Victoria, Alex, Ramsey, Rioux and Roxy; siblings, Bernard and wife Sandra, Alfred and wife Ann, Ernest and wife Barbara, Bob and wife Sonja and Claudette.

"Ev was an avid reader who inspired many.

We think he would find the following quote from one of his favorite authors "nearly adequate": *There were no embraces, because where there is great love there is often little display of it.* Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote." This was posted by Martha Cowett Cummings on the Rhythm Bones Society Facebook Page.

How do you pay tribute to a father, be he the patriarch of the Cowett family and in our case the man responsible for the founding of the Rhythm Bones Society. You can read more about Ev in an article written by his son, Dan, in the online newsletter Vol 8, No 1. Mel

*(Continued on page 7)*



A favorite rhythm bones photograph of the Cowett family

# Editorial

This newsletter was about 80% complete when I learned of the death of Everett Cowett, the father of the Rhythm Bones Society. In this revised newsletter we pay tribute to the man who made it possible for us to collectively enjoy one of the oldest of all musical instruments. His tribute begins on Page 1.

In looking for photographs of Ev for the newsletter, I ran across the photograph on Page 8. All of these founding members of RBS have died except Al Cowett shown in the middle. One of our stated purposes is to pass on our unique craft to the next generation, and this photograph shows how much we really need to do that. Below is a paragraph on a kids workshop I taught recently, and I hope you are doing similar things. We will cease to exist if we do not do this.

Member Judy Alderman is the driving force behind the Prater's Mill Foundation that is working to preserve this old grist mill in Northwest Georgia. She has invited me to be a roving rhythm bones player at their annual festival, and I've had the opportunity to perform with some great groups.

A few weeks back, she invited me to participate in a Cultural Heritage Day at the Mill for local elementary students. I taught 90 kids how to play rhythm bones, and several of them were playing quite well before it was over. My teaching skill improves.

The next afternoon, I came down with an intestinal virus which my wife came down with two days later. Those kids must have had germ hands, and I touched every one of them. However, Judy, if you are reading this, I had a great time with the kids, and I am again well.

Recently, I went back to Tulsa, OK for a high school reunion, and it turned out to be the opening weekend for the Woody Guthrie Center. I was particularly interested in Woody as member Dom Flemons said he played the bones, something that Pete Seeger confirmed saying "he played them occasionally."

One of the guests that weekend was folk singer Rambling Jack Elliott who traveled with Woody at times and also

confirmed that he played them. I asked Jack to write up that story, and if he does you will see it in a future issue.

## Letters to the Editor

Annette and I went to Everett's memorial service on the 18th of May. I was surprised to see that Jonathon Danforth made it all the way from New Bedford. It was a happy occasion with family and friend telling great stories about Everett. I was really tickled to find that Everett's Kids, Dan, Al, Tommy, Martha, and John (I think I named them all) had brought there Bones and intended to play as part of the service. For some unknown reason Jonathon and I just happened to have our Bones with us and the family was kind enough to let us join them. We played a favorite of Everett's and it seemed just right. Annette told me that a lady sitting in front of her said, "I would not have missed this memorial service for the world." *Mitch Boss*

I am excited to find this website about bone playing. The bones have been in our family for years. My grandfather, Chet Davids played for dances while shearing sheep on the desserts of Idaho and surrounding area. The bones are made of ebony.

My father Theron Davids, then taught himself to play them as they were setting around his home. He played with an orchestra in Chesterfield, Idaho for years. Chesterfield is on the national historical register and is visited by many each summer. The restoration group have rebuilt the original recreation hall on the town site. My brother Paul Davids and I have been playing with a band there this summer. Paul has a metal set of bones and a pair of ivory bones.

I started to play the bones in 1963, it was my talent in a Miss Caribou County Pageant. My father taught me his techniques and his enthusiasm for the art.

We really have never met anyone who plays the bones. We are glad to hear about so many who love the bones.

We play to any music that we feel the beat to. My nieces are starting to

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

play with me now. We played at the county fair in August; it was fun to share the time with them. Three of my brother's children play the bones. I would like to have family bone fests. I need to work on that.

I would like to come to a bone fest sometime. It sounds like a fun, fun time. I have always thought that I would like to have music arranged specifically for the bones and for a group playing to an arrangement. I think it would be great. *Shirley Christensen*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVII**, August 9-11, 2013. Leominster, MA. Host is Steve Brown. If you have questions, suggestions or want to volunteer contact him at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com)

**NTCMA and Bones Contest**. August 26-September 1, 2013. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.



# Bones Fest XVII Preliminary Program

Bones Fest XVII will be in Leominster, MA with activities that are familiar at a Fest and things we've not done before. It will also be a time to remember and reflect on the lives of two important rhythm bones players, Everett Cowett and Joe Birl.

On Thursday for early birds we will perform on Cable TV.

Friday begins with a performance at a local day camp and senior center and continues with individual performances and jamming. Friday evening will see a French Canadian night with Le Vent des Cantons and local fiddlers at the Franco American Veterans hall.

Saturday continues with individual performances and jamming. An RBS first will be a Bones Flash Mob! At around 1pm at the local mall, we will surprise shoppers by Jonathan Danforth playing solo fiddle and attendees joining him one at a time. We will shoot a video that will be uploaded to YouTube and hopefully it will go viral giving us some much needed publicity. The day ends with a public performance.

The Fest concludes on Sunday with a community breakfast at the hotel.

Come join in the fun in this once a year get together. *Steve Brown*

## Website Updates

There was no April update to our website.

The May update was about the Abbeyfeale Bones Competition. The photograph on the month was of the 2013 winner Patty Donovan and the video was clips from previous Abbeyfeale competitions.

The June update was all about remembering the late Ev Cowett, RBS founder and first Executive Director. Clicking the photograph of Ev takes you to an article about him, and the video showed him at several Bones Fests. It will stay up until after Bones Fest XVII, and then be replaced by Bones Fest XVII highlights.



**Bones Fest  
XVII**

**Heart of  
New England  
Leominster, MA**

**August 9-11, 2013**

**Host  
Steve Brown**

Registration Form

## Remembering Rhythm Bones Players

As I write this, I have returned from singing the *National Anthem*, the *Armed Forces Medley* and *God Bless America* with my barbershop chorus for the Memorial Day Ceremony at the Chattanooga National Cemetery. I listened to our new Mayor talk about honoring the soldiers who gave their lives to preserve our way of life, and began to think about Ev Cowett, and rhythm bones players who have passed on.

We, of course, do not honor them as we do our fallen soldiers, but we can remember them for what they did for our rhythm bones craft.

On Page 8 is a Bones Fest III photograph I found and realized that all of those shown except Al Cowett have passed on. You can read their names on the caption for the photograph.

Our database of rhythm bones players has the names of 41 who have

passed on, but there are many more who we never heard about. In addition to those named in the photograph, there are RBS members Dan Dwyer, Norris Frazier, Carl Hedrick, Will Kear, Tom Raisbeck, Ida May Schmich, and William Turnbull.

The database also includes old timers like Dr. Fred Edmunds (our RBS grandfather), Freeman Davis (Brother Bones), Ted Goon (Mr Goon-Bones), Percy Danforth, Clifton Ervin, Cowboy Bud Bartram, and more.

Ev Cowett said at Bones Fest II that there were only about 50 rhythm bones players left in the world. He was wrong as there were and are thousands who learned to play from their father or someone in the family who had learned from someone from the minstrel era when rhythm bones playing was at its peak. They, like many of us, had never seen another rhythm bones player, and thought they were the last one remaining.

But Ev was correct in noting that pool of rhythm bones is small and growing smaller. Look just at demographics, and within the next couple of decades, all of these old timers from the first generations after the minstrel era will be gone.

While that is sad it is also a challenge to the Rhythm Bones Society to pass on our wonderful craft to the next generations.

We as a society have not yet figured a way to do this, particularly for children, so the task falls on each one of us individually to go out and teach as many young people as we can, expecting that a few, here and there, will find rhythm bones as exciting as we do.

Sky Bartlett, thanks for Shorty Boulet and Ernie Duffey, is a good example, and his young arms can do things with rhythm bones that my arms cannot! And his talent and enthusiasm got him a few minutes of rhythm bones playing time on national television.

People Like Percy Danforth, Ted Goon and Joe Birl to name a few, left a legacy of bones and instruction. Go find a student this week, and start or continue creating your own rhythm bones legacy. The Sky's the limit!  
*Steve Wixson*





## Ev as Father of the Cowett Family

Ev's legacy is his family who all play rhythm bones. Above from the left are John, wife Val, Martha, Ev, John, Tom and seated Al and Dan. Would there have been a Rhythm Bones Society without his family. At Bones Fest I they made up over half of the attendees. At Bones Fest II almost half of the attendees. At Bones Fest III, five became RBS founding members.

Rhythm bones were played at Martha's wedding and as shown in the photograph to the right of Ev, husband Joe Cummings had been drawn into the family rhythm bones club.

Below shows one of their many family performance at Bones Fests, this one at BFX. Next to Ev is friend and bones player Bill Rose (whose Red Apple Farm was the site for Bones Fest V), and Joe is behind Martha Al is shown standing to the right.







## Ev as Father of the RBS Family

Ev in the left photograph at Bones Fest I, said in his opening remarks that he wanted to do three things, share boning things so we can learn from each other, do a bit of bones synchronizing, harmonizing if you will, and talk about having a real big bones festival.

Shown above at Bones Fest III in 1999 are our founding members. Ev was elected our first Executive Director, a post he held until 2004.

Show below at Bones Fest X is Ev surrounded by his rhythm bones family of over 100 people (not everyone in attendance is shown). This surely must have been the “real big bones festival” he mentioned at Bones Fest I.



# Mel Mercier Remembers Everett Cowett

I first heard about Bones Fest and the growing community of American two-handed bones players from two of the founding members of the Rhythm Bones Society, Everett Cowett and Russ Myers. In March 1999, several months before I attended my first Bones Fest, I met Everett and Russ when I went to visit with them in Greensboro, North Carolina and Brightwood, Virginia, respectively.

At the time, I was a visiting scholar at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, attending some postgraduate Ethnomusicology seminars. In one seminar, led by Eric Charry, students were required to engage in a small-scale ethnographic project and I chose to focus on American two-handed bones playing.

I first became aware of the style some years earlier when, on a visit to Toronto with my father to perform in John Cage's *Roaratorio*, I met the prominent Washington-based bones player, Percy Danforth. Percy was in Toronto working on a project with the percussion ensemble, Nexus, at the time. We met him at a party and he played his bones for us. I never met Percy again after that, but he made a significant impression on me and several years later, when considering what I might focus on for my ethnographic exercise at Wesleyan, I decided to search out other exponents of the American two-handed style.

I had no means of contacting Percy Danforth and I knew of no other American two-handed bones players at that time. Eric Charry knew no two-handed bones players either, but one of his former colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro had recently heard about a bones player by the name of Everett Cowett, who lived in Greensboro. I contacted Everett and made arrangements to visit him. He suggested that I should also visit another bones player by the name of Russ Myers, who lived not far from him, in Brightwood, Virginia. I made plans to visit Everett and Russ in early March of 1999.

When I arrived in Greensboro on March 6<sup>th</sup>, Everett was celebrating his birthday at home with his family. He and his wife, Val, have raised four boys, Dan, Al, John and Tommy, and a girl, Martha. Everett taught them all how to play the bones when they were young and all have continued to play into adulthood. According to Everett's wife, her children stopped playing the bones for a period in their teens, preferring instead to play electric guitars and drums, instruments she and Everett refer to variously as the 'appliances', 'electronics', 'utensils', and 'electrical gadgets'. Eventually, however, they all returned to bones playing and for many years they have played together at family gatherings.

While I discovered that Everett was most comfortable playing along to his preferred music on cassette tapes and CD recordings, his son, Dan, plays guitar and he sometimes provides what Everett calls 'background music' for the family bones playing. Over the course of the two days I spent with the Cowetts, I played the bones with them in the informal music-making sessions that took place and spoke to Everett about his playing history and practice.

Everett Cowett's bones story is in many ways typical of those told by many of the more senior American players. A retired agronomist, Everett grew up with his parents and six brothers on a potato farm in Northern Maine in the 1930s and 40s. His mother played the accordion in the French-Canadian style and he has memories of dance parties in their home when he was a child. He remembers accordion, fiddle and harmonica players providing the music on those occasions. He was aware that there were bones players associated with this music tradition, but he cannot recall ever seeing one play.

Everett began playing the bones as a young boy after two children in his neighborhood showed him how to play; they had learnt to play the instrument from her uncle. According to Everett, a lot of the kids he knew could 'click' the bones and he described it as a common 'trick' at the time.

Unlike his childhood friends, Everett continued to play the bones as he grew up. His first public perform-

ance was in high school in 1950, when he accompanied some girls who sang the song 'Dry Bones' at assembly. In college, his bones-playing act was a popular feature at fraternity parties and other events. Everett knew of no other bones players at that time and his unique talents contributed to his celebrity during his college years.

Everett continued to play the instrument throughout his adult life but he never met another bones player until the 1990s, when he met Fred Edmunds, a retired doctor and bones player from Lexington, Virginia. That year, while on vacation with his family, his son's car was broken into and Everett's bones were stolen. When he couldn't find any replacement bones in the local music stores, he began to make his own. He also began to do some research into the history of the instrument and was invited to talk about the bones on a locally produced TV show, *Crossing Carolina* with Arlo Lasson.

Within a few weeks of the broadcast, Fred Edmunds contacted Everett. Everett went to visit Fred and the two men shared their bones playing experiences. Up to that point, both Everett and Fred had wondered if they were the only bones players left in America. Fred spoke to Everett about his desire to hold a rhythm bones convention and it was this idea that led to the first Bones Fest event. Everett and Fred made contact with several other bones players in America and Everett hosted a gathering of this small, dispersed community in his home in September 1997.

The following year, the Cowetts held Bones Fest II in a local park where participants had a small informal audience of people who were using the park for afternoon recreation. Steve Wixson, a bones enthusiast traveled from Tennessee to attend the event and in the following years he became a dynamic force in the development of what became the Rhythm Bones Society. Within just a few years the community of bones players had grown significantly. In 1999, Everett knew of about fifty players. Just a few years earlier, he wondered whether he and his family were the only bones players in America. *Mel Mercier*

(Continued from page 1)

Mercier has written a nice article about Ev on Page 6 to the left.

Ev was encouraged to hold Bones Fest I by Dr. Fred Edmunds, who might be considered our grandfather (you can read about Fred in online newsletter Vol 5, No 3.)

His daughter, Martha, gave him the present of a website that connected him with people outside his normal reach, such as myself, who found Ev and the announcement for Bones Fest II while searching the web with the words "rhythm bones" I found on a pair of black plastic bones that I later discovered were made by the late Joe Birl. My life was forever changed that day. So too have countless others.

Ev and family personally hosted Bones Fests I, II and VI, and you can read about those three plus more in online newsletter, Vol 8, Special Issue. Ev wanted Bones Fests to be like a family reunion where everyone feels comfortable even performing on stage in front of their peers. That style continues in each annual Bones Fest.

Ev was elected our first Executive Director, a position he held until 2004. In that position, he was responsible for leading the RBS Board and writing the Executive Director's Column in the newsletter. His last column in the online newsletter Vol 6, No 2. is worth reading.

Walt Watkins called Ev a man with great vision. "For decades those of us who played rhythm bones, whether one handed or two, or rattled on in some kind of way, did so mainly alone. Rarely did we stumble onto another rhythm bones player.

"Then, along comes Ev, a man of quiet yet intense passion - a passion to find all the rhythm bones players in the country and give them a voice, to learn how they play and for them to learn from each other. In this, Ev became the savior of a nearly lost art.

"He was not a technician, his forte was his great vision as to how it might be to bring all this talent together and explore opportunities for bones play to survive and become recognized for its contribution to music.

"He formed and led the Rhythm Bones Society and led it well. For that we are eternally grateful. I am so glad that Ev got to witness the esteem

the RBS accorded him when he turned over the Rhythm Bones Society to his successor, Steve Brown. His vision has become a reality and that is an achievement which earns my utmost respect. Sleep well, old friend, may your vision extend to the Pearly Gates. "

Mitch Boss said, "Our band was playing at Hanging Rock State Park and a woman, I can not remember her name, but she asked me if I was a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. I said, "The what?" She gave me Everett's name. I called Ev and he clarified there actually was a Bones Society and he knew that because he had started it a few years back.

"A couple of weeks later I was playing with the band at the NC Storks County Stomp and Ev showed up. We clicked our bones at each other, talked and ended up with Ev, Annette and I all going to supper. By the time we finished eating Ev had sold us. He said we were members as of then. That was eight years ago and we have been to every yearly get together since. We feel like every one in the Rhythm Bones Society is family. Thanks, Ev, we love you, Mitch and Annie ."

Bill Vits said, "When I first attended a Bones Fest I didn't know a soul. I immediately met Ev and his entire clan who were the "first family" of rhythm bones players. Their kindness set the tone of our organization where people share stories, ideas, licks and little pieces of bone and wood that are so dear to us. I suddenly felt a part of something much bigger than I had imagined. It wasn't about competition, it was about perpetuating a simple art that gave us joy. I can still see Ev's smile when he played the bones and watched his talented family perform. Thanks Ev!"

Sharon and Jerry Mescher said, "When Everett smiled, his distinctive smile seemed to encompass his whole face. To watch him play with all of his family was a treat. They seemed to be having the time of their life. Not only having a grand time, but there also seemed to be a deep pride to be a part of Ev's and Val's legacy.

"When the Cowett's could not attend a Bones Fest, the comment that we heard often was, "Boy, are we

going to miss the Cowetts!" They were and are at the heart of the Fests. So, when we remember Everett, the image will be one where he is surrounded by his musical family. And, without a doubt, he will be smiling."

The first person that Dave Boyles shook hands with at Bones Fest III was Ev. Dave said, "I was impressed with his gentleness and his dedication to make our bones playing significant.

What sticks out most for Spike Bones is not Ev as founder, but that he came with his family and they put life in us. Spike said, "Every time I think about his kids, it warms my heart.

Ev's daughter Martha's words started this article and will finish it.

"The Rhythm Bones Society was, I believe, my father's favorite retirement project. He really enjoyed it.

"When he was well, putting his energy and heart into the festivals, organizing demonstrations to school kids, learning about the history of bones playing and getting to know new bones players gave him great satisfaction and pure joy. It always brought the family together and seemed to give him an added sense of purpose.

"He especially enjoyed hosting the festivals. If he could have hosted every Bones fest in Greensboro, he probably would have.

"I think that as RBS grew, what surprised him most was that other people had other interests in the bones genre that he himself did not have. This gave him an opportunity to learn new things about an old favorite. That's the kind of stuff my dad loved. The "give and receive" aspect of life and to always learn something new.

"Perhaps the one thing I know was most important to him was connecting with other bones players who had a similar passion who would take his torch so to speak and carry it on, and make the Rhythm Bones Society eternal. As he always said *May your bones be with you.*"

Ev will be remembered in many ways. His hands are the hands holding rhythm bones shown in our RBS logo in the upper left corner of Page 1. His slogan, *May Your Bones Be With You*, has been informally adopted by RBS. I'm wondering what that slogan might mean to him in death. *Steve Wixson*





Shown above are Rhythm Bones Society founding members Russ Myers, Vivian Cox, Al Cowett, Everett Cowett, Joe Birl, John Cahill, and seated with his back to camera Matteo. All of these except Al are deceased. What a loss of friendship! What a loss of talent! We need young rhythm bones players to carry on for these fine men and woman. Go teach a youngster how to play!

---

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 15, No. 3 2013

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## Executive Director's Column

The bones have barely stopped ringing in my ears from Bones Fest XVII as I write this about a month from the Fest. I have many great memories of the Fest, and perhaps some "hind sight is 20/20" observations. I've never been more convinced that securing a base of operations is a key to planning a successful fest, and though it took me some time, the Unitarian Church, did in the long run, serve us well. I still wonder if this is a task which should be undertaken by one person, and I strongly advise future hosts to enlist support, and the board to consider a committee-type format. That being said, it's equally clear that the foundation of Bones Fests

in general is the people who attend, and we had a great and talented group this year. Something magical happens when we get together as it has in every fest I have attended (13 in all).

Judging from the many comments I have received, I would say every one who came felt the same as I. I was especially delighted to see almost all of the Cowett Family, and hope that Tommy is able to get to the next. Everett's spirit surely was there as we played "Swedish Rhapsody." As usual, I leave bones fest energized for bone playing, and eager to plan for next years fest. I hope every

(Continued on Page 3)

## Highlights of Bones Fest XVII

Despite a late start in organizing, Bones Fest XVII began as scheduled on August 8th, and unfolded much like the lotus flower in the Buddhist parable. From the performance on Dean Mazzerella's program on Thursday to the last hug goodbye on Sunday morning, Bones Fest XVII lived up to every expectation of what the Fests have become to us, a gathering of good friends, old and new, with a large helping of bone playing all around.

In reflecting what the general theme of this years fest could be described as, one thing stands out above all else: Community. A community of Bone players reaching out to a small community in Massachusetts to embrace each other. Perhaps the first open television performance at a Bones Fest on Inside Leominster to performance and teaching at the Senior Center and the Boys and

(Continued on page 7)



Bones Fest XVI Group Photograph following Rhythm Bones Flash Mod at Kimball Farms

## Editorial

I am sitting in the Hotel Cafe waiting for our final breakfast get-together reflecting on another great Fest. I'm starting to organize the video that Mary Lee Sweet and others shot to post on our website and YouTube (We owe her a big thank you for her labor of love by videoing many Bones Fest over the years). So much happened - I can't wait to see it.

I asked attendees for one word to describe the Fest. Last year in Orlando was the Beginner's Fest as we had maybe 60% beginners. In San Antonio it was the Performers Fest as we had 9 hours of stage time at the Texas Folklife Festival and The Alamo. In Alexandria it was the Workshop Fest as it left us with hours and hours of workshop videos on our website that many people have viewed. None of these Fests, of course, can be described in one word, but it helps me organize my thoughts.

This year the word is Community and it came from our host, Steve Brown. You can see it in the Fest graphic on our T-shirt, and Steve talked about how it was one of his organizing principles. Community for him was both out reach to the Leominster community as well as community within the attendees. This year among attendees, other than Saturday only attendees, there was only one beginner. The RBS community came together as we remembered Ev Cowett, RBS founding father, and Joe Birl. Ev set the tone - Fests are like a family reunion.

Lots of personal highlights for me. One in particular was watching Bill Vits lead the program where we taught bones playing at the Boys and Girls Club. I'll copy him next time I teach a group, and you will see him in one of the videos. Since teaching kids is one of our priorities, maybe it's time for some teaching articles in the newsletter.

The Video of the Quarter on Page 3 is interesting as it shows rhythm bones in a studio using sheet music. I don't think I could ever get good enough to do that.

The Rhythm Bones Society has an alternate web address. We are a non-profit organization and the Board approved purchasing the [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) domain name. It is up and running.

## Letters to the Editor

Annette and I went to Everett Cowett's memorial service on the 18th of May. I was surprised to see that Jonathon Danforth made it all the way from New Bedford. It was a happy occasion with family and friend telling great stories about Everett. I was really tickled to find that Everett's kids, Dan, Al, Tommy, Martha, and John (I think I named them all) had brought their bones and intended to play as part of the service. For some unknown reason Jonathon and I just happened to have our bones with us and the family was kind enough to let us join them. We played a favorite of Everett's and it seemed just right. Annette told me that a lady sitting in front of her said, "I would not have missed this memorial service for the world." *Mitch Boss*

Here are pictures [one shown on Page 8] of some actual rhythm bones that I cut and polished and my sister-in-law decorated with Celtic patterns. She is quite versatile and can do other motifs (Indian, Eastern, Old English, etc., etc.) I look forward to the newsletters. *Stan Von Hagen* [Stan is a new member.]

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

The Board Meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 3:54 PM in the First Unitarian Church in Leominster, MA. Those present were Steve Brown, Jonathan Danforth, Skeff Flynn, Bill Vits and Steve Wixson. Scott Spiegler was a visitor.

The minutes of the last meeting were read and approved. The Treasurer noted that he had emailed the 2012 Treasurer's Report to all Board members, and a complete listing of all supporting documents to the Executive Director. At the end of 2012, we had a bank balance of \$4,272.43. Motion was made and approved to accept the report.

The Board, serving as the Nominating Committee, nominated Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher and Kenny Wolin as Board Members. One position was left to be nominated

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

from the floor.

There was a discussion about a host for Bones Fest XVIII, and a decision will be made at a later time.

Dom Flemons requested a rhythm bones brochure that he could pass out at his shows. The motion was made, seconded and approved to print a trial run of 200 brochures. Steve Wixson presented a draft of a brochure and the Board will review and edit it.

There were two email motions passed this year; the first to make Ev Cowett a Fellow of the RBS and the second to authorize Bones Fest XVII.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:58. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson,

## Rhythmbones.org

The domain name of <http://rhythmbones.org> is an alternate address for our website. The <http://rhythmbones.com> will continue to work indefinitely.

(Continued from Page 1)

one of you are able to attend.

Jennifer, Jeremy and I are just back from a brief stay in the North woods of New Hampshire, where with Ernie Duffy, and Shirley Boulet, we attended a concert by the Carolina Chocolate Drops. I know many of you have seen them, but if you haven't I strongly recommend seeing them when they come around. Multi-instrumentalists Dom Flemons and Hubby Jenkins are fabulous bone players, and well worth the ticket price alone. But the bones alone scratch the surface of this amazingly talented band. Both Dom and Hubby illustrate how different we each are as bone players, and how we each develop a unique approach to playing the bones. The band, by the way, just returned from Europe, where they caught up with old friend Yirdy Machar at the Tonder Festival in Denmark, Dom was happy to report.

After re-reading my highlights article, I realized I left out an important ingredient to the Saturday night performance. Dave Reiner has been a good friend of the bones for many years. Dave and his friend JR played Saturday night, and added that magic he so often does.

As fall begins, I think again of gathering our bone playing friends for a regional Fest. Even after the effort of organizing BFXVII, the prospect of getting together before the snow flies is truly tantalizing. So think about it in your own area, you just might find eager participants! *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The General Membership meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 5:54 PM in the First Unitarian Church in Leominster, MA. The minutes of the last meeting were read and approved. The Treasurer reported that RBS had a bank balance of \$4,272.43 at the end of 2012.

The Nominating Committee report was read and the floor open for nominations. Tim Reilly was nominated and the motion was made, seconded and approved to elect the slate by acclamation.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:02PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve. Wixson

## More Bone Making From Walter Messick

I have been making bones for about 15 years. I learned from a musician friend of mine who had a retail shop and wanted some bones to sell but didn't know where to get them. So he showed me a pair and the rest is history. I now make them out of almost every kind of wood I have. Most are made from native woods but I also make them out of exotic woods when I have some. You name the wood and sound and I either have made or do make them. Most hardwoods are somewhat loud to loud with varying degrees of brightness and mellowness. These woods include black walnut, cherry, oak, maple, osage orange and the like. Woods like red cedar, western red cedar and similar woods are softer and more mellow. Not everyone wants to stand out in a crowd and they like a more quiet sound.

I cut my bones on a bandsaw with a jig I made to cut the same angle every time. I then sand them on a belt sander and an inflatable sander after rounding the edges on a router. There isn't much to a set of bones, but it takes more labor than what I can get out of them. If I wasn't a frustrated percussionist and understand that there are a lot of folks out there like me I wouldn't make them.

I have made thousands of pairs of bones selling most of them at craft shows over the years. I have them in several craft shops, galleries and the Country Store in Floyd, Va. Now I sell mostly through my website. *Walter Messick*  
cabincreekmusic@aol.com

## Guy Gillette Obituary

Member Guy Gillette passed away on September 2, 2013. Guy attended Bones Fest X with his daughter Dorcie and both Guy and his brother, Pipp, who performed as the Gillette Brothers, attended Bones Fest XI. They performed at that Fest, and many remember jamming to their music at the Nature Center.

A more complete obituary can be found on their website, [campstreetcafe.com](http://campstreetcafe.com). Guy's most recent contribution titled 'Cowboy Bones' is on Page 6. There will be a short tribute video on our homepage in October. *Steve Wixson*

## Steve Wixson Played Rhythm Bones Made on a 3D Printer

The Chattanooga City Library has a new printer. Not all that interesting except that it is one of the new 3D printers, a Makerbot Replicator-2 using the PLA polymer, and it is available free for anyone having a Chattanooga Library card which I happen to have.

Stereo lithograph has been around for more than 25 years, but only recently has this new lower cost generation of 3D printers become available.

To print in 3D, you need to prepare a 3 dimensional electronic drawing of what you to print. I did not have the program to do that, but had a friend at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga who suggested I try Sketchup.

Sketchup can be downloaded at [Sketchup.com](http://Sketchup.com). You can use this program free for 8 hours, and after that time if you want all of the features you have to buy the program. The program will still work, but not all of the features can then be used. It took me under 3 hours to learn how to use the program and do my rhythm bone design.

You can design lots of things with this software. I decided to model a Danforth rhythm bone which is really pretty simple. I started drawing an ellipse of 5/16" by 1." To do that I had to download an extra tool—called the Ellipse Plugin. Then I extruded the ellipse to 7" making a straight rhythm bone. To get the curved shape I had to download and use the Bender Plugin.

The 3D printer cannot use the output from this program, so you have to download the .stl Plugin that formats your model so it can be printed. I was able to email this file to the library, but you could put it on a DVD or USB card and take it to the printer which is not a bad idea because you probably want to see the printer in action.

The photograph of my 3D bones is on Page 8. They required a bit of sanding to remove material on one edge that supported the bone while it was being printed. I played them at BFXVII.  
*Steve Wixson*





Riedesel, Duffy & Boss on Mayor's CATV Program



Bill Vit's leading a beginners workshop for the Boys and Girls Club



Senior Center



Le Vent des Cantons and Victor Albert at Franco American Club



Flash Mob at Kimball Farm



Bill Vits' Workshop



Dan, Martha and John Cowett with Dan Reiner



Tim Reilly, Jerry Bell, Kenny and Teri Wolin



## Photographic Highlights by Adam Klein, Mary Lee Sweet and Steve Wixson



Ari Erlbaum



Michael Ballard and Dave Reiner



Norm Conrad



Parker Waite



Gerry Hines



Nicole Singer



Jonathan Danforth



Blue Hammond, Jeremy & Steve Brown with Dave



Skeff Flynn



Traditional Conga Line Finale with Bill Vits in front followed by Steve Wixson and Ivan Browning

## John Hall's Ted Mack Story

The other folk whom I know from talking to them were Joe Bennett and the Sparkletones (of "Black Slacks" fame, way back when) and Pennsylvania-born singer and songwriter Ed Rambeau. My dad thought I ought to audition for the show, and so he encouraged me to do so. After I auditioned at the Golfb Studios in New York City, the producers, spotting a natural connection, book Dad and Me for the Fathers Day show in 1958, so we were on the show in June. I had a great time; little did I know my dad was petrified, but he carried it off beautifully. I was 15 at the time; almost 71 now. As soon as I figure out how to copy the DVD I have without wrecking the thing, I'll make a copy for you! *John Hall*

## Rhythm Bones Project in Switzerland

Last June we started a bones-project in Switzerland. We are trying to introduce the bones to the Swiss Bluegrass and Old-Time players and maybe get some interested teachers that would like to play bones with their students.

I have visited the Chlefeldi-builder Röbi Kessler and bought some of his Chlefeldis (See Vol 15, No 1, Page 5 for more about Röbi). I think the bones are a bit easier to play, so a friend and I started to build our own bones-prototypes.

To get started we set up a crowd-funding project in Switzerland. The motto is "Swiss-Bones - an old instrument re-discovered". The crowd funding project was a success. We found 45 supporters for our Swiss-Bones project.

So we could start to produce our first series of Swiss-Bones. In a few weeks the bones will be ready for shipping and the Swiss-Bones website will be upgraded. We are planning to include tutorials, links and of course a contact/order-form for anybody who is interested in our bones. *Caspar Noetzi* ([www.swiss-bones.ch](http://www.swiss-bones.ch))

## Cowboy Bones

We have always assumed that many of the cowboys that went up the trail following the War Between the States, probably played the bones. Not only because they could carry them easily and they were readily available to them, but because the Irish and African American cowboys among them (which there were many) would have been familiar with the bones from their backgrounds. Also, Minstrel Show Music was among the popular music of the Trail Driving Era and cowboys would have been exposed to it, like everyone else. In spite of this, we have had very little luck in finding written or concrete evidence.

We thought we had hit pay dirt a while back when after acquiring a copy of "Black Cowboys of Texas", we saw a chapter on Mathew "Bones" Hooks, but it turned out that his nickname referred to the "thin and wiry" build of the horse wrangler / bronc buster and not to the playing of the bones.

Our only positive historical confirmation came several years ago while my brother Pipp and I were playing our music at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. After finishing a set, we were approached by an excited 80 something year old Montana rancher, Marvin Bell, who said he heard the bones while walking through the museum and immediately set out to find the source.

He then went on to relate how that an Irish cowboy that he had worked with as a young man, Paddy Ryan, had taught him to play bones and that together the two of them played in a cowboy band. Paddy was born sometime in the 1890's in Miles City, Montana and was working on the Flying D Ranch (now owned by Ted Turner).

We have included the bones in our music for the past 14 years and have taken them to Cowboy Gatherings around the country, from Elko, Nevada to Alpine, Texas, to Monterey, California, etc., and have included them on recordings for 5 albums of cowboy music.

We have not given up looking, but at this time that is the extent of our knowledge connecting bones playing with cowboys and ranching history.

I found this in my notes and unfortunately did not make a note of where I found it. Best wishes *Guy Gillette*

Now gather 'round me fellers,  
we'll have a little fun  
We'll dance upon the boards,  
and beat upon the drum  
We're a happy band of cowboys,  
and we're gathered here to play  
So strike the bones and tambourine  
and drive all cares away.

## Rhythm Bones Workshop at Albuquerque Folk Music Festival

In June, 2013, I gave my annual rhythm bones workshop at the Albuquerque Folk Music Festival. As usual, it went very well. Over 25 beginner and intermediate players showed up. We had a great time, despite a huge, 10,000+ft plume of smoke from a raging forest fire that was clearly visible in the Jemez Mountains to the northwest.

At the workshop I started with a short oral history of the bones that included their appearance in the Bible (Ezekiel), in human grave-sites dating 2000 years and more, the Irish connection, the addition of polyrhythms by American slaves, and the whole minstrel show thing.

I then showed how it's not the bones per se but the technique that counts. I played butter knives, pencils, spoons (the bones way, not the spoons way), and even a meter stick cut into four 10 cm pieces. At that point I pulled out my real bones: ribs from a cow skeleton I found 20 years ago bleaching in the sun at the base of the volcanoes that sit on Albuquerque's western horizon.

Next we hit the basics with the tap, some simple rhythms, and lead up to the roll. My muse the entire time was Percy Danforth. It was from him in 1981-1982 I learned to play the bones and bought my first pair of Danforth Bones. I still have quite a stash of his bones in my collection of about 30 pairs.

I don't get to play the bones much during the year due to my full time obligations to teaching, pursuing a PhD and, oh yeah, baseball dad, but I look forward every year to the ABQ Folk Fest where I hope to turn more folks onto the bones.

*David A Wilson*

(Continued from page 1)

Girls Club, to the first ever Bone playing Flash Mob at Kimball Farm, The Rhythm Bones Society reached out to Leominster and it reached back to us. Every where we went we were greeted with openness and friendliness, if not with a little surprise and curiosity. As hard as it was to get this thing started from an organizer's perspective, it fulfilled all of my dreams and expectations. I'd like to reflect back on the highlights, although I'm afraid there may be so many as to cover the entire fest.

Although I appreciate our invitation to play on the Mayor's program, what really stands out about Thursday for me was seventeen bone players enjoying dinner together in one of my favorite restaurants, Il Forno in Fitchburg. Literally like a family dinner, there was frivolity all around, and of course bone playing as we attempted to teach our server Josh just what we were all about.

Highlights of Friday have to include teaching 60+ children in Leominster what the bones are and how to play, nothing like looking over a Gym full of kids clacking away!

We connected so well at the Senior Center, that we had a number of Seniors following us around throughout the week end!

Friday afternoon was good, but Friday night was more than fantastic, my good friend Paul Luria set the scene with a bone along, and the band Le Vent Des Cantons just rocked our bone playing spirit. When my friend Victor Albert, master French Canadian Fiddler, showed up and played with the band, it truly was magical. At 88, he still has the ability which saw him win numerous fiddle contests.

To say that Bones Fests have been good for my son Jeremy is an understatement. Watching him playing on Friday night and through out the weekend brought tears to my eyes!

Good friend Jerry Bell showed up toward the end of the night at the Franco Club, but was still playing at the hotel when I went to bed at midnight, and continued into the wee hours, I understand!

Saturday morning started with a loving tribute to Everett Cowett by all present, including six members of the Cowett family. It was great to reflect on the life

of our founding father. I was thrilled when Martha Cowett produced a CD of Swedish Rhapsody, one of Everett's favorite bone playing tunes, and we all played away.

Intertwined with this was a tribute to Joe Birl, an Iconic figure in the bone playing world.

After Bill Vit's enlightening program on integrating the drum set with bone playing (man can that guy play!) we headed over to Kimball Farm in Lancaster, a short drive away. The Flash Mob was truly inspirational! The entire experience at Kimball's was remarkable, and a number of attendees came to our Saturday night performance as well, and we got free ice cream, by the way.

Saturday afternoon saw a great presentation on Latin rhythms by Kenny Wolin, our resident marine. My only regret was that Sharon Mescher, who requested the workshop, was unable to be at the Fest due to a family emergency. Somebody send her the video, please!

Ok, I have to admit there are just too many highlights of Saturday night to include in this brief overview, it really shined and there was total agreement that it was one of the best programs we have presented.

But with general acknowledgment that I simply have to leave some out here are my highlights: Ari Erlbaum's hysterical Star Wars bone playing rap complete with nose flute and kazoo, Mitch Boss' persistent dry humor, and bone playing pyrotechnics, Adam Klein's soaring version of John Henry, Tim Reilly's intricate accompaniment to a harpsichord piece, Frank and Mary Lee Sweet accompanied by Dave and the band on Tell Me Ma, Bernie Worrell demonstrating why the Mescher Tradition is one of the most fascinating aspects of bone playing, Steve Wixson playing to the 17 year cycle of cicada's, Bill Vits blowing our socks off accompanying his own band on CD, and Kenny Wolin doing a Rickey Ricardo tribute complete with advertisements for RBS members parody products (that one is hard to explain, but trust me absolutely hysterical).

I would be amiss if I didn't thank all of the first timers who beat their fear and reluctance, and got up and performed admirably including Nicole Singer and Scott Spiegler, to name two.

I am truly in awe of our community which came together to produce one of the best Bones Fests, and to name all of the help and assistance I received in this is simply to put everyone's names down, but to thank the following people quite simply with out whose help this Fest simply would not have happened.

It goes with out saying that Steve Wixson is the glue that holds us together, and his help with this fest was phenomenal. From the structure, organization, including the program book, and general encouragement, I just couldn't have done it with out him.

In my darkest days preceding the Fest, Mary Lee Sweet gave me the gentle strength to continue, and know that the most important thing was in bringing us together, and for that I sincerely thank her.

In the waning moments of Saturday night, when I could barely stand up, and think straight, two people were there with me to the end, Kevin Kelly and Ernie Duffy. Sweeping floors, carrying equipment, emptying trash, they lifted me up to the end and for that I thank them.

As they say, last but certainly not least, is my wife Jennifer whose tireless work before, during and after the fest helped me to persevere.

Bones Fest XVII is now just a memory, but what a memory. Although it took some hard work, and perseverance through the difficulties, it was more than worth it!

One last thought, have you thought about sponsoring a Bones Fest in your area? In order for these things to continue, we must stand as a community and carry it forward. How about it? *Steve Brown*

## Report on NTCMA Rhythm Bones Contest

When we arrived at the Le Mars festival, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that previous winner Joseph Kooi's sister, Anika, had taken up the bones six months prior. Now, she and Joseph play together. They not only play the bones, but, at times will tap dance as they play. The bones contest was held and here are the results: 1st place, Joseph Kooi; 2nd place, Anika Kooi; 3rd, Jeff Ostis. *Sharon Mescher*



Rhythm bones printed on a 3D Printer (see Page 3)



Stan Von Hagen rhythm bones (see Letter to Editor)



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet



Adam Klein

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 15, No. 4 2013

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## Executive Director's Column

The December snow is melting at a fast rate outside during an early winter thaw, and the craziness of the Holiday Season is upon us. I'm in my usual reflecting mood which settles in this time of the year. Thinking back on the amazing experience of hosting Bones Fest again, and the loss of good friends like our founding father, Everett Cowett, and Texas bones player Guy Gillette. We are experiencing these losses way to frequently.

I want to share something important which has recently come to my attention. Dan Cowett, Everett's oldest son is in the midst of fighting for his life. Dan was a constant fixture at Bones Fest's from the earliest days. Pairing with his brother Al, who was the MC, Dan ran the sound board to make sure we all sounded good. Like many people in his position, he did a lot of work, and got little credit or attention. He has been diagnosed with a serious case of cancer,

is having frequent Chemo treatments, and is unable to work. I don't have to tell you how important the Cowett family is to our instrument and organization. I would encourage all of you to reach out to Dan and the Cowett's during this difficult time. Donations or cards, and letters can be sent directly to Martha Cowett in Dan's name Martha Cowett USPS - 9 Wetherburn Way Greensboro, NC 27510

I am extraordinarily excited about Bones Fest this year. The prospect of going to Grand Rapids MI, to Percy Danforth's state, and experience one of the great communities in the country is, in a word, thrilling. Bill Vits and other Michigan folks are working hard to put it together, and the details will be forth coming. Hope to see you there! *Steve Brown*

## Rhythm Bones in a Civil War Prison Camp

There is a grim story about prisoners during the Civil War. It is mostly forgotten, but member Jean Mehaffey found the story in a magazine-like book American Heritage, Vol XV, No 6, October 1964, titled "A Civil, and Sometimes Uncivil, War."

In summary, "The living conditions were atrocious, food and medical care were incredibly bad, crowding was almost unendurable. The soldiers in charge were not inhumane; it was the product of war and too many prisoners.

"The story was told by one of the prisoners, Ezra H Ripple, a Yankee in the Confederate prison who started a camp orchestra. What makes it relevant for us is the orchestra included a rhythm bones player. Ripple also hired James E. Taylor, who made the sketches included with this article that give us some idea of what happened.

"It began when Ripple found a violin and began playing for the other prisoners who started dancing and singing. The next day he was called up and asked to play for the officers. He found a few others who could play and "soon they played every evening in front of

the Colonel's quarters."

"Ripple had found a way to soften his camp experience, and "presently his music won him and his makeshift band a trip to the village." After the difficult job of finding suitable clothing, they performed in the open-air to an audience mostly of slaves. They did so well that they were invited to come inside and play. A few days later they played in a more formal setting.

(Continued on Page 8)



Ripple's Camp Band moves inside to play for the help.

## Editorial

I met Jean Mehaffey at the NTCMA festival in Avoca, IA and later at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, KS (the home of bones player, Barry Patton). She knows a lot about rhythm bones and I've enjoyed talking with her. Jean, now a member, sent me a copy of the American Heritage magazine with the article that is reprinted on Page 1. She also sent us the photograph of the maritime band with a rhythm bones player that has been included in a couple of newsletters. Thanks, Jean.

Board Member, Kenny Wolin, led a workshop on Latin rhythms at Bones Fest XVII. Part of what he had to do was develop some notation that would be easy for rhythm bones players to use. His article is on Pages 6 and 7, and a video of his workshop is the Video of the Month for January and will have a permanent home on our website after that.

While I learned to play rhythm bones from my father, the two main influences on my playing were Dr Fred Edmond, who many consider the grandfather of RBS, and his 'Bones Unlimited' book and video and Aaron Plunkett's bones instructional video. The first is now owned by RBS and is available for free on our website. The later has been converted to DVD and can be purchased. In this issue, Aaron tells us his bones making story.

Bill Vits will be our host for Bones Fest XVIII on August 7-10, 2014 in Grand Rapids, MI. Put it on your calendar and look for details in the next issue and on our website. And read his Natalie McMaster story on Page 3.

Jerry Mescher obtained a video when he and his dad appeared on the Original Amateur Hour TV show. Turns out the producer of that show is still alive and wrote an article for us. Member John Hall also was on that show (See Vol 15, No 3.) Jack Frost was also on that show and see Page 4 for his remembrances.

Thanks to Dr Christopher Smith for his excerpt on *The Bones Player* painting from his book on William Sydney Mount. (see Page 7.)

Member Mardeen Gordon of Shooting Star Bones does more than make them. She tells how she embroidered the just

mentioned *Bhe Bones Player* painting Brad Dutz's Youtube video (see letter in the column to the right) demonstrates rhythm bones in a studio setting with sheet music and direction. You've got to watch it!

## Letters to the Editor

Thank you for the tribute to Guy!

When Guy gave me the instructional video by Mel Mercier on playing the bodhran, he never would have guessed what he was getting himself in to. The segment in the video on playing the bones sparked Guy's interest.

He went out where an old grey Brahman cow had died and found his first set of bones. That first set, strangely enough, ended up being the set he played from then on.

Playing the bones was I feel for Guy a very liberating experience. He was able to jam with musicians from a variety of genres of music and always made it work.

After every performance, Guy would be surrounded by a group of inquiring people-both young and old-wanting to learn to play the bones. He would always give an impromptu bones workshop.

Thank you for the video, thank you for all you've done, and my wife and I hope to make it to one of your events soon. With Highest Regards, *Pipp Gillette*

I thought your readers may want to know about a new show starting in January 2014 on STARZ channel called *Black Sails* and it's about some pirates. Bruce Carver and I have played on all the episodes. I have played many bones on all the cues and Bruce is doing all the bodhran work. Below is a Youtube link so your readers can check it out. Bear McCreary is the composer (he is the one who does walking dead and Battlestar Galactica). [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwMmJfF\\_xrEifF\\_xrE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwMmJfF_xrEifF_xrE). *Brad Dutz*

Saw the Carolina Chocolate Drops play at the Ottawa Folk Festival last month and was fascinated with Dom Flemons' playing of the bones. So when I was in Halifax, NS recently on business I dropped into the local folk music shop and bought the only set they had (mahog-

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

any). I dabble in playing some rhythm instruments (including the bodhran) so familiar with reels and jigs, etc. Have watched some YouTube video and now teaching myself (great thing to do while walking the dog in the woods out back our country house).

Found out about RBS just by Googling the bones. And now have connected with Bob Bolton of Sydney, Australia (who's under "players" on the RBS site) since I'm traveling to Sydney on business in November - I'm hoping to get together with him for a lesson! (BTW: I also play the didgeridoo, and will be getting more lessons on that instrument too while Down Under).

Already thinking about attending next summer's festival! *Jay Thomson*

[RBS introduced Jay to Bob Bolton and Bob sent this email.] I'm hoping that Jay will be able to work out dates and spare time in his lightning visit

... and we can get together and rattle a few sets of 'bones'. I did mention in my email reply to Jay that I have made a lot of different ... generally wooden ... sets of "bones" and that my late father had made many sets for Boy Scouts to play in Scout Camp concerts & sessions. In the long run, I have decided that Dad's sets ... following the general design written up in early 1960's Bush Music Club "Singabout" magazine(s) ... but using Australian "Brush Box" timber were as effective as any I have heard ... but I have subtly modified the grip and mass distribution - in ways that don't mirror the form of a beef rib - but do help player grip and resonance - so they are both firm and responsive.

I also just skimmed through my 'bones sets' making / assessment records and

realised that, during my obsessive 'wooden bones' period it seem to have experimented with subtly different designs and configurations of 'bones' sets ... in some 34 ... mostly ... Australian (regional) timbers ... plus beef shin bones ... and "densified wood" from a 1930s electrical switchboard!

Some of them are clearly good! Unfortunately, I haven't played them nearly enough with the serious permutations of the Bush Music Club's (~) 'Concert Party' assemblies over the years to expand that observation ... and I'm mostly playing Button Accordion / Anglo Concertina / Mouth Organ or Tin Whistle in band gigs! (The only one of these that allows me to also play bones simultaneously is (.. left-handed ...) mouth organ ...)  
Regards, *Bob Bolton*

## Bill Vits Plays Bones With Natalie MacMaster

The Grand Rapids Symphony did a pops weekend with Natalie MacMaster, fiddler & stepdancer three years ago. At that time, she had a new baby 4 1/2 weeks ago and was dancing & looking fabulous. I was playing drum set trying to pull along a sluggish orchestra with my teeth. My monitor mix was troublesome, but the first half went well on Friday night.

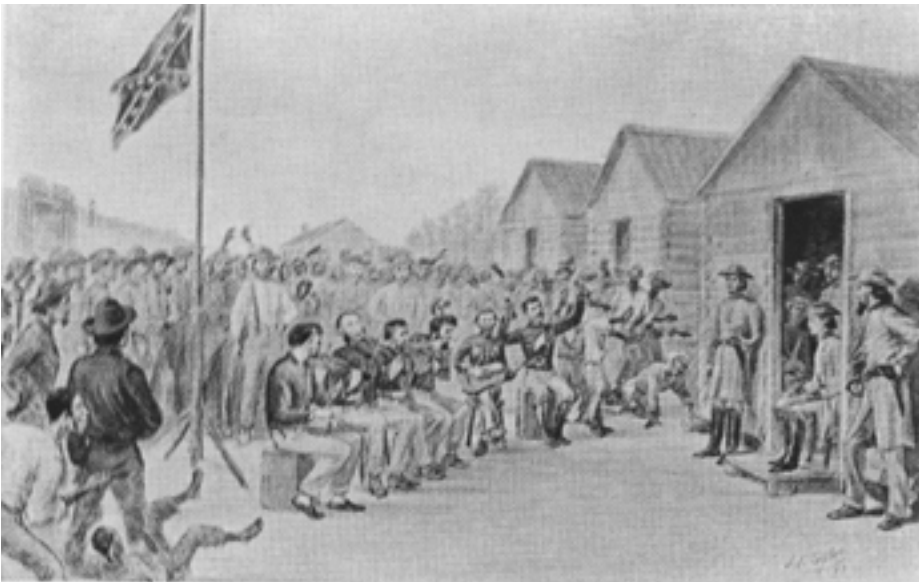
At the intermission she was in the hall with her nanny, baby & two other children. I said "I've been wanting to tell you I played the rhythm bones, but waited till we got off to a good start." Her eyes lit up and she said "come on" and we went into her dressing room with her piano player and kids. In 30 seconds we played a bit, she said wait till the piano solo and she'd give me the nod to come out front.

The orchestra and our conductor didn't even know till I came downstage and the crowd went wild. We did it for the next two shows and people have been stopped me all week to comment on the magic of the bones along with her star qualities.

Check her out on Youtube if you haven't seen her. Here's a link to the review. [http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/03/canadian\\_musician\\_plays\\_and\\_lo.html](http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/03/canadian_musician_plays_and_lo.html)

Recently Natalie returned to perform on our summer Picnic Pops series outdoors at the Cannonsburg Ski Area. We have a gorgeous white acoustical tent that covers the orchestra and thousands sit up the ski hill. This visit she brought her keyboard player and a percussionist, Eric Breton, who played a left handed drum set up with congas. He worked the bones into a couple numbers and did so while playing the rest of the kit. Eric is from the East Townships of Quebec and studied in Montreal and specializes in World Music.

After the show we rattled the bones a bit and I brought him a local Founders IPA. He's an excellent player and was hip to all my tricks. Natalie (who wasn't even tired after a 2 hour show in 95 degree heat) joined us and kept saying "I should have got both of you up there playing the bones!" *Bill Vits*



Another photograph for the article on Page 1. Ripple and fellow musicians play for the officers. The bones player is on end of band



A third photograph for the article on Page 1. After the band found suitable clothing, they performed in the open-air to an audience mostly of slaves.

## Rhythm Bones on the *The Original Amateur Hour*

“The Original Amateur Hour” was proud to have been one of the few outlets in American broadcasting to offer an open forum for one of the country’s most unique and original performance arts: the bones! Over the span of the radio series with Major Edward Bowes as host and the TV series with Ted Mack as host, scores of bones players were given their chance at the proverbial “15 minutes of fame.” This unusual entertainment form dating back to early minstrel and vaudeville days was enjoyed by millions of “Amateur Hour” listeners and viewers.

On television, we had many performers ... solos, duos, families, etc. Here are just a few that I have in my archives at The Library of Congress in Washington, DC:

11/21/48: Jack Gerson from Brooklyn plays the musical bones

4/3/51: Luther Tall plays the bones

8/5/56: From New York: Amerose & Gerson play guitar and the bones and yodel

4/21/57: Brooklyn salesman Donald Watts plays the bones

4/5/58: From East. Haddam, Conn., Lauren Copperthite plays the bones

6/7/58: From Garden City, Long Island, John Hall & Father play the bones

8/23/58: From Columbus, Ohio, Mary Jean Young plays the bones and the marichas

11/2/58: From Camden, NJ, Paul Jones plays the spoons and bones

7/31/59: New Yorker Marian Barber plays the musical minstrel bones

6/18/61: Iowa Dad & Son team Albert

& Jerry Mescher play the bones

1/10/65: From Opalaka, Florida, Harry Darne plays the musical bones

7/25/65: From Camden, NJ, George Meares plays the bones

9/5/65: From Columbus, Ohio, Alfred Kerns plays the musical bones

10/10/65: From St. Paul, MN Jack Frost plays the bones and The Devils Fiddle Stick

10/20/68: Worchester, Pennsylvania, Ormerod “Ducky” Duckworth plays the bones

I gladly make these shows and others available at my own cost to individuals and organizations.

If you would like a longer history of the show, I have attached an article I wrote a while back for The Caucus for Producers, Directors and Writers in Los Angeles. You have my permission to use any and all of it in your publication as well as the photographs.

Let me know if there is anything else I can do. *Albert Fisher*, Producer, The Original Amateur Hour, website: [originalamateurhour.com](http://originalamateurhour.com).

[Today’s American Idol show and those like it can trace their roots to The Original Amateur Hour. The radio version created by Major Edward Bowes was on the air from 1935 until 1944. The television version with his former talent scout, Ted Mack, was on the air from 1948 until 1970. There was a one year revival with Willard Scott in 1992. All of these shows had high ratings.

There are several recognizable names in this list. Jerry Mescher obtained a copy of he and his father’s performance and played it at Bones Fest IV. John Hall’s story was in the last newsletter. Read a story in the column to the right that former member Jack Frost wrote of his experience.]



Major Bowes and radio announcer, Ralph Edwards



Ted Mack host of the television show

## Jack Frost’s Ted Mack Story

I got selected when I auditioned here in Minneapolis. They announced it in the paper, and I said why not - let’s do it. I’m 80 years old now. I’m trying to remember where we auditioned - some theater.

I was surprised to get a call saying “you’re on the show.” I was playing bones and my devil’s fiddle - sort of a one man band. It’s funny and a lot of people just laugh at it. I figure they are enjoying it and I’ve done it a lot of shows, particularly solo shows. When I play in a band they let me do at least one number with the devil’s fiddle and maybe a couple with the bones.

The show was in Chicago in a special theatre. I was so proud to be on the Ted Mack show. They paid for us to come, but we drove - they paid for gas.

When we were practicing - each one taking our turn - I think I got the most applause of anybody. They had a band. They gave each one of us 4 minutes, and for me I could play the bones for 2 minutes and the devils’ fiddle for the other two minutes.

I saw Ted Mack for the first time on the show. I don’t think I saw him before the show - might have. Ted was very gracious, and they treated us real well. They took care of our housing, our meals - everything.

The winner was selected with maybe 2 points by applause and the rest by people calling in or sending post cards.

I had to laugh like crazy because there were so many funny things that happened. You know when you’re practicing and playing things fall apart. The devil’s fiddle came apart and I had to repair it.

My bones were steady, and they were sort of new too. I made them when I was about 15 years old - out of ebony wood. I’m still playing them, and can’t wear them out. I’ve made other bones, but didn’t like the sound and threw them out.

I did not win - a singer won. *Jack Frost*

[Jack is mentioned in the column to the left. He was interview over the telephone, and this may not be an exact transcription.]



## Aaron Plunkett Bones Maker and More

Hi, I'm Aaron Plunkett. I'm a professional percussionist. I'd like to share a bit of my story.

In the mid-1980's I traveled to many countries on a World Music Tour following the path and history of how hand-struck musical instruments migrated around the world. After leaving the Middle East I went to Ireland. I wanted to trace my family roots and learn about the history of my ancestors that date back to Ireland, 900A.D. I spent many rainy days traveling throughout the greener than green highlands playing bones and bodhran with the locals.

Dunsany Castle, Townland of Dunsany, County Meath, in the Northeast was passed through marriage to the Plunkett's in 1180 A.D. and remains so today. It was used to film the marriage scene in the film Braveheart.

My most famous ancestor, Canonized Archbishop Oliver Plunkett, circa 1629-1681, was taken to London—hung, drawn, and quartered, July 1, 1681, by Cromwell. His skull and bones eventually returned to Ireland and are preserved on display in St. Peter's Church in Drogheda, County Louth, just north of Dublin. Seeing Saint Oliver's skull inside a glass case sent me straight to the warmth in the pub, the comfort of a pint, and a bonus "Jam". The experience left me with the profound desire to better play the Irish bodhran and the Irish musical bones. It sent me on a journey throughout the Emerald Isle, East/West, North/South. I was privileged to be taken in by Master Irish musical instrument makers, players and performers and tutored in the arts of making and playing traditional Irish percussion instruments.

Since that time, I have continued on the path to steward these ancient Irish musical art forms. I was commissioned to compose and record tracks for the film, TITANIC. I teach and have produced a "how-to" video to play musical bones—'Bones from the Beginning': [http://world-beats.com/cd\\_vid/VID\\_bones.htm](http://world-beats.com/cd_vid/VID_bones.htm)

I encourage and welcome others to preserve the Irish cultural heritage by learning to play.

I make bones and distribute hand struck instruments: <http://world-beats.com/store/index.htm>

I make bones out of three materials: genuine goat bones, Lignum Vitae/Ironwood, and Blue Bones made from a polycarbonate composite plastic. Each offers a subtle different feel, playing action, and "crack" or sound.

The Goat-Rib Bones are "hands-down" the premium instrument to play. The tonality and intensity of their vibrations is superior in clarity, depth of sound, and "crack." The natural bone produces a wider range of frequencies.

Making musical bones from goat ribs is a craft that was passed on to me from Masters in Ireland. A mature, specific breed, goat must be sacrificed. You ask for the Creator's Blessing and thank Her for providing such a perfect instrument. The rib bones are first soaked for several weeks in a special organic bath to remove the flesh and to sanitize the bone. They are then sun-dried for several more weeks. After all of that, I size, seal, and tether matching pairs of ribs with a strap of leather: <http://world-beats.com/instruments/bones.htm>

Lignum Vitae or Ironwood Bones are made from the Lignum Vitae tree that grows mostly in South America. It is one of the densest woods on the planet. I use this dense material to make bones to capture the quality of the sound produced by the vibration created when two of these wooden "ribs" are struck together in mid-air. That action produces a piercingly loud, crisp, "crack." The process to get to the "rib" is tedious. The log of Ironwood must first be cut using a method called "quarter-sawn." This technique produces greater stability of form and size with less warping. The log is quartered lengthwise, resulting in wedges with a right angle ending approximately at the center of the log. I then cut strips and trim them in sized lengths. These I steam bend and cooper to the specific arc curvature. Proper protective precautions, i.e., ventilation and a mask are essential because inhaled dust is deadly:

<http://world-beats.com/woodbones.htm>

My relatively new creations are the Plunkett Blue Bones (see photographs on right). They are made from a polycarbon-

ate compound with a mystery ingredient added for weight. The weight enhances the pendulum action allowing speed and accuracy. The mixture results in an exothermic reaction that is poured while still "hot" into bone shaped molds using the French cold-caste bronze displacement method. I have made these molds from my personal collection of authentic Irish goat bones collected while touring Ireland. Blue Bones distinct sound and playing action are the result of the materials used being evenly distributed and suspended throughout the length of the bone. They are easy to hold, super fast to play, not too loud in volume, less costly and come with the added bonus of saving rare Lignum Vitae trees and rare long horn goats. I make them in two sizes to create different pitches and to create a better fit and feel for different sized hands: <http://world-beats.com/instruments/bones-plastic.htm> Aaron Plunkett



Plunkett Blue Bones - Large Size

# Latin Bones and Notation Workshop Recap

[This article is illustrated in a video on the [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) website]

Many traditional rhythms in what we call “Latin music” are structured around a repeated 1 or 2 bar, pattern called the “clave.” Clave basically means “key” (the key or repeated guide pattern). The clave is also the musical instrument often used in Latin music, especially in Cuba, Africa (hence the term Afro-Cuban), and Brazil.

Since claves as percussion instruments are so incredibly similar to our beloved rhythm bones, they fit really well with the music. Putting together a Latin Bones Clinic for our most recent Bones Fest was quite challenging in notating my thoughts, as well as what I could cram into a 45 minute workshop. This reminds me, I must give a big shout out to our Bones Bretheren, Mike Ballard who provided me with the use of his claves! What doesn't he have in that magic bag of his?

I started the class with a one and two-hand demonstration of some of the rhythms that could be achieved with bones by applying many patterns I've learned from drumset, congas, bongos and timbales.

Next, I talked about breaking it all down to just 3 basic rhythms that seem to work well with most Latin music.

The first rhythm I demonstrated on claves is the “clave,” which I previously mentioned:

a) 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +    b) 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

I had everyone stand up, or sit up, and walk in place. Since walking is human nature, I like to have everyone do this because it gets your entire body in motion, so you can really feel the beat. We all CLAPPED anything that is **bold with an underline** (if you watch the video I circled what I wanted everyone to clap). After we got comfortable with this we tried it out on bones (one or two-handed).

Looking at my notation, your feet touch the ground on every number. In other words, you're walking on the downbeat. I also insisted on everyone counting OUT LOUD! Sorry, that was just beaten into me for many years while learning all

the drum rudiments.

When we say the word “and” notice that your foot is lifted off the ground. You guessed it – that's called the upbeat. This is very important to understand because when we're talking about the term “syncopated music.” It means that you're playing rhythms that have a lot more upbeats than downbeats in them. Latin, African music and Old Time American music has a lot of this!

We played along to “What's New” by Jamie Aebersold – Latin Jazz Vol.74, that emphasized the clave pattern. I pointed out that this is called a “2-3 Clave Pattern” because measure “a” has 2 bones clicks, and measure “b” has 3 bones clicks.

Some Latin music has it reversed so if you start with measure “b” and then measure “a” you end up with a “3-2 Clave Pattern.” No worries, if you're playing along and the clave is not obvious, just play what you think sounds good, but make sure you try and lock in with the Bass player!

Before I moved on to the next pattern, I threw in an advanced exercise for the 2-hand independence bones players - Play the clave pattern with your Left Hand, while playing the following rhythm with your Right Hand:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 ±

Work this out very slowly starting with just measure “a” of the clave till you can feel where the beats fall and gets comfortable, then isolate measure “b”. It's very awkward at first, but once your body is entrained it just feels good!

Remember that repetition (ideo-kinetic exercise) is crucial because we're working on muscle memory. To quote one of my teachers, “it's not that you can do them, it's that you do do them!”

The next pattern we worked on is called the “rhumba pattern,” which works really well with slow Latin dance music.

a) R L L R

b) L L R L

OK, this is where

the notation discussion got interesting. I came up with this after experimenting with beginning bones players who aren't familiar with Western notation. I taught my mom, and this seemed to make it much easier for her to have a visual example of what she was playing and hearing.

Anyway, take a look at measure “a.” I normally just circle the “L” but for typing purposes it's underlined. That represents a 3-tap, triplet, triple-flourish, 3-note Willie, or whatever else you wanna call it. The point is, when you walk in place every tap (whether it's Right or Left hand) should be on the downbeat. Measure “a” has 4 downbeats, so go back and forth counting either

“1 - 2 - 3 - 4 -” or “R - L - L - R -”

When you get to the “L” that is underlined, or circled (some people suggested to me notating the L with a triangle around it, which I really like) do your bones flourish, but just make sure that those 3 taps are evenly spaced starting on beat “2.”

In percussion notation, I would say the word “tri-pe-let.” To connect it all together, L L is verbalized as “Tri-pe-let Tap.”

In non-western verbal notation, Greg Burrows I think would say “ta-ke-ta” for the 3-note triplet. Greg, could you please elaborate on this so Steve could add an article to the next newsletter and I could get credit for this shameless plug?

Anyhoo....we played along to a Slow Rhumba with a 2-3 Clave called: “ii/V7/I (Twelve Keys)” by Jamie Abersold – Salsa/Latin Jazz Vol.64

The last rhythm we touched upon is a repeated 2-measure rhythm called “cascara” which means “shell.” This is commonly played on the side of the tim-



Kenny Wolin's Latin Workshop with large sheet of bones notation.

bale, or with the Right hand on a drumset cymbal or cowbell, while the Left hand improvises.

a)  $\underline{1} + \underline{2} + \underline{3} + \underline{4} \pm$     b)  $\underline{1} + \underline{2} \pm 3 + 4 \pm$

Notice that this has a lot of syncopation, or upbeats. Same drill as before. Experiment with this by alternating your clicks between Right and Left, then try the whole thing with just your dominant hand. A lot of this music can be pretty up-tempo, so I use a lot of drumstick techniques to get the bones bouncing off of each other in rhythm.

I like to play this rhythm with my right hand while playing different clave patterns with my left, then reverse it by playing the cascara with my left hand. I'm a big proponent of playing 2-handed bones with 2 very distinct high-low pitches so that even a slight variation can make it sound more interesting. The slow rhumba pattern is a great example of that when you change up the Lefts and Rights.

We played along to "What's New" by Jamie Aebersold – Latin Jazz Vol.74

Finally, we talked briefly about improvising in this style by using lots of upbeat rhythms. When we walked in place (sitting or standing) we tried to focus on tapping/clicking when our foot was lifted up.

We played along to "Manteca" in a fast 2-3 Clave by Jamie Aebersold – Salsa/Latin Jazz Vol.64.

I wrapped everything up with a little teaser of the Ricky Ricardo skit/performance that I did that night, so everyone could pick out many of the rhythms we worked on.

FYI: the opening commercial announcements were done by my 11yr old son, Ben, which included Spike Bones Dog Treats, Doc Brown's Irish Whiskey, Dapper Danforth's PalmAid ("Don't be a Dapper Dan man, be a Dapper Danforth Man!"), and Cap't Reilly's Fishsticks ("That Mystical treat!").

Next article I'd like to talk more about notation ideas for many of the different techniques our members have come up with over the years.

Thanks again for attending and supporting these workshops. Teri and I hope to see many old friends and new faces in Michigan (my home state!) this Summer!  
*Kenny Wolin*

## Book Excerpt: Mount's Painting of The Bone Player

William Sidney Mount's *The Bone Player* was painted in 1856 the same year as his possibly even better-known *The Banjo Player*. It is one of a collection of four paintings which in the Creolization book I called the "Gallery", because all four—Just in Tune from 1849, Right and Left from 1850, and *The Banjo and Bone Player*—employ elements of classical portraiture. In this period, the portrayal of African American vernacular musicians, especially for African American musicians, was highly unusual. Though Mount was quite conservative in his politics, he had learned from black players, and his rendering of these musicians as heroic figures conveys respect and admiration. Moreover, the precision and accuracy with which he renders details of instruments and technique confirms his usefulness in understanding how musicians played in this under-documented period. There is little documentation in the period of rhythmic practice or instrumental technique: hence Mount's paintings are particularly useful musical reportage. *The Bone Player's* grip, body posture, and sense of rhythmic motion are as concretely rendered as the symbols of itinerancy (a rumpled overcoat, a battered hat, the jug and glasses of the roadside tavern) and of mixed-race identity (skin tone, facial features and hair, his rakish earring) which physically embody what I have called the Creole synthesis: the collision between African and Anglo-Celtic, Caribbean and North American, rhythmic and melodic conceptions which gave rise to the birth of blackface minstrelsy and the first wave of American popular musics. In a pre-War era when African American musicians were viciously caricatured, in print and on the burnt-cork stage, Mount gives us the commanding authority of the source musicians he knew and admired. *Christopher J Smith*, Chair of Musicology and Director of the Vernacular Music Center at Texas Tech University. His new book is *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Illinois, 2013).

## Inspired by The Bone Player

I see in the newsletter that BFXVII will be in Massachusetts, and that a side trip is planned to visit William Sydney Mount's *The Bone Player* at the Boston Museum of art. I do so wish we could be there for that, because that painting has a special meaning for me. [Editor note: That trip did not happen at the Fest.]

My parents-in-law visited Boston some 28 years ago, and were so surprised to see a painting of a bone player that they bought a postcard of it to send to me. I hung on to it for 15 years until in 2000 I finally decided to create a hand embroidered interpretation of it which I attached to the back of a leather jacket. I have been proudly wearing it ever since. See the photo below.

I have done 13 other hand embroidered interpretations of well-know artworks, albums covers and original compositions, but *The Bone Player* is the one that fellow boners will no doubt appreciate.

I would be delighted to recreate the embroidered image for someone as a commission, but since it would take over 300 hours to do, the price would be prohibitive for all but the most passionate and well-to-do. However, I have just established a store on Etsy, where I offer beautiful giclee prints on canvas or metal. The canvas prints can also be partially embroidered to make it more unique and special. For instance, just the bones could be embroidered, making the cost of the embellished print reasonable. Here is a link to my Etsy.com store: Embroidistry. Playfully, Mardeen Gordon



See this in color on Mardeen's Etsy website

“There’s more to the story including an escape and recapture. On February 26, 1865, the ordeal was over. Ripple concluded with “ That was the end of the story. A few days of recuperation, then payday, after which each man got

a thirty-day furlough. The final muster out came short after that, and now, years after, I am permitted to recount to you what, if I had not experience myself, and know to be true, I could scarcely believe.” *Bruce Catton*

[Editor note. The flamboyance of the rhythm bones player is intriguing. Scott Miller and Spike Bones have that look.

The article and photographs reprinted with permission.]



Later, Ripple’s Camp Band plays for a formal affair. Photographs reprinted with permission.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 16, No. 1 2014

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## Executive Director's Column

This is without a doubt the hardest Editorial I have written. Dan Cowett, as I'm sure you're all aware, passed away on March 24th. Dan was a central figure in many Bones Fests, running sound, and being the glue that holds it together. Beyond those roles he performed, he was a special person. He was so genuine, and kind, someone I was always so glad to see. I remember vividly he and Everett at Bones Fest in Milwaukee, he put great effort to make sure Everett could attend. He's a good example of how this small, uncomplicated instrument has brought together some truly amazing people who represent more than an organization, but a family of bone players. I was ecstatic that he was able to attend Bones Fest this summer, and have great memories of them playing together. One more way of saying, nothing is worth

more than this day, hug your kids, play the bones, experience life.

Hard to focus my energies toward other things, but I'm really excited to be coming to Grand Rapids this Summer. Bill Vitts has quite a town to show us, and Jennifer, Jeremy and I are gearing up. Did you know that Grand Rapids is one of the centers of the Craft Beer movement? I'm going to have to sample as many as humanly possible. If you have never been to a Bones Fest this would be a great one to make your first. If you haven't been to one in some time, we are dying to see you, and if you just can't miss one, it will be great to see and play some bones with you. Make this Bones Fest Grand! *Steve Brown*

## Dan Cowett Remembered

Daniel Andrew Cowett, age 52, passed away this March 16. You can read a formal obituary by clicking on Dan's photograph in the April RBS Homepage.

Dan ran the audio at a dozen Bones Fests making them run smooth and performers look professional.

Dan seldom played rhythm bones on stage, however, the April Homepage Video of the Month shows his audio engineering and some rare rhythm bones playing, one with his father, Everett Cowett, the father of the Rhythm Bones Society, on an Irish Fest stage at Bones Fest in Milwaukee, and a second with his sister, Martha, and brother, John, at last year's Bones Fest. Here's some remembrances.

Dan was always a welcoming and fun-loving member of the RBS family. He was also the best sound guy ever. Not only could Dan resolve any technical sound issue we faced, but he had a special knack for making us feel comfortable on stage and taking away the edge. His easy-going and reassuring presence turned any audio problem or concern into no problem at all. Then there were his peculiar musical skills - such as composing wacky songs and playing weird jaw harps! Dan was a truly unique person and Bones Fest will never be the same without him. *Scott Miller*

I'm pretty sure he's been at every Bones Fest I've been able to attend and he's been in the notes for

the ones I've missed. His smiling face and his tireless help with our public performances will be missed. *Michael Ballard*

Dan always lit up our Bones Fests with his casual exuberance and helpful attitude. You could not help but love him. *Mitch Boss*

I know he was a backbone of the RBS. It's sad that he was still so young. My best wishes as always, *Nick Driver*

We are so sad to hear of the passing of Dan

(Continued on Page 4)



Dan Cowett at the controls at Bones Fest IX

## Editorial

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Dan Cowett who was our audio engineer for most of our Bones Fests. Dan died of cancer on March 16th, and if you click on the Photograph of the Month for April on our Homepage you will see a formal obituary. If you also click on the Video of the Month you will view the highlights of his Bones Fest audio engineering and performing. Dan you will be missed.

Also remembered in this newsletter is member John Davis who died this year. We are losing way too many members.

Bill Vits shows us the graphic a friend of his designed for Bones Fest XVIII. Wait until you see it in color - it great!

A new band with a rhythm bones player came to my city and before I knew it they were gone. They are called 'Bones, Jugs, N' Harmony Band, and Cody introduces them to us.

In other news, member Robin Corbett has joined the Carolina Chocolate Drop and tells how he became a member.

Bob Bolton, from Australia gives us a story about bones and the Bush Music Club.

There are stories about dancer Ed Austin and bones, young Nick Spicer and bones, Norman Nichols and bones, a Randy Seppala update, Tim Reilly teaching a workshop, and the state of Ebony. I hope you find them interesting.

My ear likes the traditional rhythm bones sound of triplets and taps, therefore I'm not a big fan of Kenny Wolin's advanced techniques (sorry, Kenny). Having said that, I am captivated by his Bones Fest XVII Latin Workshop video now on our website, and am trying with lots of practice to put those techniques into my muscle memory (thanks, Kenny). His notation on the video is hard to see so I broke out his companion article in the last newsletter and used that notation. Try it and you too may like it.

## Letters to the Editor

I've had a lot of fun with the bones since being re-introduced to them. About 1950 (when I was ten-years-old) a grandfatherly mailman used to play the bones and harmonica together as he and

I used to wait by the train tracks to see that the town's mail got snatched up into the passing mail car. Keep up your good work. Sincerely, *Jim Quiram*

I knew the late Dr. Everett Ronald Cowett for over 40 years. We worked together at Ciba-Geigy. I attended his funeral on May 18, 2013 and heard bones being played for the first time. I would like to make a contribution to the Rhythm Bones Society in honor of Ev who played such an important role in the society. *Haney B. Camp*

Just a note to let you know the world's largest distributor of rhythm bones, Bone Dry Musical Instrument Co, is looking for a Marketing Manager who loves nothing better than playing folkroots rhythm instruments. So if you know an enterprising folkroots rhythm musician who enjoys rattling the bones, playing the washboard and helping folks buy folkroots instruments online, then they will want to check this out. <http://www.bonedrymusic.com/Articles.asp?ID=287>. *Scott Miler*

## Bones Fest XVIII Information

Bones Fest XVIII will take place in Grand Rapids, Michigan on August 7-10th, 2014, hosted by Bill Vits. Grand Rapids is the most thriving city in Michigan with attractions like the Frederick Meijer Gardens, the Gerald R. Ford Museum, the Van Andel Arena, Devos Place, Artprize and numerous great restaurants and micro breweries. The venue for performing & socializing, Polka Pops Cafe, is 5 minutes from the Riverfront Hotel and downtown. Grand Rapids, which is 40 minutes from Lake Michigan, has a beautiful downtown and is easily accessible by car, train or air. There will be activities for early Thursday arrivals, and full programs on Friday and Saturday with a closing breakfast on Sunday. The Bones Fest graphic shown to the left in black and white is actually in color. Can't wait to see the t-shirt.

The Registration Form for BFXVIII will be sent out by the first of May. Mary Lee Sweet has booked her room. August will be here before we know it.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones website: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)



## Tim Reilly Teaches Workshops

On December 4, 2013, Bones Society Board member Tim Reilly presented a series of workshops at Fields Memorial Elementary School in Bozrah, CT. Music teacher Deb Coats, who also works with Tim as part of the demonstration squad at Mystic Seaport Museum, asked the accomplished percussionist and master bones player to meet with her 4th through 8th grade band percussion students.

Tim worked with the students throughout the afternoon on snare drum and other drumming techniques. He had the opportunity to observe each grade's weekly percussion lesson and offer critique, advice, and encouragement to the young drummers.

At the end of the day, eighteen budding percussionists enthusiastically gathered for a 45-minute basic bones workshop which culminated with the entire group playing along to an Irish jig.

It's hard to tell who had more fun, Tim or the kids! Deb Coats reports that a number of her students seem to have taken up the bones and can be heard clacking away while waiting in the bus lines.

Great job reaching out to the next generation of bones players and drummers, Tim! *Elizabeth Kading*



Tim Reilly and some of his young percussion students.

## How I Came To Play The Bones

This is a short piece about how I got started bones playing. My father was from Barbados and came to this country in 1926 where he met my mother in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My mother was from Newfoundland; it's why I partially attribute my 82 years to hybrid vigor. Bones playing on Barbados was common when my father was growing up and where the kids, he said, would "pick up any two sticks and rattle them."

Sundays, when I was growing up in Massachusetts in the 30's and 40's, was a day of church, Sunday paper comics, visiting etc. One of my father's activities that included me was a walk 'around the river' so called. The Charles River was close to home and we'd trek a great circle along the river to where MIT was, along Massachusetts Avenue to where it met the other end of our street and home, often stopping to visit a relative who was also from Barbados. On those walks with my father we'd skip stones on the river; he'd pick up a length of rope or string and show me how to tie knots or make one of those chains that when you had used up the length you'd pull the ends and see the whole thing unravel. He'd pick up a twig and by trips end I'd have a whistle. He'd also find two sticks and sometimes just flat stones and rattle them. I never paid much attention to those rattling sticks until years later at the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) that strolling the corridor I saw this bent over white haired guy rattling some sticks...a pair in each hand. It was Mr. Bones himself, Percy Danforth and I remember thinking, 'My father did that.' Maybe I had tried them in earlier days and there was some memory that let me pick up 2 sticks and have them play. I play mandolin, banjo, fiddle and ukelele (all tuned alike) and play a lot of Celtic, Old Tyme etc music and fall back on playing the bones when I don't know the tune. My present love is improvisation with trad jazz bands and find that not only Sweet Georgia Brown but a number of jazz tunes are enhanced with a bit of bones.

I remember years later when at a Christmas time visit I gave my father a pair of bones I'd carefully crafted and watched, downhearted as he rattled them once and put them aside.

For a number of years, I played with 2 different groups that played music for Boston's Museum of Fine Arts' afternoon tea. Paintings at the museum are often moved to different locations and I most always arrived early enough to pay homage to the Bone Player by William Sydney Mount. I love that painting, but one day it was gone from the expected place and had been moved...Holy Cow, to the room we were playing in. One day a woman from the Museum Ladies Committee happened by while I stood in front of the picture playing the bones for whatever the rest of the trio was playing and asked if I'd do that when she was leading a group of ladies through the museum later that afternoon. It was a prideful moment with their taking pictures.

Boston's MFA has a First Monday of the Month lecture series on musical instruments and an outstanding one, a few years back, was given by our own, All Ireland Bones Playing Champion, Steve Brown on the bones.

I live under the curse of 'supposedly' knowing how to fix everything from plumbing to electric and with that curse comes frugality to other related things. Thus, I never ever considered buying bones but had to make them. I've made them curved on a bandsaw and curved them by steaming. I've made them from pieces of glass and slate, flat stones, bone and recently from a piece of that dense South American Ipe. I was disappointed with the too metallic sound and find walnut best of all. I have dozens of bones that I hand off to folks who seem to have a real interest. Often when not having bones at hand it's fun to look around for something to rattle, even if it's only 2 pencils that only you can hear. *Norman E. Nichols*

(Continued from Page 1)

Cowett. We have such fond memories of passing late (dare I add another “late”) nights exchanging stories from the “road” and bones-playing tips. Of course the later the evening got, the more interesting and animated the stories became.

While he was more comfortable running the sound board than playing rhythm bones publicly, I can recall one tireless evening in particular that we all spent working on “pass the peas & butter” to get a handle on poly-rhythmic bones techniques. To be honest, I don’t remember if we ever tackled the techniques that night but I’ll never forget the laughs we had trying.

We’ve always looked forward to his wonderful presence at Bones Fest every year we’ve attended. I love this quote

by Shannon Alder – it’s so appropriate to Dan: “Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you.”

We’ve sure got many wonderful stories about this energetic and playful man. He has truly left a long-lasting legacy and will be missed very, very much. *Kenny & Teri Wolin*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 7-11, 2014, Grand Rapids, MI, Bill Vits, Host. See this newsletter and website for more details.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2014, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

Market” determined all ebony had to be black.

“This video shows how the determination of a single individual actually can reverse the stupid trends of centuries of guitar lore and demonstrate, unequivocally, that The Emperor Has No Clothes.

“Perhaps it is time to reappraise ALL our notions of quality and suitability of the wood - and other resources - we use for anything. It is obvious that we can either address these issues, or they will address themselves for us.”

The video with Bob Taylor of Taylor Guitars is titled ‘The Truth of the Forest: The State of Ebony in the World’ - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anC-GvfsBoFY>

## Hank Tenenbaum and the LOC

I was recovering from surgery on my back and couldn’t go to school, early to mid 60’s, so I took cabs to the LOC (normally a 10 minute walk) and spent many days researching the bones in the Recorded Music Section. There were 16 2/3’s, 33’s, 78’s and Edison cylinders and may have also been some wire recordings. I wore out the people, librarians/aides, trying to hear EVERYTHING so instead of totally wearing out my welcome I jotted down notes in a spiral notebook about all the references I could find. I noted “bones and fiddle, bones and guitar, bones and piano bones and...” you get the picture. I listed the show date and the reference # used at that time. I understand those #'s have since been replaced with another system.

I listed Major Bose or Ted Mack and most likely didn’t list the names of the performers, always intending to go back and finish my research and update my notes. That notebook is most likely buried in a storage bin I have been paying for, for 20 or so years, and and may barely be decipherable to me as I wrote it when I was much younger and my handwriting was SO BAD that my teachers refused to read my homework assignments and routinely gave me F’s for homework or tests that weren’t printed or typed.

The best part of my time was striking up a relationship with Joe Hickerson (See story on Page 6). *Hank Tenenbaum*



### Hand with Flesh and Bones

A friend with a private radiology practice took this xray of my hand holding a pair of ‘Black Bart’ rhythm bones. For reference on the left is a photograph of my hand in about the same position as the xray. I don’t know that there is a lot to be gained from looking at these images, but I thought them interesting enough to include in the newsletter. [Black Bart is member Dave Boyles] *Steve Wixson*

### The Sad State of Ebony

This is a not the normal kind of newsletter story. Ebony is one of the great rhythm bones woods, and it might interest to ebony rhythm bones makers and players.

“The sad state of ebony today and a drastic near-monopoly that may actually save the last legal source in the world.

“Until very recently 90% of ebony cut was left on the ground because “The



## Father, Grandfather and Great Grandfather

My father was born in 1897. He was a professional musician. (To put this more in perspective, I am only 60 years old.) His early years were spent on Bear Lake, Idaho. His parents moved to Southern California where they picked up work in the silent (and later talking) movies. Dad joined them there and later managed the Pantages Theatre in Los Angeles where he produced vaudeville shows. (This would be in the 1930's and 40's.) Previously, he had learned to play the violin and now he was leading orchestras.

While growing up I watched my father play the bones. (At this point he taught music in the public schools.) I thought all dads played the bones. He had a special song that he liked to play to. He would have my sister play it on the piano. (I would have to have her tell me what it was.) But this song was not the standard kind of "old time" music that most bones players accompany. So ... his style of playing was ... I suppose ... was pretty unique.

I am a professional dancer. My career took me to Brigham Young University where I was the artistic director of the International Folk Dance Ensemble for 27 years. While with this group, I was able to travel the world, to more than 55 countries. Each year we had opportunities to dance with other groups from all over the world and each new opportunities brought me into contact with multiple dance (and music) cultures and traditions.

On one such occasion in in 1990, I visited for the first time a wonderful festival in Drummondville, Quebec. On the first evening I was entering a party where a French-Canadian folk dance group called Mackinaw was performing. One of the first things that caught my attention as were approaching the hall was the rhythm of bones. I can't explain how much excitement I felt.

From there ... I made a new friend, Erik (the bones player) and he taught me how to play. I had never been interested in learning from my father. And my father passed away in 1984 ... just as my

career changed and led me on a path of traditional music and dance ... which led me full circle back to the bones.

Since that time, I have inserted myself into as many opportunities has possible associated with my work. I was in the business of creating staged performances of International music and dance ... so I began jumping on the stage and playing with our band during our Appalachian sections and as we performed Danse Quebecoise. I use them in my university classes when introducing students to these forms of dance. This past spring, I took an elementary school outreach group of 30 college students to over 50 schools where we presented dance and music to the young people, (a 40 minute assembly). Bones were featured in the performance and the demonstrations on rhythm. And most recently, my wife and I arranged for and taught music and dance for young people out in the wilds of Utah ... dancing in the fields under the trees ... 20 musicians and about 200 kids and adults.

I just recently retired from directing ... but I still teach world dance classes and instruct in ethnochoreology as a full-time professor at BYU.

So ... that's my story. The only thing I can remember my dad telling me about the bones was that he learned them as a young boy while herding sheep for his father. I suppose they must have hired other help (men who helped with the ranch and the cattle and sheep) from who knows where. And this is how we suppose dad was introduced to playing the bones. They had 200 acres on Bear Lake. I still have one pair of bones that belonged to my father ... and I've made other pairs from cattle ribs. I'd still consider myself an amateur with the bones ... but they are part of my heritage. They are a special memory for my family of our father, grandfather and great-grandfather.  
*Edwin Austin*

[We had a Contact Us inquiry from Lindsey Watson about rhythm bones for her husband. She mention she learned about rhythm bones from Ed Austin. When he was contacted, he wrote this article.]

## Nicholas Spicer Young Player

Most children start as drummers. Nicholas Spicer was no exception. He started keeping time as an infant beating on the walls of his home. Nick got a pair of bongos for his first birthday.

Nick first played Bones after a Carolina Chocolate Drops concert at the age of 4. Dom Flemmons gave him his first lesson backstage that day. Soon afterwards Jim Lande made Nick a set of bones that were perfect for his hands. In no time he was clicking and clacking around the house. Mike Baytop regularly played at a farmer's market nearby and encouraged Nick to sit in with him whenever the opportunity arose. Mike says he got more tips whenever Nick was out there with him. That year Nick played with the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation at the DC Blues Society's DC Blues Festival.

It was a cold day that December at the Riverdale Park Holiday Market. Nick was wearing his fathers' wool hat pulled way down on his head. Nick and I were watching Mike Baytop perform his set and Mike invited Nick to sit in like other times. You see how he listens closely to Mike. Listening is an important tool. Nick has always been careful to make sure what he plays is a contributing part of the music. What's fun to watch in the video is the joy and happiness both generations have in making music together.

Over the years Nick has performed with the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation when they would play at events in the community. He has also sat in with his father's band, MSG Acoustic Blues Trio, and performed with his father at the Folklore Society of Greater Washington Summer Festival.

The community at Archie's Barber-shop has always welcomed and encouraged young players. Nicholas has been a part of that community since he was an infant.

Nick is now 11 and plays saxophone in the school band. *Miles Spicer*

[Check out the video of Mike Baytop and Nick Spicer on rhythm bones at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdL-RWbCeZi8>. Jim Lande says Nick recently discovered a cahon drum and could play it instantly. Says he's retired from bones.]

## Aussie Bob Bolton on Bones and Bush Music Club

Just jogged into posting a couple of rather distant (positively southern hemisphere) notes about the place of ‘bones’ in our folklore.

The Bush Music Club is celebrating its 60th year - apparently making us the second oldest ‘folk music Club’ in the English-speaking world.

One of the related events following the BMC’s beginnings in Sydney, 1954, was a connection made with musicians of similar political bent, down the Illawarra area - around Wollongong, down south of Sydney - inspired by the Bush Music Club’s founders: The Bushwhacker Band.

We encouraged those who had been involved, for several years with a similar band which had formed after the same style as the (Sydney) Bushwhackers, to mount a play in the Wollongong area about their own history. While I was down at the Illawarra Folk Festival (run by the Illawarra Folk Club - a later group of more diffuse nature), they mounted a ‘Reading’ of a play - ‘Lola’s Keg Night’ - based on this spin-off of our 1954 BMC. I was dragged away from other concerts ... and photography ... because they realised the play reading needed a character based on a BMC bones player, who had worked with them as well as the BMC, keeping all the rhythms tight!

I took his part for those readings playing a Brush Box wooden set of bones.

I gather they will now find a suitable local player of the bones for the continued development up to public performance, and I was doing some research on photos in our archives, and I noticed that the bones visible in the hands of the (1955) player in the group photos look distinctly black! I’m presuming that their player had bought the black plastic Rhythm Bones, which would have been on sale in Australian music shops, by 1955 [Bones made by the late Joe Birl]. I guess that means loaning them a spare set of mine, and, perhaps some coaching in working with dense, slippery bones!

Just as a separate item, I was, of course, reminded that, back around 1972

I walked past a small music shop, in Sydney’s Pitt St South, and saw that they had piles of the black plastic Rhythm Bones in the window ... on special at 50 cents a pair!

As Concert Party Organiser of the BMC, at that stage, I saw this as an opportunity to get up a workshop session that could drive the rhythm of our music - particularly the dance accompaniment, and bought a couple of dozen sets for \$12! I arranged for Frank Maher, one of our stalwart bones players (traditional rib bones) to lead the class and sessions - and sold pairs of the black plastic Rhythm Bones to participants at my cost. I still come across a few of those sets being played - and their players - today.

By the way, at the February Illawarra Folk Festival - earlier this year - I noticed that the Festival shop had proprietary Rhythm Bones on sale, but only the machined wood versions. Maybe they felt that plastic doesn’t come across of sufficiently ‘folksy’!(?)

I must admit that having experimented with many dozens of different dense Australian timbers, I think the timber that my father introduced me to, for this purpose: Australian Brush Box (*Tristania Conferta*) can’t be beat! The sound of a good dense, close-grained wood blends in better than the sharper bite of the plastic bones, and I prefer the better grip afforded by the fine grain structure of dense hardwoods. Regards, *Bob Bolton*

## Remembering John Davis

We are sad to announce that member John Davis passed away in 2014. John joined RBS in 2000 and he and his wife, Sarah, attended several Bones Fests. He started playing in 1944 when he was 15 years old. He learned from a friend of the family, the late George Brooks. He bought bones from Dr. Fred Edmonds and they were made from persimmon wood.

John was remembered in the February update to our homepage and a tribute video can be viewed at <http://rhythm-bones.org/DavisMemorialVideo.html>. John, thanks for the memories.

## Rowan Corbett Joins Carolina Chocolate Drops

A few months back Rhiannon Giddens of the Carolina Chocolate Drops contacted me. We’ve been friends ever since we met at The International Folk Alliance Conference in 2007. As both Dom Flemmons and Leyla McCalla were about to leave the band to embark on solo careers, she asked if I’d like to audition for the new line up.

So, I went down to North Carolina to play with Rhiannon and Hubby Jenkins, and a few days later they asked me to join the band.

In addition to playing rhythm bones, I’ll be on vocals, guitar, plectrum banjo, cajon and bodhrán.

We’re starting out with a tour of the South East, as well as the Mountain Song at Sea Bluegrass Cruise.

Needless to say, I’m very excited. I couldn’t have asked to play with a better group of musicians (see photograph on Page 8). *Rowan Corbett*

## Joe Hickerson American Folklife Center

On my first visit to the LOC, I met Joe Hickerson, now Head Emeritus of the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. Here’s a recent note from him. *Steve Wixson*

“I do remember building up a vertical subject file on bones [probably where our newsletters are stored], but not a bibliography. I remember becoming a friend of Percy Danforth in Ann Arbor when he did a guest set at a concert I did in 1969(?) at The Ark. He subsequently was recorded by the Folk Archive at the Library and gave workshops at folk festivals, etc. I was fascinated by the fact that, as a boy, he learned to play the bones from an African American youth in Washington, DC. I also remember the visit(s?) of Eric Ilott to DC under the aegis of folks (esp. Jonathan Eberhart) in the Folklore Society of Greater Washington. I believe he used four bones in each hand. All best. *Joe Hickerson*

## Bones, Jugs, N' Harmony Band

The first time I was exposed to the bones was in 2007, my sophomore year of college at the University of Illinois. Brad Dutz, a studio percussionist in Los Angeles, originally from Decatur, Illinois, was doing a master class with the U of I percussion studio. As part of his lecture about being well-rounded, he brought out a couple pairs of bones and showed us some basic things. After the class I got Steve Brown's contact info from Brad and ordered my first couple pairs of bones. I spent a little while messing around with them, but the demands of being a music major kept me from really digging in. I barely picked them up over the next few years until I saw the Carolina Chocolate Drops in November 2011. After that show I was inspired to get playing again, and I thought a good way of going about it was to form a band where it was a featured instrument.

We started with no original material, just covering old blues and jug band tunes, and some George Hamilton Green xylophone rags. The bones were used on a few tunes, but I would also play drum set, and/or washboard on some.

Later on in the game, we decided to add some variety to our shows, and we began to feature a stripped down instrumentation, called our "Bare Bones" set. Tim Berg and I (the percussionists in the group), switch off playing the bones and the quijada (donkey jawbone), Charlie Harris (usually the bass player) plays claw hammer style banjo or bass, and JP Goguen (guitarist/tenor banjoist) plays the jug or resonator guitar. This set is really bones heavy, with a pretty different style and sound. In addition to the Bare Bones set, we've started writing some original tunes in the full band set up that feature the bones, including "Wiggle Ya Bones," and "Shakin' the Cobwebs Off."

Here is a video of Ola Belle Reed's "I've Endured" from our Bare Bones set at the Mudlark Theater in New Orleans: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6c-BHnnliTY&feature=youtu.be>

Here is one of "Wiggle Ya Bones" from the Tonic Room in Chicago: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=->

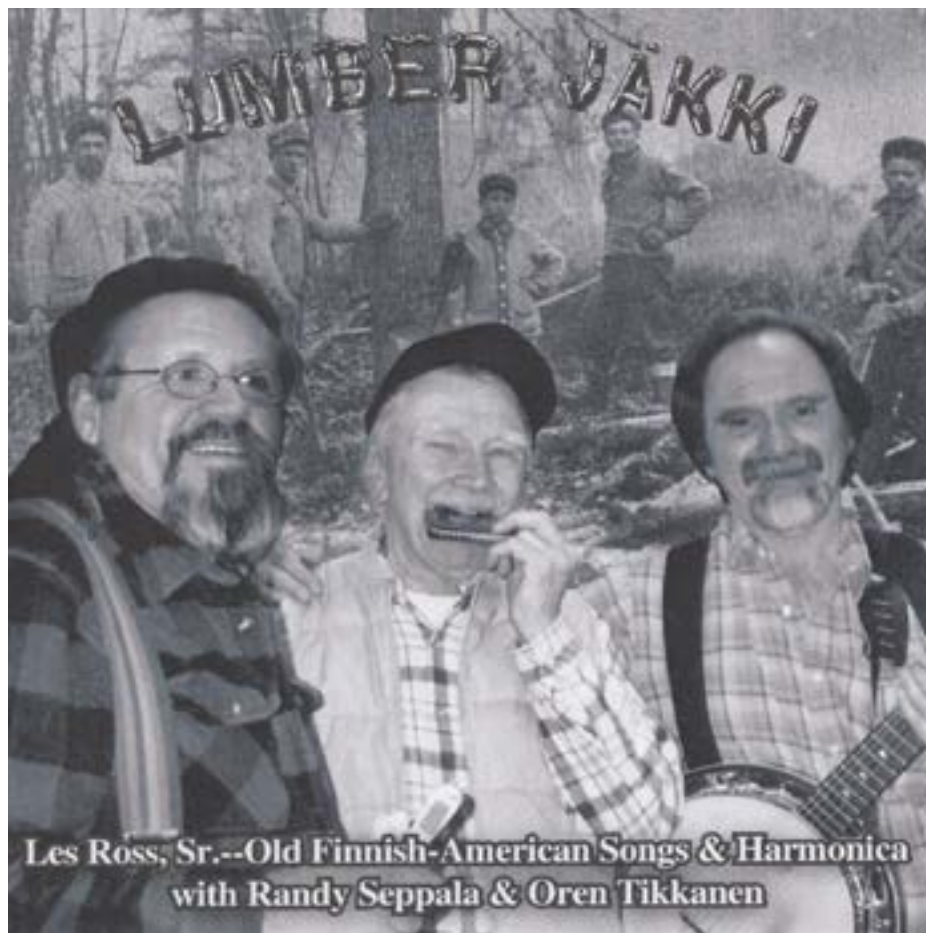
5F9rc7Wtxyw

Unfortunately, we don't have a recording or video of "Shakin' the Cobwebs Off" yet, but we will soon, as well as more Bare Bones videos and recordings! Let me know if you have any other questions, or would like any more info about the band. Thanks for reaching out. *Cody Jensen bonesjugsnharmony@gmail.com* Several videos on website - <http://bonesjugsnharmony.com/> [There is a photograph of the band on Page 8.]

## Randy Seppala Update

I am in Clarksdale, Mississippi until May 1st when I will return to Michigan (most of the snow should be gone by then). Harp, Hart & Bones, my old time Mississippi Delta Blues band, will be down here for the Juke Joint Festival in April. I'm playing some blues with musical friends here and enjoying the Delta, always something going on. I was up back up North last month and we just released a CD of old Finnish lumberjack music from early 20th century Upper

Michigan. Lumber Jakki (Luumumber Yakki) is the name of the band, featuring 90 year old harmonica player/singer Les Ross, Sr.. Les learned to play harmonica as a child from family members and actual lumberjacks at the Blue Moon Tavern in Eben Junction, Michigan. The jacks would make up their own lyrics to the songs of the day and sing them in the long evenings hours in the bunkhouse, in pre-radio days; that was their entertainment. The words are raunchy as Hell and sung in Finnish and uncensored on the CD. We released the CD in conjunction with a project called Michigan-I-O which included some select samples of the great Alan Lomax's work in Michigan in 1938. I'll send a copy for review, it includes a lot of bones playing and great "accordion style harmonica playing" of which Les is one of the few surviving practitioners. We can do a report later on the Delta juke joint tour with Harp, Hart & Bones. Looking forward to Bones Fest in Michigan this summer, it's already on my calendar. *Randy Seppala* aka Da Bones Man [dabonesman@gmail.com](mailto:dabonesman@gmail.com) - (906) 235-5928 - cell





Carolina Chocolate Drops with Hubby Jenkins, Rhiannon Giddens, Rowan Corbett and Malcolm Parson (See Page 6 for Rowan's story)



Bones, JUGS N' Harmony Band (See Page 7 for story)

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 16, No. 2 2014

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## Executive Director's Column

Only two more months before Bones Fest XVIII, and we invade Grand Rapids, Mi. I don't think any of our members need reminding what an excellent musician and all around good guy this year's host Bill Vits is. Bill is well connected to the musical community in Grand Rapids and has a number of amazing events planned.

But here's some facts about Grand Rapids you might not be aware of: Grand Rapids won 2013 Beer City USA vote! With a surging population of Craft beer pubs and breweries, it's sure to appeal to a vast majority of RBS members!

Grand Rapids was named "One of America's coolest towns" by Men's Journal in April 2010. Did we have any doubt as it's the home of our own extremely cool Bill Vits!

Grand Rapids is the second largest city in Michigan, but it still retains the homeyness of a small town! This is sure to be a great city to run around and play the bones! This will be the first time a Bones Fest has been sponsored in Michigan.

Ann Arbor, Michigan was the home of Percy Danforth, and he inspired many people in Michigan to play bones, including Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, and Sandor Slommovits. We can only imagine the bone

(Continued on Page 3)

## Nacchere in Etruscan Paintings

[Translated from Italian by Adam Klein. His comments noted by '-AK.']

Having some interest in ethnomusicology and ethnography regarding the history of the "nacchere" (pronounced "NYOCK-keh-reh") of Maremma and Tuscany (Italy), and suspecting that not much has been published [about them] and possibly also some degree of imprecision about the most ancient available documentary materials, I thought I might condense in these pages a bit of reflection with reference to the evidence that has been left to us by the Etruscan civilization. I have therefore examined the PARIETAL paintings of the archaic and classical epochs, not having found any documentation for any periods preceding those.

The most well known and published evidence of nacchere (pronounced "NYOCK-keh-reh" translated as "castanets" in some dictionaries) in antiquity would be that which exists (?) in

the Tomb of the Lionesses, dated at 530-520 B.C. in the Necropolis of the Monterozzi, loc. Calvario, Tarquinia, and rediscovered in 1874, "a paradigmatic example of Tarquinian art in the Ionic style" with "greco-oriental characteristics" (Steingraber 1984). The female dancer portrayed on the right in the large frieze above the false door at the bottom of the sepulchral chamber (on the left in the image detail above) "seems" to be grasping two long objects about 13 cm (5 3/4 in.) judging from the length of the thumb, (Continued on Page 4)



Figure 1. Tomb of the Lionesses

## Editorial

I try to make contacts around the world both to find out where rhythm bones are played and to get stories for our newsletter. This issue has a wonderful article from Mario Galasso from Sardinia, Italy. The text is interesting, the photographs magnificent and the translation from Italian to English was done by member Adam Klein. Mario we thank for your sharing your work and Adam for translating.

There are definitely more rhythm bones playing now than when RBS was formed. Recently my wife's best friend from our days in Birmingham, Alabama called her. Seems two of her best friends had just returned from a festival in Mississippi where they encountered a rhythm bones player who sold them a set of rhythm bones and an instruction booklet/CD written by Sue Barber (originally with a cassette tape). They told my wife's friend that they wanted to learn more. She said, "Do I ever know someone you should meet." They all came to Chattanooga and we had a great weekend of rhythm bones playing. By the way, the rhythm bones player was member Randy Seppala.

I am so looking forward to the Grand Rapids Bones Fest and what Bill Vits has in store for us. Last year, I did something that I had been thinking about for years, I played to recorded music with circada in the background. I have two groups of trees in my background, and the circada recording had a nice stereo effect with their slow pulsating rhythms going in and out of synchronization. To top it off, circada have a 17 year cycle of life and it was our seventeenth Bones Fest.

## Letters to the Editor

On April 5th, 2014 I competed in the Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent Show, which took place in Brunswick High School's Crooker Theater. I played the rhythm bones to a rendition of "Sweet Georgia Brown." My performance was well received by the judges and the audience. Contestants competed in the following categories: Youth-vocalist; Teen -vocalist; Adult-vocalist; Dance; and Miscellaneous. Judges awarded priz-

es (trophy) for each category. The judges then selected the evening's three finalists from all the categories. The audience then voted for their favorite performer from the three finalists. Each judge (three of them) also presented a "judge's choice" trophy to any contestant who they believed deserved recognition. I was the recipient of one these (12" high). Sincerely, *Claude Bonang*

I have a new web site for my Triskele Rhythm Bones: <http://triskelerhythm-bones.com>. Thanks again. Hope to hear from you again. *Jim Hesch*

I am always amazed at the strange places where one comes across references to bones or bones players! I'm currently reading a book by Richard A. Mathels entitled "Captured, a W W II experience of Air Force P.O.W.s in Germany." He related this story which occurred toward the end of the war.

The Jewish P.O.W.'s were being singled out. "We had two Jewish roommates. They were told to be ready to move elsewhere. All the Jewish members in camp were segregated and left the compounds with no know destination.

One of my Jewish roommates was on a lower bunk near me. The night before his being shipped out, I knew he was awake all night. Earlier he had written a letter to his parents and had given it to another of our roommates to be delivered when the rest of us returned home.

He was musician of sorts. He played the "bones." I believe sometimes they are referred as clavals. They consisted of two pieces wood held between his fingers which he could rattle to a rhythm. They were very effective. That last night he was with us he rattled those bones in a very slow and sad beat throughout the evening. The next morning he was gone."

He goes on to say that the commandant of the camp challenged the decisions of his superiors, housed the Jewish P.O.W.s in another barracks, and they were still there when the camp was liberated. *Jean Mehaffey*

I just did a performance at the Irish National museum with storyteller, Nuala Hayes and the two harp players Anne-Marie O'Farrell and Helen Davies.

## Rhythm Bones Player

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Non-member subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

**Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)**

While rehearsing they wanted to do a small teaser for Facebook, so they recorded a short version of one of the ancient Norwegian tunes called Gorrlaust, with me playing bones and bone flute.

I made a quick upload on YouTube, and I thought that I might be of some interest for you and maybe some of the bone-enthusiasts you know.

So I send you this link to the fresh video together with my best regards.

Yours, *Poul Hoxbro*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq\\_RJxU-5pI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq_RJxU-5pI)

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 7-11, 2014, Grand Rapids, MI, Bill Vits, Host. See this newsletter and website for more details.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2014, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

(Continued from Page 1)

playing characters who populate the state and will surely show up at the Fest!

Please make the effort to get out there to Grand Rapids for Bones Fest XVIII! We will hoist a beer together!

This summer will see the second marriage spawned by a Bones Fest. In August, Jessye Weinstien, and Sky Bartlett, who met at Teri and Kenny Wolin's Bones Fest in Alexandria, Va, will be married in New Hampshire. Some of you might remember that Teri and Kenny were married at the Bones Fest in Alexandria after having met at a Bones Fest in Chattanooga, Tenn. We want to wish Jessye and Sky the very best in the future, and give them a heartfelt congratulations! So if you are looking for the perfect mate, you might try Bones Fest XVIII, bones players are just lovable!  
*Steve Brown*

## Mario Galasso Biography

Mario Galasso was born in Fasano (Brindisi), Italy in 1941. In 1952, he moved to Florence where he remained until 1962. He moved to the Salento in 1963 as officer of the Italian Air Force before moving to Rome. Since 1992, he has been living in Alghero (Sassari).

His cultural background moves from ethnography to archaeology, to music and in general, to the study of ancient cultures and populations. Since 1995, he has been working entirely in the fields of scientific research and underwater archaeology.

He saved from destruction the ruins of the ancient Roman road that lead to Florentia in the 2nd century A.C. He walked down in the excavation site and sat there, stopping the work of the building contractors.

Since 1992 in Sardinia, he started his cooperation with the Department of History of the University of Sassari, and is a Visiting Professor in History of Archaeology. His chronological sector of studies started with the Late Bronze Age and moved gradually to the post-medieval age.

He is currently involved in the study of the abandoned human locations in Sardinia, with particular focus to the villaggi

a muristenes used only for short periods of time and on occasion of religious recurrences.

He is also very interested in local popular, jazz and country music and he often plays and organizes workshops and concerts. He plays squeeze box, accordion, 5 and 4 strings banjo as well as rhythm bones.

To see him play rhythm bones for some interesting street dancing, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ilm-MK5h-jII>.

## Bones Fest XVIII Preliminary Program

Bones Fest XVIII is just around the corner (see Fest Graphic below), and host Bill Vits announced the preliminary program. The final program will be completed as attendees turn in their Registration Forms indicating what workshops and clinics they want to participate in.

Here are some highlights. On Thursday, there is a kick off party for early arrivers at One Trick Pony Restaurant. Hosts Dan & Lisa Verhil featuring Sean and Seamus O'Tool

Friday features another flash mob (first one at BFXVII last year), clinics and workshops, performances and jamming, catered Polish dinner with Kielbasa, sauerkraut & pierogies and more jamming at the hotel.

Saturday features more workshops and clinics, preparation for the public performances, General Membership meeting, Dinner, our public performances with local musicians Jay Round

& Tom Devries, and an afterglow at the hotel.

There are other surprises including Sue Barber who with Percy Danforth wrote a history of rhythm bones that is on our website as well as an instructional booklet/CD that is still available today.



Doug Danforth sent this photographs of a placque that his father, Percy, received.





(Continued from Page 1)

one between thumb and index finger and the other between the ring finger and the pinkie (little finger). The illustration has divided scholars: in 1958 Massimo Pallottino interpreted the objects as CRO-TALI, followed by Steingraber in 1984 (Annotated Catalog of Etruscan Art), ed. Jaca Book, Italian edition Milan 1985, p. 322 Tomba #77) which describes it as “young woman with tunic and crotali” (Figure 1, Page 1)

For a definition of crotali one is referred to the esteemed study done by Paolo Casini (P. Casini, *Nacchere toscane – Tuscan castanets*, in the booklet of the CD of the same name, produced in 2007 by Semper SNC, Florence in their Pegasus series, in Italian and English – and in that language published in the Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society (USA), Vol. 9 No. 4, 2007.



Figure 2a

The Florentine School (Giovannangelo Camporeale, chair of Etruscology, University of Florence) in the 1980s preferred to interpret this detail as extended index and little fingers, as the thumb, middle and ring fingers are closed to the palm. Thus no “crotali.” Camporeale has called such a gesture apotropaic {to ward off evil - AK} (or as the vulgar ex-



Figure 2b

pression “to make the horns” {cuckold - AK}) – despite the fact that nowadays, in such a gesture of exorcism or contempt the thumb is held closed over the middle and ring fingers, while in the fresco the thumb is extended and even pointing backward (Figure 2 a-b, right column). Thus there are two possibilities: either the “horns” gesture has changed over the millennia as regards the position of the



Figure 3

thumb, or such a gesture as represented and interpreted by Camporeale had a different meaning in the Etruscan period.

To those who would base [their interpretation] solely on the length of the two fingers (“crotali” if one accepts the interpretation of Pallottino and Steingraber) it should be pointed out that in the female figure to the left in the same frieze the right hand (Figure 3) is depicted with fingers abnormally bent back and long, and the same pictorial rendering is found in various other contemporaneous wall paintings in the tombs of Tarquinia (for example: Tomb of the Augurs, Tomb of Hunting and Fishing, Tomb of Flogging, Cardarelli Tomb, etc.)

From the analysis of an enlargement of the painting one can deduce other details: a hand with open thumb, index (?) open, middle and ring closed to the palm and open little finger – or perhaps bent toward the palm but with a distended end joint. If that’s the case, the apparent nacchere would be one between the thumb and index (but then where’s the index?) and the other between ring finger

and little finger, the latter bent toward the thumb and sitting on the nacchera.

But holding the nacchere in this way, is it possible to play them? The answer is no, the nacchere are held diverging from each other more more than meeting each other and so the possibilities are only two: either the incorrect interpretation is that of Pallottino, Steingraber, Casini and all those who have wanted to see crotali or the Maremman gnacchere here (they’re not nacchere or crotali but something else, probably only the fingers of the dancer); or it’s an error by the fresco’s creator, who wanted to depict a dancer in the act of playing crotali, but did not know how they were played.

It is worth pointing out that the right hand (Figure 4, below) is not rendered like the left; one can see a bend in the wrist, and the sum of the digits, held and seen laterally, is rendered with one red contour line without any details. It would seem, however, that the dancer was not (also) holding nacchere in her right hand, if in fact she was using just one pair in the left hand.



Figure 4. Enlargement from Figure 1, Page 1.

But it’s interesting to reflect on the general placement of the images: both dancers {in Figure 1 - AK}\* have one leg very high and flexed, the other half-extended but with a flexed foot, right leg against left; also, they are mirrored in their arm movements.

If we combine the placement of the [Figure 1] dancers with the use of nacchere, we think immediately of a



dance which those well educated in the history of art would define as “orgiastic” – but with little of the literal meaning of “orgy”.

The nacchere are used as accompaniment up until the *cadenza* in demisemi-quavers {32nd-notes –AK}; in other words up until an unrestrained {“free” – AK} dance. If we remember that in Etruria for centuries already the importation of ceramics decorated in Greek style, and the presence of Greek, Magn-Graecian† or culturally Greek painters, was very important (it’s sufficient to recall, aside from the painted tombs, Etrusco-Corinthian ceramics); and if we remember that in Magna Graecia itself and specifically in Apulia the Classic authors made reports of free dance which is the forerunner of the tarantella and the *pizzica tarantata* (at Taras, then Tarentum, then Taranto in the south of Italy, Puglia), we can, with a fair approximation, suppose that dance was also imported from the zones of Greek influence and assimilated by the Etruscans. It’s not by chance that in the female figure at left in the large frieze (Figure 3, Page 4) the forward movement with raised arms reminds one very closely of that movement which even to this day is executed during the tarantella dance.

In conclusion, we have two “official” interpretations (*crotali* vs. “horns”), and in-depth examination only yields doubt.

If fingers: either the gesture with the left hand is a making of the horns, deformed from the actual sign, or it has a different meaning which is unknown to us.

If nacchere: only in the left hand (is she left-handed?) – or also in the right?



Figure 5

An odd way – to us – of depicting these two elements, which doesn’t allow for sound production, and which leads to the conclusion that the artist is not familiar with this musical instrument, but has been charged with depicting it. In any case, we are not talking about a realistic representation.

In the opinion of the author, following close study of the fresco, this is not a depiction of *crotali* or *nacchere*, but of fingers; and it’s no accident that the little finger is rendered shorter than the index.

The slightly more recent (520-510 B.C.) Tomb of Hunting and Fishing is located in the Necropolis of the Monterozzi, loc. Calvario, Tarquinia, and was rediscovered in 1873. Very distinctive and atypical in its wall decorations, in the first chamber we see scenes of a “forest sacred to Apollo” with “little dancer figures”, now quite deteriorated; and “with grotesquely swollen features” who “are performing an animated ritual Dionysian dance” (Steingraber 1984).

Today the PARI-ETALI frescoes are much deteriorated, but fortunately we have available to us some 19th-century reconstructions.



Figure 8 - Tomb of Hunting and Fishing. Enlargement from Figure 7, Page 8.



Figure 6

Above is a recent photo of a detail showing a female dancer (Figure 5), its recent graphic reconstruction (Figure 6) and the 19th-century watercolors (Figure 7, Page 8) of the complete relief on the left side of the first chamber. At the bottom of the left column is an enlargement of the detail from those same watercolors (Figure 8).

From the photo of the painting in its present condition one can deduce that the dancer is playing *nacchere* with both hands; the graphic reconstruction supports the hypothesis at least for the right hand (raised) and possibly for the left, but the watercolors by Gregorio Mariani done the year of the rediscovery (1873), in the archives of the Germanic Archeological Institute of Rome, removes any doubt: they are hands (Figure 7, Page 8). The pictorial rendering of these hands is very similar to that used in the Tomb of the Lionesses with a strong eastern Greek influence.

The Tomb of the TRICLINIUM is perhaps the most famous Etruscan tomb; discovered in 1830, in the area of Calvario, necropolis of the Monterozzi, Tarquinia, and is dated to 470 B.C. The “strong imprint of Greek style with a prevalence of the Attican component”, induces one to hold the images to be “the work of a Greek painter or, if Etruscan, one who developed his style in a Greek environment” (Steingraber 1984).





Figure 9

In 1949, from this tomb which was in mediocre condition, the paintings were detached and are now in the Tarquinia Archeological Museum, while at the Gregorian Etruscan Museum (Vatican City) there are copies. On the right wall of the only chamber one can see “a female dancer with crotali in a light bright chiton {a kind of tunic - AK} with little red flowers and a short red jacket hemmed in blue” (Steingraber 1984 (Figure 9)

Following are details of the two hands that hold the nacchere. The fresco is greatly deteriorated. (Figure 10 and 11)

Fortunately in May-June 1832 the designer Carlo Ruspi was appointed by the Vatican Commission to make actual-size transparencies {traces - there was no slide photography in 1832 - AK} of this figure and of another in the same frieze.



Figure 10

In the transparency, the colors and proportions of the original are accurately registered. On the nacchera {singular - AK} on the right the annotation is almost illegible, but seems to read

“Rosa” relative to the color used in the translation into watercolor (Figure 12).

From this 1:1 copy (Figure 13) we can almost exactly reconstruct typology, dimensions and manner of use of the nacchere that the dancer has in her two hands.:

First of all, one notes a length of about



Figure 11

20 cm in the one held in the left hand, and slightly shorter in the other hand; the width at the gripped end is about 4 cm while at the free end it's about 7 cm (dimensions estimated based on the size of the female figure).

The player holds the two nacchere together, and the double line in red and black at their middles is simply a decoration, like the ones at the tips of the two pairs of nacchere.

The fingers are situated thus: thumb, index and middle bent inward, ring and little extended.

This supports the notion that the two components of the instrument can be bound to each other at the grip end and perhaps by a loop passing around the base of a finger (the middle?) just like in the modern nacchere of southern Italy.

That is, probably two holes in two



Figure 12

parallel points at the base, across which a cord holds the nacchere together, and possibly also binds them to the player's middle finger.

With the modes of use that go with this kind of grip, one can presume accompaniment to music that is not too fast, of the same type as the modern tarantella lenta {slow tarantella -AK} or “tammurriata”campana {tammurriata of Campania - AK} -one can presume this also from the fact that the knees are not held high



Figure 13

as in the images from the other, older tombs shown above; and this results in a more composed dance, like the already mentioned tammurriata.

It is indeed impossible to omit the connection {nexus - AK} between the Paestum area and Etruria, which already in ancient times had produced similar images (for example the diver in the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing, identical in iconography to the tomb of the same name in Paestum. Obviously in the





Figure 14 - Tomb of the Rooster

Tomb of the Triclinium the style is less archaic and decidedly more evolved.

The Tomb of the Rooster {or Cock - AK} is in the Necropolis of the Monterozzi, loc. Second Arches, at Tarquinia, and was discovered in 1961 during the excavations funded by the Lerici Foundation. It dates from between 400 B.C. and the first quarter of the fourth century, that is between 400 and 375 B.C., and thus between the Subarchaic period and the Classical period.

In the single chamber, frescoed on the inside, on the left wall there is a scene of a dance accompanied by a musician playing a double flute (Figure 14) “The dancer with crotali, clad in red-blue-white, with a florally decorated dress “ (Steingraber 1984) is firmly holding two pairs of nacchere in her hands. The style and mode {i.e. choreography - AK} of the dance exactly resembles the tarantella lenta or the tammurriata campana, even down to the precise positioning of the arms of the masked male dancer on the left, which to this day are alternately raised and lowered during the dance in tempo with the nacchere.

In contrast to the picture in the Tomb of the Triclinium, the nacchere are held with all the fingers engaged in the grip; this makes one suppose that at the less wide ends they must be attached to each other in a fairly tight way by way of a cord passing through them, but not so tight as to prevent them opening in the small arc necessary for their use (at least 20-30 degrees?)

In this way (Figure 15) it seems

useless to make the attachment string pass around a finger, and indeed the image shows a strong, secure grasp by all the fingers around the instrument. An evolution of the previous type? Or merely a different way of playing?

At the end of this brief excursus, I present a scene from a late Roman mosaic, originally not noted by me because it was found on the Internet (and used



Figure 15

as a logo by the National Association of Archaeologists (ANA) who, I hope, will forgive me this “theft”). Here the same dance scene accompanied by a double-flautist and by nacchere held by the female dancer (Figure 16).

But not only that: the ditibicine {flute player - AK} is using his right foot to



Figure 16

play another instrument that seems to be equipped with a bellows, while at right a man holds a famous popular instrument bade from a branch, or better yet a piece of cane split down the middle which when shaken rhythmically behaves like nacchere.

The ballerina holds the nacchere in a way different from that used in Etruria during the Classical period: the thumb is opposed to the fingers and the nacchere are securely controlled with a cord passing through two holes in each piece and then between thumb and middle finger. Practically a modern usage, even though in Campania today there is a firmly established practice of attaching the nacchere to the back of the hand, making them sound using an outward arm movement.

In conclusion, we can only conjecture as to the material these instruments were made of in the past: though we have reports for the crepitacula {an ancient instrument resembling castanets. -AK}, sonagli {rattles - AK}, crotali and several others, to date I have found no documents referring to the material that nacchere were made of in the Etruscan period. One may suppose that they were made of wood, but which [species]?

Probably the chosen substances have always been the same as that which experience tells us of, namely oak heartwood, wood from scopa-root {Erica scoparia, a Mediterranean species of heath, also used to make tobacco-pipe bowls - AK}, [and] boxwood for obtaining darker and more powerful sounds; while for the more

silvery and tinkly tones one turns most often to beech and pine. But as always it will be a matter of personal taste, and [the Etruscans are not certain to have] avoided the use of ribs of animals both domesticated (bovine, equine, etc.), and not. Unfortunately, in archaeological research so far, the presence of nacchere has never been certified – which is the reason for archaeologists’ total lack of knowledge regarding [nacchere ] material.

Especially in important funerary contexts, with depictions of dances or banquets, it is not impossible for someone to find a pair of nacchere made of bone, recognize that they are cut ribs and take them to be remains of a funeral sacrifice.

Mario Galasso

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Figure 7. Tomb of Hunting and Fishing

<http://www.spinelli.it/eng/leper->

<http://www.spinelli.it/eng/leper->

Translation by Adam Klein, June 2014

Scopa info source: <http://www.trecani.it/vocabolario/scopa/>

\* “i due ballerini” means that at least one dancer is male, so Mario can’t be

referring to the female dancers in Figures 1 and 3, but must mean the dancers with red and white skin in the same image, Figure 1. For that he would have written “le due ballerine”.

† magno-graecian from the region of Magna Graecia: see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magna\\_Graecia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magna_Graecia)

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 16, No. 3 2014

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## Executive Director's Column

Bones Fest in Grand Rapids this year was in a word Fabulous! Thanks again to our hosts Bill and his wife, Stacey, Vits for a job well done! We were clearly shown the town from our Thursday performance at One Trick Pony, to our home base in the Guest House and to a now traditional flash mob with our own Celtic Kilroy as the Bronze Man of the bones. Shall I say a splendid time was had by all.

The amazing dinners of Polish and Italian food were only topped by the amazing deserts provided by our co-hostess Stacey Vits - magnifique!

As we reflect back on each Bones Fest, we have a tendency to summarize or categorize the main theme of each one. Last year could be one of community, San Antonio, and Orlando provided many opportunities for performance, and Alexandria Virginia was

one of workshops (and of course a wedding!).

Grand Rapids will for me always be the tribute to Percy Danforth. Being held in his state, and attended by so many people influenced to play the bones by him (myself included), but of course, the major contributors would be his son, Malcom 'Mac' Danforth, grandson, Jonathan, great grandson, Emmet, and Sue Barber, his co-author and friend. The stories were glorious, and the nostalgia vivid, as we heard Mac's descriptions of accompanying his Dad to festivals, and Sue's stories of Percy and her writing. Mac was gracious enough to bring a great deal of Percy memorabilia and it was much fun looking through it all. Percy I think would have been

(Continued on Page 2)

## Highlights of Bones Fest XVIII

"Rattle in the Rapids" I'm still energized from a wonderful weekend of bones playing with over 50 attendees in my home town, Grand Rapids, Michigan. After arriving at the Riverfront Hotel on Thursday, many folks went to the One Trick Pony and had dinner and a rousing evening of bones playing with Sean & Seamus. These guys are dear musical friends who played "bone-friendly" tune after tune. Then San Slomovits surprised many with Emily & Jacob and a mini-set of their intimate music. They were on their way to another music festival, but timed their visit perfectly. <http://sanemilyandjacob.wix.com/sanemilyandjacob> San invited me to sit in and I was beaming ear to ear. Our hosts, Dan & Lisa Verhil, loved our rhythm bones family!

Friday started at the Guest House with registra-

tion, group jamming and bones for sale. The cheezy charm of this old Polish hall made us feel right at home. Before noon we organized to head downtown for our "Flash Mob" mission. At 12:30 we all converged at Rosa Parks Circle where Celtic Kilroy had been "frozen" as a bronze statue with bones and a crowd had developed. Suddenly 30 bones players brought him to life and played along to Irish tunes from a hidden speaker (see the photograph on Page 8). Lunch on the mall had many options from hot dogs to sushi. Steve Wixson and I enjoyed jamming with a local street musician who is an extra with Opera Grand Rapids. We played a medley with Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean!"

(Continued on Page 3)



Bones Fest XVIII Attendees at Guest House in Grand Rapids, MIv (See Page 6 for the key to attendees names)

## Editorial

As is my practice when I fly home from a Bones Fest, I write part of my Editorial in the air. I echo the appreciation of BFXVIII attendees to Bill Vits and his lovely wife, Stacey, for another memorable Fest, and I make special note of how smoothly everything went. The highlights article starts on Page 1, and has more pages in color than previous highlight issues.

Part of Bill's plan for the program was Remembering Percy Danforth and his contributions to rhythm bones. To help with that were Sue Barbers who in collaboration with Percy wrote a history of rhythm bones that is on our website (click the Resources Tab and then the History Tab) and an instruction booklet that to Sue's great surprise is still being sold some 35 years later.

Also present was Percy's son, Mac, member and grandson, Jonathan and great-grandson, Emmett. After the session, Mac presented Jonathan with two boxes of Percy's memorabilia with more to come. Many had assumed that this had gone to the University of Michigan. The session was videoed and highlights will soon appear on our website.

Also in the works is a major project to capture Percy's rhythm bones contributions for future historians. In 2000, RBS profiled Percy in the second issue of the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter. Jonathan wants to write a follow on article using all of the information now available about Percy. So that people can see Percy in action, Lark in the Morning has given us permission to use parts of Percy's instructional video and Tom Spence gave us a video of Percy from the 1983 Old Songs Festival.

Due to the success of the flash mod that Steve Brown had at BFXVII, Bill Vits scheduled another for his Fest. It was on a raised knoll and much easier to video. As soon as possible I will edit the video and upload it to YouTube. Then I will email everyone in our database and request they forward the YouTube link to everyone they know and hope that the video goes viral and the world learns about us. An important reason why it could go viral is Celtic Kilroy who as a

bronze stature started it off. It was great!

Most of the photographs and video shot at Bones Fests and used on our website and in our newsletter comes from me, but mostly from Mary Lee Sweet. Next time you see her, give her a thank you hug!

## Letters to the Editor

I was most pleased to read and see the BFXVIII highlights on our website and see you had 50 or so in attendance. Good job. I seldom play anymore as I had a problem in my right arm that makes it difficult. Still enjoy listening and carry on. It was good to see some familiar people as well. *Bob Waddell*

Hey, look what I found: Storytelling helps celebrate Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival. <http://www.monett-times.com/story/2098819.html>. This year's festival represented a concentrated approach, with 45 contracted performers...the only percussion player this year was me, a bones player who offered a symposium on the ancient craft. *Scott Miller*

[Tim Reilly missed Bones Fest XVIII and here is why.] I am hoping to put in a little blurb about the 38th voyage of the Charles W Morgan in the next newsletter. I wore many hats during the voyage as a rigger who worked to rebuild the ship and make her sea worthy, as a sailor who represented the seaport staff as foreman on 5 legs of her 38th voyage, as interpretative staff, and as the only bones player on the ship. I made a set of bones while underway to ports such as Newport, New Bedford, and Stelwagen Banks. I met Jonathan Danforth during my New Bedford stint. *Tim Reilly*

I've restored a cat playing bones image and transformed it into a large print. Folks who have no connection to rhythm bones have bought copies, so I thought I should take it right to the heart of the instrument! Please have a look, and if it pleases you perhaps a link to it is a newsworthy item. All the best! <https://www.etsy.com/listing/173471515/antique-cat-print-formal-cat-in-white>. *Todd Kimmell*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

(Continued from Page 1)

proud to see an organization of bones players, and to know how much he meant to us all!

One last thing, a hearty congratulations to Sky Bartlett and Jesse Weinstein who were married the week after Bones Fest, and still managed to attend this year! They met at Bones Fest in Alexandria Virginia, and are the second marriage we can claim to have come out of Bones Fest! Woo Hoo! *Steve Brown*

## Website Update

The RBS website updates for July and August were highlights from BFXVII. The September update had Bill Vits' highlight article with a photograph of the Flash Mob plus overall video highlights from BFXVIII. During the next several months the videos will include the Remembering Percy session and workshops and individual performances.



(Continued from Page 1)



After lunch we were back to the Guest House for Stephen Brown's clinic on beginning bones. With his logical and relaxed approach several newbies were playing in no time. Teaching bones requires patience, humor and physical contact and Stephen has the magic.



I did a clinic on rudimental bones and covered flams, paradiddles, doubles as they can work into our bones playing. I enjoy playing the bones at a small drum-set which adds lots of possibilities.



This Bones Fest was a tribute to Percy Danforth and we were blessed to have his son, grandson and great grandson in attendance. Another special guest was Sue Barber, who wrote and documented much of Percy's rhythm bone history. Discussion and stories were lively and all agreed Percy would be thrilled to see our

organization. Malcolm (Mac) Danforth brought an inherited treasure box of his father's memorabilia of clippings, pictures, drawings and awards that Percy



had received. He gave it to Jonathon who quickly selected a few significant items and arranged a table display.



We all found something in that box that excited or touched our hearts. One article quoted Fran, Percy's wife saying, "Percy is a musician like a bird is...but I'm a trained musician."

A Polish dinner followed with Kielbasa, pierogies, sauerkraut and my wife Stacey's desserts. After that meal we still had energy to all get up and perform as a rehearsal for our Saturday night show.



Jay Round & Tom Devries supplied hammered dulcimer, bass and guitar for live music while Jay ran sound and coordinated CD's, iphones, tablets and anything with a output. For the Saturday night show we had 26 acts to coordinate.

Saturday found some second day registrants and folks jammed while we snuck in a Board Meeting.



Randy Seppala & Stephen Brown were selling beautiful bones of all types between teaching and giving tips.





At lunch time, 90 year old Lew Guernsey from Ionia arrived in a BMW convertible. Lew knew Percy and even made a set of bones on his machinery. He shared his wonderful collection of bones with me and even gave me a set of noise-maker "cheater bones". He had never seen such a congregation of players!

Saturday saw clinics by Skeffington Flynn on Bones History and Beginning Bones. Skeff is doing great things for the RBS, including a brochure that is now available to promote the bones.

Spike Bones got the crowd loose by circling the players and encouraging participation.



Celtic Kilroy gave great tips on harmonica & bones while busking. His multi/instrument energy was infectious.



A quick membership meeting featured lowering our dues from \$25 to \$20.

Saturday's dinner had more great food (homemade lasagna & chicken) while Stacey made more delicious desserts.

Before you knew it it was almost showtime and folks wandered in not really knowing what to expect. After doing three radio and a TV promotion we had good turnout of interested listeners.

The show was fast paced and the variety of styles and techniques was as-

ounding. All the regulars performed, but I must mention a few others. The next generation of bones players were Anika & Joseph Kooi who played the bones AND tap danced!



Jack Frost cracked me up when he played a gallop rhythm and pretended to 'whip the horse.' Kathy Whisler sang and played with a wonderful voice (she's a lawyer). Jeremy Brown, the "Superman of the Bones," closed the first half with a crowd pleasing performance to 'Happy' which caused big smiles all around.

The second half featured the Mescher family, Mary Lee & Frank Sweet and more veterans of previous Fests.

Gerard Arseneault brought out the smiles and Sky Bartlett blew the roof as he looked like Bruce Lee with rhythm bones. Celtic Kilroy showed his musical versatility, Steve Wixson jammed with Jay on upright bass and Spike Bones put

on a mini-minstrel show. The grand finale was our conga line with all participants on their feet.

After the show, tear down & clean up we celebrated back at the "Danforth Suite" and said our good byes at brunch the next morning. The RBS is healthy, happy and teaching new people to play the bones. Thank you to all who traveled to GR and trusted me to host Bones Fest XVIII! *Bill Vits*



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet



Gerard Arseneault



The Mescher Tradition; Sharon and Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell





Sky Barlett and Ernie Duffy performing a move they learned from the late Shorty Boulet. They are accompanied by Tom Devries on guitar and Jay Round on hammered dulcimer.



Jessye Weinstein and Sky Bartlett met at a Bones Fest and were married a week later



Michael Ballard



Blue Hammond



Stan Von Hagen



Skeff Flynn



Ernie Duffy teaching Kate Barfield



Gerry Hines



Kathy Whilser



Jack Frost



Steve Wixson jamming with Jay Round on bass



Lew Guernsey



Randy Seppala teaching



'Superman' Jeremy Brown



Mitch Boss and Randy Seppala with Jonathan on fiddle



Mike Passerotti and Canadians Jay and Deborah Thomson in the Congo line



## Key to Photograph on Page 1

- 1- Steve Brown
- 2- Mark Stone
- 3 - Jonathan Danforth
- 4 - Sharon Mescher
- 5 - Jerry Mescher
- 6 - Gerard Arseneault
- 7 - Tom Worrell
- 8 - Bernie Worrell
- 9 - Jay Thomson
- 10 - Barry Palmerton
- 11 - Deborah Thomson
- 12 - Skeff Flynn

- 13 - Sky Bartlett
- 14 - Ernie Duffy
- 15 - Spke Bones
- 16 - Jessye Weinstein
- 17 - Jerry Hines
- 18 - Jeremy Brown
- 19 - Anika Kooi
- 20 - Blue Hammond
- 21 - Randy Seppala
- 22 - Stan Von Hagen
- 23 - Kathy Whisler
- 24 - Mike Passerotti
- 25 - Bill Vits
- 26 - Josh Passerotti
- 27 - Michael Ballard
- 28 - Matt Kilroy
- 29 - Mitch Boss

- 30 - Kate Barfield
  - 31 - Frank Sweet
  - 32 - Mary Lee Sceet
  - 33 - Jim Quiram
  - 34 - Sandra Quiram
  - 35 - Lew Guernsey
  - 36 - Joseph Kooi
  - 37 - Jennifer Brown
- Not present for the photograph were:
- Sue Barber
  - Clay Beringer
  - Scott Craig
  - Jack and Greta Frost
  - Chyarles Johnson
  - Jim Lochowitz
  - Jean Von Hagen and
  - Steve Wixson who took the picture



## Minutes of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order on August 15 in the Guest House in Grand Rapids, MI. Executive Director called the meeting to order at 4:50 PM. Steve Wixson read the minutes of the last meeting and a motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes as read. Steve Wixson gave a brief Treasurer's Report noting we had \$4,689.33 at the end of 2013. He noted that he had given a copy of the Report with all supporting documentation to the Executive Director.

The Board serving as the Nominating Committee nominated all current Board members to serve another year. The floor was opened for further nominations, and being none the motion was made, seconded and approved to elect all by acclamation. They are Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Tim Reilly and Kenny Wolin.

Steve Wixson gave a brief overview of the Board Meeting. He thanked Mary Lee Sweet for all of the videoing she does of Bones Fests.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 5:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order on August 15 in the Guest House in Grand Rapids, MI. Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 10:22 AM. Members present were Steve Brown, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Bill Vits and Steve Wixson. Visitors present were Jerry Mescher and Tom and Bernie Worrell.

Steve Wixson read the minutes from the last meeting and a motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes as read.

Steve Wixson gave a brief Treasurer's Report noting we had \$5,917.55 in the bank at the end of 2013 but owing a re-

imbursement check to Steve Wixson for \$1,226.22. He gave a copy of the Report with all supporting documentation to the Executive Director. A motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the Treasurer's Report.

The Board gave appreciation to Skeff Flynn for completing the brochure discussed at the last meeting. He reported he printed 600 copings, giving 250 each to Dom Flemons and Rowan Corbett to pass out at their shows.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to reimburse Skeff for the 600 copies he had printed. There was a desire to print 10,000 more copies and after quotes are obtained, we will approve this with an email vote.

There was a discussion as to how to distribute the brochure. It will be put on our website for downloading. We will put a note on our website so that people who can use the brochure to the benefit of RBS can order it.

Steve Wixson moved that we reduce the membership dues to \$20 per year due to lower newsletter printing costs. The motion was seconded and approved.

Skeff initiated a discussion about redesigning our website. He noted that a local graphic artist did our brochure for free and asked that we consider her if we do a major redesign of our website. We need to document what we want from our website and he will initiate and circulate such a document.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to suspend the meeting to determine if Tim Reilly would like to serve another year on the Board. The meeting was suspended at 11:42 AM.

The meeting resumed at 3:20 PM. With the Board serving as the Nominating Committee, a motion was made, seconded and approved to nominate the current members to serve another year.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn the meeting. Meet was adjourned at 3:25 PM.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson

## Scott Miller Has a Ragtime Story

Last June I gave a symposium on "Bones and Ragtime" at the 2014 Scott Joplin Festival in Sedalia, Missouri.

Joining me was ragtime pianist and composer Rich Egan. A few days later Rich and I opened the neighboring 2014 Blind Boone Ragtime & Early Jazz Festival in Columbia, Missouri. While there I met Adam Swanson, a young and highly gifted musician who was a headliner at both events. Adam made his New York debut in Carnegie Hall at the age of nineteen. He has also performed solo at the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage in Washington, D.C.

Anyway, Adam and I had a great conversation about minstrelsy. A few days later I ran across a recording of "St Louis Tickle" and "Crazy Bone Rag" that Adam posted on YouTube which was recorded by his mentor, Johnny Maddox.

Johnny Maddox's First Record  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWwMf7O1YE8>

The Bones and Ragtime symposium I gave at the Scott Joplin Festival in Sedalia centered on the lack of documentation that connects bones with ragtime. In fact, the presentation began with this quote from ragtime luminary, Trebor Tichenor: "Bones were definitely played with ragtime. We just don't have documentation."

And now I just stumbled across an important recording by a legendary ragtime player - with bones accompaniment. I had to dig deeper.

The percussion in the recording sounded like a wood block to me. But that could be bones from 2:37 to 2:51. So I asked Adam if he could confirm specifically where in the recording bones are played. "I spoke with Johnny Maddox yesterday," said Adam. "And he says, to the best of his memory, that "Temp" Templeton played the bones on this record. He says he used Ebony and Ivory bones, with both hands." It appears that the bones on these two tunes are...well bones.

The 1950 recording of "St Louis Tickle" (side A, Dot 1005-A) and "Crazy Bone Rag" (side B, Dot 1005-B) with bones are among the first releases on the Dot Records label. (#1005 indicates this was their 5th release.)

In any event, the fact that rhythm bones were rattled in the first published recording by the legendary piano player Johnny Maddox, and that bones played a role in helping launch Dot Records, is a historic event - and significant news for rhythm bones players. *Scott Miller*



Flash Mob centered around Matt 'Celtic' Kilroy, a frozen bronze statute, on the knoll at Rosa Parks Circle in downtown Grand Rapids

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 16, No. 4 2014

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## Executive Director's Column

We've had a foot of snow and the temperature was 10 this morning, so though the calendar doesn't say it, winter is upon us my friends. And with winter comes another end to a calendar year, and time to reflect a bit, and perhaps look to the promise of a new year.

This past year brought the sad passing of yet another prominent member of our bones playing family, Dan Cowett. Dan brought a real genuineness where ever he went, served for many years as our audio tech at Bones Fests, was quite simply a joy to be around, and he will be missed. We can only remember our bone playing friends by continuing the tradition.

Our foret into Grand Rapids was truly a delight, and one that will linger long in my memory. Bill and

Stacey's hospitality were second to none, and the community of Grand Rapids embraced us all. For that we are most thankful.

Our tribute to Percy Danforth at Bones Fest this year brought him back for at least the week end. That stirred many memories of the man who introduced me to the bones, and I'm very grateful for that.

For me personally, seeing Junior Davey win the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship was true justice for a man who has taken on the cause of rhythm bone playing and sprinkled it about by teaching countless adults and children, and I'm sure he will continue to do so.

I've had the experience of playing music of the Civil War period (Continued on Page 2)

## Gerard Arseneault on Canadian TV

[Editor's note. We met Gerard at Bones Fest V in Massechusetts. My brother vacationed in Quebec City, Canada and while eating heard rhythm bones in another room. He investigated, found Gerard and passed contact informatioun to me. Gerard also attended Bones X in New Bedford and this year's Bones Fest XVIII in Grand Rapids. As you can tell from the photograph in the left column, Gerard is a warm, friendly man.

To understand his story, view his performance on Candian TV at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jZ23V8kxEPw>. What follows is in his own words.]

I was selected for the 'Give Way to Seniors' show because of an announcement on TV asking for people 50 years old and over with a certain talent to phone up without hesitation. A few weeks later a woman phoned me and asked me "What do you do?" I said I play bones. "What is that." she said, and I explained to her what it was. She said, "Mr. Arseneault, I'll be very happy to meet you with your woods."

A few week later, I was called for the interview. I am sitting in front of the woman who phoned me and beside her is the music-master. After introductions, I put on the table my 4 woods. They couldn't resist to touch them. After a minute or two they put my music CD on, and I started to play. You should have seen their eyes all wide open followed with a

large sigh of wonder .

As soon the music and I stopped at the same time and almost together they said officially "We want you. We like what we've seen and heard. We are not the only ones who make the selection, but were are among those on the board. You'll hear from us in a few weeks." He gave me a Charleston CD. "Good luck."

On my way home I was saying to myself, this is going to be my objective for this year in spite (Continued on Page 4)



Gerard Arseneault

## Editorial

There is no long article in this issue, rather several short ones starting on Page 1 with how Gerard Arseneault got to appear on national Canadian television. I wonder if I have the courage and determination to accomplish what he did.

I am happy to announce that we are having a Palindrome Fest in 2015 - XIX. Bones Fest XIX will be on August 6-9 in Shepherdstown, West Virginia hosted by Skeff Flynn. Preliminary information will be in the next newsletter. Our first in West Virginia.

The Percy Danforth Project has started and the first progress report of sorts is on the opposite page. We are uniquely qualified for this project.

Here we are at the end of another year with 86 members, another great Bones Fest thanks to Bill Vits (see a photograph of him on Page 8), four more issues of our Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, and a website rich in content. It is dues time and you will receive a notice in mid December for 2015. We hope you will rejoin.

## Letters to the Editor

Just to let you know of the passing of Mike Berry who was a rhythm bones player and friend. I played the bones at his wake. Dutch Koop

Thought you might like to see this. We were in Holland and I asked our host what the sign said. He tried to explain it but nothing translated. Finally, I realized that he was describing playing the bones. He told me that's what this sign meant.  
*David Lasseter*



Last April I competed in the Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent Show, which took place at Brunswick High School's Crooker Theater. I played my rhythm bones to a rendition of "Sweet Georgia Brown" for which I was awarded one of the three Judge's Choice Trophies, a picture of which I'm sending along.

Should you be interested in seeing a video of me playing my musical saw, saw tie, rhythm bones etc. on the Internet, just Google "Claude Bonang." Of the topics that come up, click on "Brunswick's Claude Bonang playing his wonderful instruments." Should you do so, you'll also get a chance to see some of my wife's watercolor paintings on the walls in the background. All the best,  
*Claude Bonang*



## Executive Director Column Continued

with some amazing musicians, and historians, Marek Bennett and Woody Pringle, and their interpretation of music and readings from this era is awakening. With all great tragedies comes heroes who stand tall, like Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln.

And in that vein we face the prospect of venturing to West Virginia to participate in a Bones Fest on the same ground that the war was fought. It's really intriguing to think of playing the bones in Shepardstown and the surrounding area. Perhaps we can again celebrate bringing the bones back to one of its natural American musical partners, the banjo.

As we prepare to celebrate yet another Holiday Season, I'm wishing everyone a very magical time, and hope that you will join us this year at what promises to be a great Bones Fest! *Steve Brown*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Website Updates

The homepage updates to our website during the fourth quarter were from Bones Fest XVIII. October had a video of the Flash Mob in downtown Grand Rapids. November had a video on The Remembering Percy session. See the next page for a description of the The Percy Project that began as a result of this session. December had a video on the outstanding Thursday night party for early arrivers at the One Trick Pony Restaurant. Future update will continue with expanded videos from that Bones Fest.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 6-9, 2015, Shepherdstown, WV, Skeff Flynn, Host.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 31 - September 6, 2015, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

## The Percy Danforth Project

The Remembering Percy session that Bill Vits organized at Bones Fest XVIII paid off big time. Attending were Sue Barber who collaborated with Percy on a history of rhythm bones that is on our website as well as Percy's first instructional booklet, Percy's son, Malcolm (Mac) who told stories about his father and gave Jonathan two boxes of Percy's memorabilia that many thought had gone to the University of Michigan, and grandson, Jonathan, and great-grandson, Emmet.

Jonathan quickly went through the two boxes and organized a table displaying the items he found most interesting (see the photograph below).

That started a project to collect all of the information that we can and then do something with it. There will be a larger follow on article written by Jonathan to the one that appeared in RBP, Vol 2, No 1. Our website will be expanded by as many pages as needed to properly present the best of what is discovered.

Already, Lark in the Morning, who owns Percy's Bones Instructional video has given up permission to include the non-instructional parts of that video. Andy's Front Hall has given us old photographs and videos of Percy at festivals. And we have purchased copies of video

on Percy that the Library of Congress recorded as part of their efforts to preserve American folk musicians.

## The Tale of Bear Bones

Recently I had a chance to play the bones in the craziest of settings.

It all started when I posted a dressing room video of me playing my Danforth bones in white tie and tails backstage at a Grand Rapids Symphony concert. A percussionist friend (who was previously unaware of the potential of the rhythm bones) saw the video and contacted me and asked if I was interested in performing for a trade show.

It was a convention for Wolverine World Wide which is based in Rockford, MI. This company started with the shoe brand Hush Puppies and has grown to a international apparel maker.

They spend a fortune on these trade shows and everything is world class. Their new campaign slogan is "You are Wild" as they make shoes and clothing for outdoor adventurers.

The idea was to have percussionists wearing their shoes and clothing, but performing wearing realistic looking animal heads! The lead critter was to be me in a business suit wearing a brown bear head while I jammed with a fox, wolf and eagle.

I was told the bear head cost \$12,000 so I had dressers and handlers to help me. It took a size 50 jacket (with cardboard inserts) to fit the head and I could only see two holes of light out of the nostrils.

As you can imagine it was hot and claustrophobic and I had to go up stairs in the dark and then play and dance down a runway without falling five feet to the ground. I often perform with my rock band, *The Concussions*, wearing masks but this was a greater challenge than I imagined.

I was paid handsomely and also received free shoes and apparel for a full day of rehearsals before the 5 minutes of performance! The best part of the story is I taught three great drummers how to play the bones and gifted them some of Randy Seppala's maple bones. *Bill Vits* [See Bill in Bear Head Mask on Page 8.]



## Bones Fest

# XIX

### August 6-9, 2015

## Shepherdstown, WV

## Skeff Flynn, Host

Preliminary Information  
in the next Newsletter

(Continued from Page 1)

of a tearing ligament on my left shoulder. I must make it. I had lost my equilibrium while I was trying to install a plywood 4x8x1/4 on the ceiling of my cellar. I continued to work, but at the end of the day it was very painful. After a few days I decided to go for an xray. They said that with a tearing ligament in your shoulder, you are better to take it easy for a while. This happened two weeks before my interview. Knowing that I had to go for my interview, two days before I went to get a shot of Cortisone in my left shoulder as you don't feel the pain for a few days.

It was just the beginning of a new game I said to myself. I had to get the beat of that music which is new to me. It'll be a good challenge for me in spite of my handicap. I was thinking that way because I still was not feeling pain due to the Cortisone effect.

I had been sent to a clinic twice a week with a physical therapist to do exercises. Adding to that were my practices with my woods to try to get that new unknown beat, and it became harder and painful.

A phone call came for a get together for those who have been chosen like me, and I went to make acquaintance with the group. I waited until all the other persons were questioned by the two persons who had given us the interview, and I managed to be the last one to see them.

"How are you Gerard?" I said not too well. They asked what is going wrong and I told them all about my left shoulder (I never told them before) - that it is so painful. I'm here this evening to think about having to quit. I'm have some exercises to do and I'm followed by a physical therapist, but when I start to rattle my woods it hurts me even more. So it is still early. You could easily replace me because I will not be able to reach my goal.

I said, "At the hospital, they told me I would be helping myself exercising with the nurse twice a week and nothing else for at least one month." A moment of silence. They discussed together and the music-master looked at me and told me "We are going to make a deal with you, Gerard. We'll give you a month and a half to not have to come to some meetings. I'll want you to attend to the music

of the Charleston CD to get familiar with his rhythm, and the total numbers of music bars specially to memorize at which numbers you'll have a solo bar when I stop the music. All this without your woods which will give you a great rest for your left shoulder. I'll phone every 2 weeks to see how you progress. Our reason is you belong the group." I said thanks for their great confidence in me.

It helped me a lot these weeks by just doing the exercises prescribed by the doctor and remembering the beats of the music and the number of each solo-bar. I started to rattle very slowly and increasing every day up to a level I could endure.

After a while I had to join the group at the theater. They were showing us how to get on the stage all together in some occasions and when it was our turn to perform alone.

The time goes by very fast. In no time we are at 2 days before our performances. I went to get another shot of Cortisone into my left shoulder to minimize my pain.

I did my best to not disappoint my audience. When my turn came believe it or not, I had my answer - an ovation. Good thing there was no recall because after playing 2 days in row in my condition, it was my maximum. My personnel evaluation is about 50% as I surly did better when I was in a better shape. But I'm glad to be able to accomplish my objective to the end.

You will notice when I was playing, my eyes were closed because I did not want to be disturbed or distracted by anything, even the light, so that I could be able to count from the beginning of the music starting at bar #1. Numbers 7-9 10-10-13-15 were my solo-bars and luckily I didn't miss one.

You'll also notice while I'm playing my arms never went higher of my shoulder when I was playing. Before my arms were mostly above my shoulders

Since about my shoulder I went for what they call Resonance Magnetic. This test is the top test to compare with the xray. The results show many tearing of ligaments and muscles. They are discussing if they could operate me at my age of 87 year old in 6 months.

Please excuse my composition my

faults and my writing. [Some editing done - English is Gerard's second language.]

Some friends of mine put me on YouTube. My regards to all of you. *Le Quebecois Gerard*

## 2015 Dues Renewal Time

RBS dues run from January to December, and you will soon receive an email with the 2015 Dues Renewal notice. This can be paid by check or PayPal, and the number paying on-line continues to increase. RBS says thanks.

## John Perona's Legacy Lives On

Just to give a little news on playing rhythm bones (using SPOONS) and where I am on my acquired skills. I want to thank all who taught me different techniques on playing and to think thought I knew every thing about rhythm bones playing.

Well I must tell you I have been playing spoons in public, on stage oh, what the heck - on the street too and some of my acquired techniques came from going to Bones Fests. Thanks to Randy Sappala who was an apprentice to John Perona (read about John in RBP Vol 11, No 1, Page 4 with several color photographs on Page 8). I do play spoons and hold them exactly like rhythm bones so I don't have to make up any excuses to you avid rhythm bones players. Yes, I have other ways of holding spoons when playing that I also use, but it is the technique of holding those table spoons exactly like rhythm bones and playing in the same manner that gives the true musical sound I like.

I want to tell you that I played and used over thousand different spoons before I got the desired sound and grip that is necessary for me to have to play spoons like rhythm bones. What am I using: Stanley Roberts Lady Joann table spoons. They are 18/8 stainless and made in Japan. They actually have that ring I like and can control. I got mine on ebay and paid \$5.00 each recently. Remember you will need 2 spoons and they must be table spoons. *Dutch Kopp*-spoonsman



## Miriam Leads a Bones Workshop

I learned to play the bones in the late 1980s. My first introduction to them was at a Northeastern Music and Dance (NOMAD) workshop and I was hooked since. I use them to accompany vocals and to add percussion when performing with my band, TransAtlantic Roots Band, in Cincinnati, OH. I not only play rhythm bones, but also hammered dulcimer, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, and clarinet (with the Southwestern Ohio Symphony Band). Most recently, I have started a Cincinnati Klezmer jam session with my clarinet.

I held a workshop this past August, 2014 at the Metamora Old-Time Festival in Metamora, IN. The workshop was for beginners who wanted to learn how about rhythm bones, and it was held for the entire weekend. About a dozen people visited the workshop and with the handouts to remind them how to hold the bones, I hope they will continue to practice and get hooked. *Miriam Stenson*

Miriam called me with an urgent request to make her two pair of bones/sticks by the next day for the festival so she would have some for students to play. I never met Miriam before, so I was enthused that another local rhythm bones player found me. I made them for her, and then I decided to go to the festival myself. The festival was totally worth the trip. I shared my bones with others to play, and pointed people to the Rhythm Bones Society web pages. Thanks to Miriam for introducing me to the fest. I'll be making more sticks for next year's class. I always need more. *Mike Passerotti*



Helper Mike Passerotti, leader Miriam Stensen, and two unnamed students

## John Bridgeworth on Britain's Got More Talent Show

[John Bridgeworth got a chance on Britain's Got More Talent television show, but did not make it past the first round. You can see a video of that and a bit more at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_pFre0OPVQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_pFre0OPVQ). Here is John's story.]

I was born in April 1938 and started playing rhythm bones when I was about 13. I found that I was easily the best player in my group - many kids had them at that time. I was seen playing by a Tommy Cherry who presented me with his 4 Ebony bones, correctly curved and in a leather case.

In 1901 there was a visit to Darwen, Lancs, UK, my home town, by a black minstrel show complete with Mr Interlocutor, and I have a picture in a book about this.

I learnt how to alter the tone whilst playing, by holding the instrument between my thumb & first finger and 1st and 2nd finger.

I lost this set when I was sailing in my catamaran about 40 miles east of Algiers, being demasted. I was rescued by a P & O ship and brought back to UK losing the yacht and the bones.

The Britain's Got More Talent show was advertised on TV and I just rang. I passed the first audition, and also got a tremendous round of applause playing in the large restaurant when they first started filming me prior to the audition (not shown on TV).

I bought 2 sets of bones for the show, one lignum vitae and the other Ebony. Both sets were half the weight I really wanted, I prefer 4 oz. I was annoyed to

only get 58 seconds before the first bell, because of the expense I went to.

My daughter did not want me to go on because they sometimes are "short" with older people.

I can play with 4 bones in each hand, and make a real racket. You might be interested in the fact when playing Irish music (in particular), I use the left hand as if it is the left hand on the piano, and the right hand plays the melody.

My daughter Vicki is visiting, and there are two venues with Irish groups playing. I wonder if I can persuade her to go with me, as she has already planned to go elsewhere. My phones are 00441614257522, & 00447942969801. I rarely get out these days due to my painful (very, sometimes) spinal condition, having had 2 laminectomies, one going wrong, the second failing to rectify it.

I once played with a guitarist friend in a bar in Spain. It didn't do much business, but the owner got knives, forks and spoons and passed them around. The place filled up, instead of it emptying as normally (it was a place to drop in on the way to the area with many more bars) The lady owner thanked me afterwards, and asked me to drop in anytime, but I was leaving the next day.

I also played (and sang) with a Skiffle group, mainly Lonnie Donegan numbers. We packed the place out, and people were actually standing on the entrance stairs waiting for a seat. I get the usual number of people asking me to show them how to play. At a kiddies party I got a mobbed as soon as I sat down.

Reminds me, one night a Cajun group were paying, and I joined in with knives, forks & spoons. There were many American tourists in the bar. *John Bridgeworth*

## Another Love Story

Two of my customers got engaged a few months ago. Eileen said, "Lew and I fell in love while he was teaching me the bones. We got engaged in September." I believe they are in their 80s.

Eileen's father played rhythm bones, and Lew's father and uncle played them. Lew's uncle taught Lew's dad how to play. Lew watched them and started rattling by himself at age 6 in the 1930s. Lew played the bones with his dad at local bars and other events. *Scott Miller*

## Rhythm Bones in Spain and England

The mention or sight of the bones in Madrid, Spain causes laughter, curiosity or even misunderstanding amongst modern Spaniards. Upon seeing me play they invariably cry "la castanuelas, la castanuelas!" and then make jokes about me being one or other of the great FEMALE flamenco stars of the distant Madrileño past. A quick demonstration satisfies the curious that my bones are indeed bones and not castanets, but my enquiries as to finding a living bones tradition on the streets or in the countryside quickly flounder. In what is a very traditional capital city, oddly I have yet to see a single bones player on the street and indeed, in all my years of being here, I have only seen ONE street castanets player, in Madrid's famous Rastro market. Personal enquiries yield little information either, with most people in their fifties and sixties greeting my questions about the bones with a shrug.

It was only when my Spanish girlfriend, Irene, mentioned my clacking activities to her grandmother, Teresa, a lovely old lady of eighty five years, that any light at all was shed on the matter.

Abuela Teresa, who was born in the San Blas area, East of Madrid, clearly remembered seeing somebody playing the bones and NOT the castanets when she was young. Although it is difficult to make generalizations on such meagre evidence, we might assume that this sighting would have been in the 1930s or 40s. Given that the Spaniards in their fifties and sixties to whom I have spoken can say nothing about the bones, perhaps we can assume that they fell out of popular use in the modern Spain of the 1950's and 60's?

My native England seems to be a happier place for bones playing. Here I made two bones connections in as many days! While on my annual vacation back home in early September of this year, I spent a week in Birmingham with my cousin, Nick Ward, who is a professional vintage jazz percussionist. While depping for an ill Mr. Peter Eddowes, the resident drummer with the fantastic Six In A Bar Jazz Band, my cousin was told that Peter

plays the bones as a novelty item as part of the band's act. Upon my return to Spain I obtained Mr. Eddowe's contact details, and he very kindly granted me a telephone interview.

Peter has played the bones since he was a child and started out with bacon rib bones! He says that these cut his hands. Peter then changed to a set of purchased bones in the 1950s or 60s; his Mother thought that these might be ivory, but he now believes them to be polished bone. They are certainly a prized possession and he worries about losing them. As a back up set he has improvised a set made from the tool bookmakers use to cut paper, although Peter says these don't make quite the same sound as his main set, which have a high treble sound. Peter plays in a two handed, syncopated style and does a duet with a flageolet player.

My other close encounter of the bones kind came quickly afterwards. My cousin was playing with the Salon Rouge Jazz band at the Hen and Hound pub in Bascote Heath, South Warwickshire and, upon hearing that I was a neophyte bones player, Nick's fellow musicians pointed me in the direction of an elderly gentleman seated in front of the band. This was Mr. Jones "the bones" originally from Wales. At a guess I would say that he was in his seventies or eighties and he was initially a little shy in talking to me.

Mr. Jones started playing the bones at an early age with a set of bones - or "clappers" as they were known - made of Welsh slate from the roof of his parents house! He was told that if he was able to play the slate set he would be rewarded with a shop bought set. Mr. Jones then produced for me the set of four bones he had been bought as a child. They were a yellowy white colour, rectangular in shape and about four inches long - the smallest bones I have seen hitherto and almost too small for my hands. During the evening we were treated to a solo spot by Mr. Jones and he played a two-handed piece, even doing some stop playing with my cousin. He was rewarded with good applause.

I was left with the impression of a very humble man. When I asked him for advice on playing he told me that he had been playing for some 70 years and that if I had rhythm in my soul I would be okay. *Simon Talbot*

## An English Rhythm Bones Tale

William Stephenson was born on 19/06/24 in Hebburn, Newcastle upon Tyne. He learnt how to play 'the bones' from the age of 6 years by picking up his father's bones and being shown how to hold them. His father (also called William Stephenson) played the bones in a band made up of apprentice shipbuilders working for the Swan Hunters Company. His father also went round the pubs in a two-man band called 'The Clappers.'

Grandpa was the eldest of the 7 children in the Stephenson family. Only he and his sister Barbara took to playing the bones properly, and both have carried on the family tradition by playing at family events.

When the ship building industry along the Tyne started to decline, the family moved to Birmingham and great grandfather got a job as an engineer at Constructors. Grandpa was about 10 - 11 years when they moved. Grandpa delivered groceries while still at school, then trained to be an engineer. He was a machine tool maker at BSA in Birmingham, working his way up to being a planning engineer in the same company.

He moved to Oxenhope, West Yorkshire, with his wife in 1996 to be closer to his daughter, son-in-law and two grandsons.

The ability to play the bones skipped a generation with William Stephenson's only daughter, Catherine Baugh, and that is how I came to learn how to play the bones! *Will Baugh*

[Will Baugh makes rhythm bones. See <http://willbaugh.com/rhythm-bones>. When ask what wood he uses, he sent this reply.]

I had a really good time making these rhythm bones. The wood I used was 'Wenge' wood, a very dark hardwood I selected due its weight, density and grain pattern. It really was a joy to create the rhythm bones from this material as the grain really stands out when giving the bones a final sand. Due to the different densities of grain in Wenge (lighter grain is less dense) and its straight grain pattern, the bones create a very rounded, full sound.

I have also used Oak, Ash and Purple

Heart wood, all of which have very different sounds when making bones.

I also experimented with a material called Corian, which is commonly used for kitchen surfacing and table tops.

These bones created a very sharp, loud sound due to the density of the material.

I gained my interest for rhythm bones from my Grandpa. He taught me how to play and that is where I picked up how to hold the bones, passing down the tradition to the younger generations.

I actually made that particular set of bones [shown on the above website] for my Grandpa's 90th birthday, and he loves playing them, always keeping them in his back pocket wherever he goes. *Will Baugh*

## Stanley Von Hagen Took Celtic Kilroy's BFXVIII Advice

I took Celtic Kilroy's advice from his Busking Workshop at Bones Fest XVIII, and took my "bones" with me to France.

I was able to play with an accordionist in front of the Cathedral in Lyon and with a group of entertainers reenacting a Medieval Play in Carcassone.

One of the players was quite interested and wanted to know all about playing rhythm bones. I showed her how to grip them and she was tapping out double taps in just a few tries.

I told her about the Rhythm Bones Society and she said that she might Google the site. Thought you might be interested in this picture below. Stan Von Hagen



## Cat Plays Bones

I've played the bones as has anyone who grew up going to the Philadelphia Folk Festival, but I'm not a bones player. Still, they are one of those cool things I know about and am happy to share that knowledge whenever chance presents an opportunity. In my work with historic imagery, I seek out unusual gems and put them through a thorough digital restoration, preparing them to be reborn as large format prints.

That means I'm always on the lookout for amazing graphics. When I found this Victorian trade card advertising a sewing machine but featuring a handsome cat in full evening wear playing the bones, I let out a whoop and holler (photo - Page 8).

Now, whenever I set my work up at a show, if I see anyone spending some face time with this print I hasten to ask if they know what the cat is doing. Most people mention chopsticks, and I then swing into my layman's version of the story playing the bones. It's always fun!

Thanks for the chance to get the link out to your readers. Please feel free to share it with anyone you think'd get a kick out of it. Enjoy! <https://www.etsy.com/listing/173471515/antique-cat-print-formal-cat-in-white>. *Todd Kimmell*

## Woody Guthrie and the Bones

Woody Guthrie is an enduring legend of American Folk Music. Though most of his recordings feature him playing the guitar and harmonica, many people do not realize that Guthrie was a multi-instrumentalist. He played fiddle and mandolin and I have finally gotten confirmation that he did in fact play the bones.

Recently, the Woody Guthrie Archives released, *My Name Is New York*, a 3-CD walking guide to Woody's life in New York City. Though he hailed from Okemah, Oklahoma, Woody spent most of his adult life in New York City where he co-founded the Almanac Singers with Pete Seeger, became one of the main performers who Alan Lomax raised to the status of Folk Music icon and also met his second wife, Majorine and raised his family (which included folk singer Arlo Guthrie and Woody Guthrie Archives curator Nora) in Coney Island.

The set features a track "Married Man's A Fool" featuring Sonny Terry on vocals and harmonica and Woody on the bones. (<http://time.com/3148184/woody-guthrie-my-name-is-new-york-unreleased-song/>)

When I heard this track I found confirmation on one of the great mysteries I had in my research.

Let me rewind back to the Ann Arbor Folk Festival, 2008. The Carolina Chocolate Drops were playing at the festival along with Pete as well as Old Crow Medicine Show. Tao Rodriguez Seeger, Pete's grandson, made a point to mention that CCD and Old Crow were the two acts that Pete had requested to see and Tao mentioned how much Pete had enjoyed both of our shows. He then asked, "Hey, you guys want to meet my grandpa?"

I can still clearly remember Ketch Secor, Willie Watson and I running to Pete's dressing room like little schoolgirls getting ready to meet one of the great icons of the 20th century. As we entered the room, Pete jumped up and said, "I like the way you play the bones. Did you know my grandfather played the bones? In fact, Woody Guthrie played them too!"

I was thrilled to know that I had gotten confirmation from Pete on my own playing, but I was struck even more by his mention of Woody playing the bones.

As a member of the Rhythm Bones Society, my interest was piqued of course and I tried to follow up. I ran into Pete several more times up till he passed away early in 2014, but each time I saw him I couldn't get anymore info about Woody and the bones. Each time I asked him was a bit cold on the subject. "Yeah he clicked and clacked here and there," Pete mentioned with none of the enthusiasm he displayed that night in Ann Arbor.

I tried a couple of different ways to go about it even having our own Steve Wixson to reach out to Pete to see if maybe there might be some detail could be teased out to make a complete story.

With this box set and new unreleased track out, the full story can be displayed with audio evidence. It seems that Woody did not play the bones often, but now we have an example of this legendary performer playing the rhythm bones!

I am not sure where Woody learned to play the bones. Sonny Terry's JC Burris was around at that time and maybe he learned it (Continued from Page 1)



Bill Vits in a Bear Head Mask. See story on Page 3

from him. Those answers we may never know. The caption for the tracks says Woody is playing the spoons but my ear

knows better.

On another note, I have a bones and harmonica duet on my new album *Pros-*



Cat Playing Bones. See story on Page 7

*pect Hill.* Guy Davis and I rock a Sonny Terry/JC Burris tribute. *Dom Flemons*

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 17, No. 1 2015

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## Executive Director's Column

I first met Walt Watkins at my first Bones Fest, in 2000. He was full of enthusiasm for the bones, and life in general. Although he had played the bones for many years, he put all of his energies into playing two handed and improving over the coming years. He became a real stand out in Bones Fest performances, and his duets with Mitch Boss were a highlight of the Fest for me. It was Walt that brought us the "pass off," and it was Walt that made playing to Dixieland Jazz so popular at Bones Fests. Beyond the bones, he was a rock solid, wise man who could cut through the frivolities of life and get to the heart of the matter. He was always a warm, grandfatherly figure to me and I will miss our Bones Fest chats and his friendship.

It is mid March, and the snow is still piled high

in the drive way. The St. Patrick season is now past, and they keep saying Spring is just around the corner. I'm always amazed at these gigs how many people gravitate toward the bones, and how I find my self explaining them at least once during each performance. They have an Irish connection for sure, but not overtly so, and people just love them! It made me think, is there some way each of you as Bones Society Members, can bring the bones to public attention, volunteer at a nursing home, or a school, contact the local library or historical society, play a couple of tunes at the local open mic or coffee house. You might be surprised at the response, and we're one step closer to making sure the bones don't slip into obscurity. *Steve Brown*

## Walt Watkins Has Passed On

I first got to know Walt Watlins at Steve Wixson's Bones Fest. I was new and kind of disconnected. Walt had started the pass-off and I was just standing on the side-lines. Walt made me join in and that is when I first felt at home in the Rhythm Bones Society. We always played together some at Fests and even sent each other CDs we liked so we could practice to play together at Bones Fests. I loved the guy; he would do anything for you. Walt was a Colonel in the Army [See obituary on Page 4], a take charge kind of guy and a great friend.

Some of you bones-rattlers will remember the many pass-off led by Walt. It was important to Walt that the traditional way of playing bones is kept alive. Like Walt, some of us old geezers grew up on Dixie-land type music. The Fire House Five Plus Two CD that we all played at Bill Vits' Grand Rapids Bones Fest was from a pass-off recording from Walt. We first played it at Black Bart's (Dave Boyle) Bones Fest in Wisconsin. Walt loved rag-time, jazz, polkas, and blue grass, or 'anything with a good beat and rhythm.'

Besides his joyful bride Joy and his family, I don't think Walt loved anything more than playing the rhythm bones. After his first stroke, I talked to him and he said, "Well, I can still play with one hand like a Irishman."

Ernie Duffy will bring Walt's recording to

Bones Fest XIX at Skeff Flynn's place in West Virginia. I put this in because Walt would like promoting our next Bones Fest.

Walt played bones for seventy eight years. He said, "I learned to play from my father and I learned to play two-handed from Don DeCamp and Jeff Newman." He played Six Flags over Texas, the Texas Heritage Festival, Silver Dollar City, MO, the Texas State Fair, The Underground Wonder Bar in Chicago, and the S&W Club in Grapevine, Texas. In 2001, he came in second after Russ Meyer at the Twenty~Six Old Time Country Music (Continued on Page 4)



Walt Watkins performing at Bones Fest XIII in Louisville

## Editorial

It is with great sadness that we report that long term member Walt Watkins has passed on (the 'pass-off' is a performance technique Walt introduced where a group of people jamming take turns by passing control of the jamming from one person to the next.) Walt and his lovely wife, Joy, attended 10 Bones Fest and maybe the most memorable was in Louisville shown in the photograph on Page 1.

As you will read in the remembrances recorded in this newsletter, Walt was a most loved rhythm bones player. Thanks for Mitch Boss for the lead article.

By coincidence, Sharon Mescher contributed a story about Donny DeCamp. In addition to performing with his unique style of rhythm bones playing and playing his banjo at Bones Fests, he was a friend of Walt's and they played together at Six Flags Over Texas. Read about that relationship in Sharon's article.

The Video of the Month for January was Anika and Joseph's Saturday evening performance at Bones Fest XVIII. In it they play rhythm bones both solo and together and tap dance solo and together and then toward the end play rhythm bones while tap dancing. They got a standing ovation.

History records many rhythm bones players who played and danced at the same time - the first minstrel rhythm bones player, Frank Brower, is a good example. A few years ago I got inspired to try and took a six week tap dancing class. where I learned some basic tap steps. However, when I tried to put them together with my rhythm bones playing - it didn't work. Congratulations to Anika and Joseph and others who can do this.

Several years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit China in a trip sponsored by our Tennessee Aquarium. I visited a museum of ethnic musical instruments and returned with the photographs on Page 1 plus a document on Chinese Folk Percussion written in Chinese. Following a plea for help, a symphony friend of Bill Vits, Larry Herzberg, translated the article and the result is on Page 6. It included more that rhythm bones, and I included it all.

## Letters to the Editor

If this was the Fest I introduced you to Karen Seime-Singleton then I was at XIII and only remember that Walt Watkins was pleasant gentleman to chat with and trade lies with. Looking forward to West VA. *hankbones (Hank Tenenbaum)*

Here is a video of me at my camper at last year's Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, KS. *Jean Mehaffey*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOQibXW3OGQ>

## Bill Rexroad Obit

Former member William Rexroad died at age 81 on May 6, 2014. Bill was active when our society was first organized writing several articles for the new Rhythm Bones Player newsletter.

Bill was a self-taught rhythm bones player, and was inspired late in life to take it up from a lingering

memory of having seen a rhythm bones player in his childhood. Bill played real animal bones that he made himself.

Music was Bill's pastime throughout his life. He played in symphony orchestras for 50 years, including 33 years in the Hutchinson Symphony. He played in bluegrass bands, old-time bands and was a performing artist with the Kansas Arts Commission. In addition to his music, he toured the central United States for several years as a storyteller, and was a stage manager, emcee, and workshop presenter at national festivals. He used rhythm bones in his storytelling/music performances. Children in particular were delighted with his story about playing the bones, then seeing a demonstration of the art.



### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Website Updates

There has been some good recent update to our homepage. As mentioned in the editorial in the left column, The January Videos of the Month was Anika and Joseph Kooi. The February Video of the Month was Celtic Kilroy's Busing Workshop along with the first announcement of the Timeline project, and there is a progress report on Page 3. The March homepage update got delayed therefore it will become the April homepage update. For those who attended Bones Fest XVIII and met Jack Frost for the first time - the Video of the Month is his performance on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour. The Photograph of the Month is of Walt Watkins and when you click on it it takes you to one of his Bones Fest performances.

## Timeline Project Update

A lot of progress has been made on the Timeline Project. Over 500 entries have been made of people, recordings, movies, NTCMA Bones and Spoons winners, All-Ireland Bones Competition winners, Minstrel bones players, books, articles, performances, rhythm bones instruction, miscellaneous items, rhythm bones, etc.

Soon the first reports will be placed on our website for review and there is a lot to review. We have no criteria for the Importance Ranking and therefore the current rankings are temporary. There are likely typing errors, lots of omissions but at least there is a structure that can be built upon.

This is also a plea for you to submit entries to the Timeline database. This project has the potential to be a major contribution to the history of rhythm bones. *Steve Wixson*

## The Jethros 'Shake Your Bones'

There is a song that the trombone player in my band wrote specifically to highlight the bones. Well, now a friend of the band who has a history of making great videos of our playing has posted a version of it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV-NopVYJCY>.

It's kind of too bad they cut out the intro, which gets zanier every time we play it and makes it nearly impossible for me to keep a straight face when we do the song.

These days it involves Rick (the trombonist) going on at length about how I don't only cycle shorts, carefully select a Bowie knife, and take down a buffalo after riding it down, in order to craft the bones which I'm about to play (which are usually, in fact, the buffalo ribs I got from Steve Brown), using all parts of the animal and donating the extra meat to orphanages. All this while I do quasi-bones-playing-calisthenics in order not to bust up laughing.

Anyway. I think the song is great.  
*Jonathan Danforth*

## Remember Percy Project Update

There has been one significant thing to report about for the Remember Percy Project. A DVD arrived from the Library of Congress with a long interview of Percy. The source was an open reel video that required special conversion equipment and cost us \$284 to convert. There was no guarantee as to what the quality of the converted video would be, but it is great. A short segment will be the Video of the Month in a future homepage update. *Steve Wixson*

## Bones Fest T-shirts Ball Caps For Sale

The following ball caps and t-shirts were left over from previous Bones Fests. If you want one send a check for \$15 which includes shipping to RBS, 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mtn, TN 37377.

BFIX (Chattanooga); several baseball caps

BFXIII (Louisville w/RBS Logo); 2 - M, 4 - L, 2 - XL

BFXIV (Alexandria); 5 - L

BFXVII (Leominster); 2 - S, 2 - M

BFXVIII (Grand Rapids); 3 - 2XL, 1 - 3XL

## Bones Fest XIX Preliminary Information

The fest hotel is the Clarion. <http://clarionshepherdstown.com/> Ask for the Rhythm Bones Society to get the reduced rate of \$94.

Most of the fest will take place at the Shepherd University Student Center. We have the Storer Ballroom which should be more than ample for our needs as well as one other meeting room so that we can do some breakout sessions. We have space in the student center from 9 am to 10 pm on Friday and from 9 am to 6 pm on Saturday.

<http://www.shepherd.edu/scccweb/>

The public performance on Saturday night will be held in the Shepherdstown Opera House - <http://www.operahouse-live.com/>. I will put something together for their web site shortly - they are happy to promote our event and have their own set of followers so maybe we'll be able to pull some extra exposure that way.

So . . . it's coming along. Let me know via our Contact Us Page if you have questions. *Skeff Flynn*

# Bones Fest XIX



August 6-9, 2015

Shepherdstown,  
WV

Skeff Flynn, Host

(Continued from Page 1)

World Bones and Spoons Contest.

Walt learned of the Rhythm Bones Society from Joe Birl. Walt used Joe's patented black plastic bones when he played inside.

I liked to watch Walt perform, he had such ease and confidence and he knew he could play with the best of them. On his application to join the Rhythm Bones Society he wrote, "I have yet to meet anyone who plays better than I-do." Wow, the last time I felt that way was when I thought I was the only rhythm bones player in the world.

Colonel Walt Watkins had a sense of loyalty and duty to whatever he cared about. He cared about us and we will miss him. *Mitch Boss*

## Colonel Walter Watkins Obituary

Colonel Walter L Watkins passed away in Arlington, TX, on March 4, 2015. He was the son of Paul Watkins and Rose Mullinix Watkins, born and raised in Damascus, MD, on February 28, 1929. He met the love of his life, Joy Ann Hahn, at the University of Maryland where he graduated in 1951.

He was a career Army officer with three wartime tours of duty. Shortly after being commissioned a second Lieutenant in 1952 he was ordered to Korea and joined the 1st BN, 32nd Inf, of the 7th Infantry Division. He was on the front lines on the mountain called Old Baldy when his first child arrived. After the war ended he and Joy reunited and he served with XVIth Corps in Sendai, Japan.

The family returned to the States where he served with the 3rd Infantry Regiment Honor Guard in Washington, DC. Col. Watkins served two tours in Germany, the first with the NCO Academy in Ulm in 1959 followed by command of a company in the 4th Armored Division in Heilbronn. He became the Operations Officer of the Division located in Crailsheim, Germany. His next assignment was at Ft. Benning, GA, with the communications department where he participated in the support one of the nuclear tests in Nevada in 1962. He served on The Infantry Center team de-

veloping the training support program for the newly formed Air Assault Division in 1963. Orders sent him to Vietnam in 1964 as Senior Advisor to the Vietnamese Armor command. Upon return he attended the Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas and then joined the Army General Staff at the Pentagon. In 1969 he rejoined the 4th Armored Division, commanding the 4th Battalion 35th Armor, Illesheim, Germany, followed by service as G3 of the Division at Göppingen. In 1972 he returned to Vietnam.

His last station was at Ft. Knox, KY, where he served as Chief of Staff of the 2nd ROTC Region and then Director of Support at the US Army Armored Center. He retired in 1978.

His decorations include the Legion of Merit with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Bronze Star Medal, the combat Infantryman's badge and the Army General Staff Badge.

Walt loved people and never met a stranger. He was interested in all those he met and before long they would tell them their stories. He was interested in genealogy and traced his lineage as a 13th generation American to the settlers at Jamestowne. He and Joy traveled many places learning about their family history, meeting unknown relatives along the way. He enjoyed meeting and visiting with Joy's relatives in Sweden and England and felt perfectly at home with them. Traveling to other countries was a highlight of their sixty-two year marriage.

He loved working with numbers and was meticulous in keeping track of all the Texas Rangers games. Another love was rhythm bones, meeting and playing with other bones players. He and Joy were members of the Kimbell Museum and enjoyed Bass Hall events.

His love for his wife and family knew no bounds. In addition to his wife, Joy, he is survived by his children Dr. Jeffrey Watkins (Barbara) of Bemidji, MN; John Watkins (Gwen) of Chattanooga, TN; Dr. Julie Platt (Michael) of Punta Gorda, FL; James Watkins (Sharman) of San Jose, CA; and Jennifer Korjus (Michael Szymanski) of Fairfax, VA. Six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren survive to carry on his legacy: Ian Paul

Watkins (Mi-Hyang) with Sophia and Sean; Ben Niehoff (Elizabeth); David Platt; Paul Watkins; Gregory Watkins and Chelsea Watkins. Also a sister, June Shook, niece Diana Klaube and special friends, Dot and Buz Hensel and Ilse Däubler of Germany.

He was predeceased by his parents and brother, Kenneth.

A memorial service was held at Wade funeral home on Saturday, 21 March 2015. Interment will follow at a later date at Arlington National Cemetery.

## Mescher's Tribute to Walt Watkins

At the Orlando Bones Fest, Walt was in charge of his famous Pass-off. Several of us attendees formed a semi-circle around the CD player. I was standing between Walt and Mitch Boss. Before starting the Pass-off, the three of us decided to play together when it was our turn. Of course, I felt privileged to play with these two bones-playing giants! And, it was simply fun to be in their company. After the three of us finished our turn at playing, Walt turned to me and "hit the nail on the head" by saying, "We can't do that again. It sounded like noise." (I had thought the same as we played, but I was not going to say anything!) But Walt did express his opinion, and he was on target! It did sound like noise. Mitch and I agreed with him, so we played separately the next time around.

My experience of Walt was that he was forthright, honest, and willing to express his opinion without apology. Because of this, I had immense respect for him. I looked forward to visiting with Joy and Walt at the Bones Fests. And, I loved participating in his Pass Off which was always a treat.

We will miss Walt, his leading the Pass Off, his forthrightness, and we will think of him fondly. *Sharon and Jerry Mescher*

## My Friend, Walt Watkins

When Walt came to Six Flags he could play with only one hand. I think it was the left hand. He came in and followed me around. I showed him what I could



do. Oh, man, all he could talk about was how wonderful I was. So, we worked with him, and the next year when we came back to Six Flags, he got a pass to come in. And, you know, they hired him.

He started playing on stage, and they paid him! I thought that was pretty nice. I think he beat me there when it comes to playing with both hands. He could do the same with either hand. I never could get the left hand to work like the right one.

I believe we played for four or five years at Six Flags. I tell you what: you'll never find a nicer guy to be around. I told Joy, his wife, the same thing; I don't know how she ever got a better guy to be with. He was always smiling. He was just a lot of fun to be around because he wasn't no guy that wanted to argue about anything.

We had a lot of fun playing at Six Flags; we played on a lot of stages. You know he's the one that brought up the Pass-off. I think he started that at Louisville with Jeff, me, Jerry, and Russ.

I miss the guy already. But we did have a good time. And he impressed a lot of people with what he did. He was darn good. That's all I can say. *Donny DeCamp*

## **Don DeCamp Master Rhythm Bones Entertainer**

[Donny's story is from a telephone conversation with Sharon Mescher]

I've played the bones a long time. I didn't learn from anybody, and I never saw anybody do it.

Where did you pick them up?

My mother, when I was 17 years old, I don't know why, said, "Don, why don't you see if you can play the bones like your grandpa?" I said, "Bones, what's that?" She kinda held her hands up and showed me how he did it with his hands.

We lived right by a lumber yard. I got a couple of sticks over there and tried putting them in my fingers somehow and fooling with them. When I got so I could fool with them a little bit with my right hand, my mother said, "Your grandpa did it with both hands." So I went back to the lumber yard, and got another two pieces of wood, and found out that the left hand

was dumber than a rock! It wasn't near as easy with the left hand as it was with the right. I don't do as many things with the left as with the right hand. My response was, "Nobody can tell that you don't do as many things with the left!" Laughing, Donny exclaimed, "I don't want them to tell!"

By the time I was twenty we went around to the dances a lot and I played with a dance band ... but I never did nothing to them to speak of until I went to Avoca. At Avoca I won the bones contest. I got some trophies and plaques... I didn't pay much attention (to the trophies). I just thought I was pretty lucky that I could play them that good.

Then I went to Le Mars and won the bones contest once up there. At Le Mars, Donny met Buddy Boswell, from Edgerton, Missouri, who came to the Le Mars festival to perform with the "Union Mill 'Opry". Buddy asked me if I would like to come down and play on his show. So I went down there 2 or 3 times and played on his show." While I was there, a gal that played on the stage talked to me and told me..."you ought to be in Silver Dollar City." I responded, "What's that? I didn't even know what it was." The lady told Donny she would get him some tickets, and he could play on stage with her group, "Green Side Up."

In 1986, Rex Burdette, who hired people to entertain at Silver Dollar City, approached Donny and asked him, "How would he like to go to work at Silver Dollar City?" When Donny showed up to perform, he went to Rex's office. Rex told Donny to do what ever it is he did. Donny asked, "Well, how do you know I can do it?" Rex said, "We'll find out." Later, Donny found out that there were people who scouted out all the performers, and watched the response of the audiences. That is how performers were hired. It's obvious that the audiences loved Donny's performances as he played at Silver Dollar City for 22 years.

In the meantime, Rex Burdette worked with a Jeannie Adams. Someone gave Adams' phone number to Donny telling him to call her because "I bet you could play at Six Flags over Texas." Donny called her, and she hired him on the spot. Donny played at Six Flags for 15 years. After that, Donny says, "I came home,

relaxed, and said that was about it. That's 37 years playing at Silver Dollar City and Six Flags over Texas. I was having fun; getting paid a little."

Walt Watkins found out that there was a bones player playing at Six Flags. He came over to see me. When I wasn't playing, Walt and I sat in the camper and talked. He played with only one hand. Walt told me, "I've heard a lot about you; I've got to learn how to do that with the other hand." He did, and he is doing good! He played for a couple of years and was hired by Six Flags.

There was another young guy, Jeff Newman, who came to Six Flags. He learned to play from Donny, and Six Flags hired Donny, Walt, and Jeff to play with cloggers. As Donny says, "We had fun. Walt and I had good times at Six Flags.

My last year playing at both places was in 2008."

Donny was "born in a little town by West Des Moines, but it does not exist anymore." His dad was a mechanic and shoe cobbler. His son Larry was the only one that played rhythm bones. His other children played spoons and were on the Bill Riley Teen Talent Show in Des Moines. On his mother's side, "the family played musical instruments: grandpa played the fiddle; grandma played the banjo."

When I got to really know what I was doing, my mom looked at me one day and said, "Don, you know I just thought dad could play the bones... he couldn't play anything like you do!" I never saw any one play them, so I had to pick up a style of my own.

After going to a couple of the Bones Fests, Sky Bartlett approached Donny and said to him, "I've got to learn what you do." As Donny said, "Sky picks up fast." Walt told Donny, "I can see a Don De Camp there." Walt was so right.

Wherever Donny performs, people flock to watch him because he is an entertainer: he plays his unique style of rhythm bones, he jokes with the audience, laughs at himself, and simply exudes fun. So, if you are fortunate to be around Donny for any reason, be prepared for a rocking, bones-playing, belly-laughing, good time. *Sharon Mescher*

## Tribute to Walt Watkins

In 2001, I attended Bones Fest V at the Red Apple Farm in Massachusetts. That was the year that I first met Walt Watkins.

Walt was one of a handful of people who had kept the art of bones playing alive. In the early days the group from the Rhythm Bones Society was an aging group so, even though I was in my late 40s, I felt like a youngster!

Since that time I have attended several Bones Fests. I tell people that first you meet fellow bones players, then you gather as friends and finally they seem like family. Walt was like family to me. He was one of the faces I hoped to see as I made my plans to attend an upcoming Bones Fest.

Walt brought a lot of music CDs with him and he would always find us a room to jam. He welcomed anyone to join in. Several years ago the way people would jam would be having many people playing at the same time so you really couldn't hear any one person. So one year Walt came up with the idea of a pass off. To do the pass off a circle would be formed and one person would start playing as everyone else listened. During a musical break, the play would be "passed off" to the next person. Sometimes it took several tries to get it right, but Walt was diligent and gave everyone their chance to play. For those who knew Walt and were around in those early days of learning how to do the pass off, they remember that he used his military skills in directing this process!

I talked to Walt about a month ago after hearing that he had had a stroke. I wanted to wish him well in his recovery. He told me that he was encouraged because he could still play bones one-handed. I also wanted to remind him of the impact he had in growing the RBS. A great example of one of the things he should be remembered for was from the Grand Rapids Bones Fest. Walt sent me a lot of his music and I brought it with me. During one of our jam sessions we started a pass off circle while playing song after song of Walt's music. In the circle there were new faces, old friends,

beginners and pros; all smiling and tapping their toes as the circle got wider. Many people made the comment "Great music!" We were accomplishing what the RBS wanted to do....making friends, becoming family.

Good job, well done, Walt. I will miss you! *Ernie Duffy*

## Chinese Folk Percussion

**Peng Ling** "Peng ling"("struck together bells"), also called "Peng zhong", in ancient times were known as xing"("stars"). At the time of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 A.D.) this musical instrument was already in existence. The "peng ling"("struck-together bells") are made of copper and come in pairs tied together with a cord, with the sound made by striking the two together. They are often used in a musical ensemble and in accompanying Chinese opera as a rhythm instrument. (Note: The National Palace Museum has a pair from the Six Dynasties period in its collection).

### **Pear Flower Slices ("Li Hua Pian")**

Pear Flower Slices were first popular among the people of Shandong Province (a northeastern Chinese province). When the farmers would sing, they would hold two pieces of broken slices of the metal ends of their plows used in farming and strike them to set a rhythm, so the original name was "Plow End Slices"(a homonym with "Pear Flower Slices", which is pronounced the same but is more poetic). After it developed from folk singing to be used in artistic performances, "Pear Flower Slices" came to be made of two semi-circles of iron or copper. When performed, they are held together in the left hand and struck to produce a sound. They are a percussion instrument used in ballad singing, as a clapper to accompany storytelling, to accompany Beijing "qin" (Chinese zither) performances, etc., as an important accompanying instrument.

**Sabayi** The "sabayi" is a Uighur (Turkish people of Xinjiang Province in northwestern China) percussion instrument. Originally the sabayi was made by stringing a small number of iron rings on a pair of ram horns. The sabayi that is popularly used now is made of two

parallel pieces of hard wood in place of the ram horns, with two big iron rings inserted in the middle part of the wooden sticks. On the iron rings are placed a small number of small iron rings. When used in performance, the wooden sticks are held in the right hand and shaken or struck with the left hand or both shoulders, to make them sound. They are often used to accompany singing and dancing.

**Pat Boards** Pat boards (pai ban), also called Sandalwood Boards or Zhuo Ban, are often simply called "ban" (boards). They are made of the wood of purple sandalwood, redwood, or yellow willow. Each pair of pat boards is made of several wooden boards.

During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) the pat boards were already in use. At the time of the Tang Emperor, Xuan Zong, in the "Pear Garden" theatrical house music ensemble he formed, one performer named Huang Pan-Zhuo became famous for performing skillfully on the pat boards. (Footnote: according to the writings of one Tang dynasty writer, in recording the talents of the performers of the time, there was no musical score for the pai ban player to follow. The Tang Emperor, Xuan Zong, ordered Huang Pan-Zhuo to create musical scores for it. Huang drew two ears on paper and, when asked by the emperor what the ears signified, Huang replied that wherever the ears appeared, the beat was to be heard).

In the Tang dynasty, the biggest pat boards had nine pieces and the smallest had six pieces (footnote #2 just gives the name of the book that is the source of this information), with a cord stringing them together on the top, and on the bottom they could be freely separated or brought together. In performance, the two hands are used to hold the two outermost pieces of wooden boards, separating them and bringing them together so that they strike the boards in the middle in order to make them sound. The pat boards often in use today are comprised of three pieces of rectangular wooden boards divided into two sections, front and back. The front section is comprised of two wooden boards, fastened together with a thin silk thread on top and bottom. The bottom section is only one board. The two sections are joined together with a cloth tie/band. In performance the board in the back is held in the left hand,

and using the place where it protrudes in the front of the bottom of it you strike the back of the bottom of a piece of the back of the wooden boards of the front section, with the front and back knocking together to produce a sound. (the original is as complicated and convoluted as my translation!)

The pat boards are a percussion instrument often used to accompany Chinese opera and in instrumental ensembles. The pat boards are often used with board drums and played by the drummer.

**Bangzi (wooden clappers)** Bangzi (wooden clappers) originated in approximately the 17th century and became popular with the rise of local “wooden clapper” operas. The clappers are made of wood, with two sticks of hard wood of unequal length. The long stick is round in shape and the slightly smaller one is rectangular. When performed, the left hand holds the square-shaped one, and the right hand holds the round stick of hard wood. The two are struck together to produce a sound. The tone color is high, level, and hard (firm), and is the principal accompanying instrument for “clapper opera”.

Popular in the south of our country (China) is a type of rectangular southern clapper. Hollow in the middle, they are struck with thin slips of reed or bamboo, and are mostly used in musical ensembles.

**Bamboo slip boards** Bamboo slip boards in ancient times were called “jianzi” (“bamboo slips”). Bamboo slip boards are used in performances involving the chanting of folk tales. They are made of two long pieces of bamboo, held in the left hand and struck to produce a sound. The bamboo slip boards used in Henan song performances are made of two sticks of red wood. When performed, they are held in the right hand and struck together. This kind of bamboo boards is often used by the singer, who sings while striking these in accompaniment.

**Bamboo boards** Bamboo boards are made of two tile-shaped bamboo boards approximately 6-7 inches long and 2 inches wide. They are strung together with a cord, which can allow the boards to be freely brought together or separated at the bottom. When performed, they are held in one hand and struck together to produce a sound.

Besides this, there are ones comprised of five or six small bamboo boards of approximately three inches in length and one inch in width, popularly called “suizi.” They are strung together with a cord at the top with a piece of copper strung between each of them, and which can be freely separated or brought together at the bottom. When performed, they are held in one hand and stuck to produce a sound.

The bamboo boards and “suizi” are sometimes used together. The singer himself plays these while singing and they are used to create atmosphere and to enhance emotions. They are important accompanying instruments in artistic storytelling performances in Shandong, Tianjin, Sichuan, etc.

**Wooden Fish** Wooden fish in the beginning were used in Buddhist worship ceremonies and used to accompany the chanting of the Buddhist sutras, but gradually evolved from religious sings to become a folk instrument. The wooden fish are made of wood and shaped like a fish, and are struck with a small mallet. Wooden fish come in all sizes, to produce higher or lower tones. Some are used in a set to produce 5 or 7 different tones, and some can be performed in a set with 12 different tones. When performed in an ensemble, sometimes two wooden fish are used, one large and one small.

Translated by *Larry Herzberg*

## Harold ‘Doc’ Edgerton was a Bones Player

As a graduate student at the University of Nebraska, I was well aware of one of our famous graduates - Doc Edgerton (April 6, 1903 – January 4, 1990).

Doc grew up in Nebraska and received a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from University of Nebraska. He attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology and received a Sc.D. degree in electrical engineering with a thesis using stroboscopes to study motors. He is credited with moving the stroboscope from the laboratory to everyday use in a wide variety of fields.

Early on he was inspired to photo-

graph everyday objects using the stroboscope and many of those photographs can be viewed on the Internet.

He was also instrumental in the development of sonar and side-scan technology, and his equipment was used by Jacques Cousteau in searches for shipwrecks.

But Doc was also a rhythm bones player and is remembered as such by his son, Bob Edgerton.

"After the war (WWII) when my father came home from his night reconnaissance work in Europe, I was listening to the "Ted Mack Amateur Hour" on the radio and heard some rhythm that sounded like tap dancing. I asked my father if he knew what was happening. He said it was a bone player. He went to our basement where we had two power tools, a wood lathe and a band saw. He sawed out two pieces of wood and showed me how to play the bones.

"He had learned as a young person and nearly drove his parents crazy playing the bones around the house. I learned from him how to play the bones at least with the right hand. I have learned that excellent bone players like Percy Danforth and others usually play them in both hands at the same time doing different patterns in the different hands, and I got to see Percy play solo rhythm bones with a modern dance team.

"My son, Eric, has learned to play the bones from me. We have yet to teach this skill to his son, Quinn.

"Originally bones were made from rib bones, but now are often made from birch, pine, ebony, ivory, or some boney material. My father made so many pairs over the years so that he could teach others how to play and give them a set of bones that he had made. I ended up with quite a collection some of which are shown in the photograph on Page 8." *Steve Wixson*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 6-9, 2015, Shepherdstown, WV, Skeff Flynn, Host. Preview in this issue on Page 3

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 31 - September 6, 2015, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.



Sample of Chinese Folk Percussion from Museum in China.  
See story on Page 6.



Closeup of the middle row from above photograph



Some of Harold 'Doc' Edgerton's rhythm bones. See story on Page 7.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 17, No. 2 2015

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## Executive Director's Column

Most of this column was written before our good friend, Jerry Mescher passed away, and his passing has made my initial observation painfully clear.

Over the years we have lost many of our good friends, perhaps because so many of us are in our later years. Dan Murphy who passed away this spring was not only a good friend, but one who genuinely liked the bones and advanced our instrument. Walt Watkins, the originator of the pass off, was an inspiration to us all. Jerry Mescher was a true innovator, who was continuing a tradition, and forging a new approach to bone playing. I think back about all the folks we have lost, and have come to the realization that as much as I have loved them, and respect them, I don't want to lose the fact that we want to appreciate those who are here. I think that is what they would have wanted us to do as well. Life is about being there, being present, and experiencing all that it has to offer. We are so

blessed to have a membership that is more like a family. Each time we meet it gives us the energy to continue in life. Life is fragile, and it can be taken from us in a blink, but as long as my feet are on the ground, and not in it, I'm going to strive to experience everything it has to offer, that's not only what they would have wanted, it's what they did. See you in Shepherdstown.

Speaking of Bones Fest, it's fast approaching. Shepherdstown is a small town rich in history, the arts and music. The weekend promises to be a most memorable event hearkening back to a by gone era. I'm planning on spending some extra time exploring the area, including the state parks, and historical sites, including Harpers Ferry. We made the mistake of telling Jeremy about the Fest, and every day we deal with the question, "When West Virginia?" So he's primed and ready. I hope you are too! *Steve Brown*

## Jerry Mescher: A Man of Traditions

I met Jerry Mescher on September 5, 1999 at the National Traditional Country Music Association's annual Old Time Country Music Festival and Contests then held in Avoca, Iowa. I heard there was a bones contest as part of the Festival, and I went with video camera to capture it for Bones Fest III being held on September 25, 1999.

I arrived at the Bones and Spoons Contest site and heard Jerry (dressed in a striking red shirt) play as he started the contest with a demonstration. He was not a competitor having won the contest in 1987 and wanting others to win it. That was the year his sister, Bernie Worrell, entered the contest and won it.

After the contest, I introduced myself to Jerry who quickly introduced me to his wife, Sharon, his sister, Bernie, and also to Donnie DeCamp and Jerry Barnett both of whom became RBS members. From then on I was taken care of by the Meschers as if I was part of their family.

There are hundreds of performers at the Festival who put on 30 or so minute sets, and I attended every one of Jerry's sets. There are many workshops as part of the Festival and Jerry was the organizer and teacher of the bones workshops.

This was an annual event for Jerry for many years

before I met him including this year's Festival now held in LeMars, Iowa. Jerry was inducted into the NTCMA's Old Time Music Hall of Fame in 2001.

Twenty days later I attended Bones Fest III where the Rhythm Bones Society was organized. I nominated Jerry Mescher to be on the Board of Directors, and even though he could not attend, the founding members could see he was someone who should help direct this new organization.

(Continued on Page 7)



Jerry Mescher with wife, Sharon, on left and sister, Bernie Worrell, on right together as the Mescher Trio.

## Editorial

This newsletter looked quite different a few days ago before the news of Jerry Mescher's passing came in. As time goes by I am having more trouble finding stories, but the flood of remembrances in a very short time has filled the newsletter. I wrote the Page 1 story.

Two time winner, Steve Brown, reports on this year's All Ireland Bones Competition, and please note that he contributed two more stories to this issue of the newsletter. As mentioned above, it is more difficult to find interesting articles and I again issue this plea for stories about rhythm bones history, your rhythm bones stories, calendar events and the like. It will be a great help.

As I prepare for Bones Fest XIX by practicing rhythm bones rudiments, I am anticipating what host Skeff Flynn has in store for us. And after reading Steve Brown's Editorial on Page 1, I too may spend an extra day or two visiting the sites around Shepherdstown. I look forward to see you all there.

## Letters to the Editor

I am so sorry! So sad for our Bones Society. Losing far too many. My heart hurts for Sharon and Bernie.

I appreciate the kind thoughts and wonderful words about Walt, especially to Steve Brown, Mitch, Sharon, Ernie, Donnie DeCamp and especially to Steve Wixson for his kindness and all the work he does for rhythm bones. If anyone wants to contact me, please use my or e-mail or phone number; jhwatkins100@att.net, 817-496-8098, *Joy Watkins*

I am still learning to play, and I am using the book and videos from your web site. I know Bob Bolton [an RBS friend from Australia]. I have seen some of his sets of wooden bones, but I have not heard him play. I don't know any active players in Australia, but Dom Flemons played the bones and other instruments at the Illawarra Folk Festival here last January. He inspired me to get interested.

I don't know of anyone selling rhythm bones in Australia. I bought mine from Lark in the Morning in the US.

Cheers. *Bob Vickery*

## Remembering Jerry Mescher

I met Jerry Mescher at the first RBS Board Meeting at Bones Fest IV. I remember his reserved, and gentle approach to the discussion, and real genuineness when speaking with him. It wasn't until the next day that I saw him play for the first time, and in contrast it was electrifying. It reminded me of the first time I had seen the bones played, and left me with the question that many people ask them selves after seeing the bones, "how is he doing that?"

Over the years I am proud to have counted Jerry as a good friend, really more like a brother, transcending even the bones, although his bone playing was magical. Some fond memories I have: spending the week end with he, Sharon, Bernie, Steve Wixson. and. Yirdy Machar playing rhythm bones at the Avoca Old Time Music Festival and Contests in 2002, staying up till 2am watching he and Bernie play *I love banana's because they have no bones*, Jerry performing *Maple Leaf Rag* at Bones Fest V with the most amazing intricacies, having dinner last summer with he and Sharon, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet on the Wednesday of Bones Fest in Grand Rapids, and his cordial hello with a big hug which just made you feel special. Jerry the bones player was in a class by himself; Jerry the person was truly genuine. I will miss them both. *Steve Brown*

If there is one person that I looked up to most as dedicated to the art of playing bones it was Jerry. But even more Jerry was a kind, loving, giving person. Was that thunder! or did I hear bones rattling? *Mitch and Annette Boss*

I'm so sad right now. I'm holding my favorite bones I got from Jerry. What a wonderful family and legacy...*Bill Vits*

That is very sad news indeed. He was a skilled bones player and I always enjoyed seeing the carefully choreographed performances he did with Bernie and, more recently, with Sharon as well. He was also an interesting man to chat with on all sort of subjects. I'm sure he was at every Bones Fest that I've been able to attend. I will miss him. *Michael Ballard*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

As a 'newbie' to the RBS I did not know of Jerry until attending last summer's Bones Fest. Unfortunately I did not get to meet him there (actually I found myself too shy in the presence of who I quickly perceived to be a living legend). I regret that now. I recently read the PhD thesis about him and his family which I found fascinating and I vowed to try to connect with him at this year's Bones Fest. I have been trying to follow the music notations for some of his pieces that were included in the thesis. It was therefore a sad shock to hear of his sudden passing. *Jay Thomson*

Continued on Page 5

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 6-9, 2015, Shepherdstown, WV, Skeff Flynn, Host.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 31 - September 6, 2015, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday. Expect some sort of remembrance for Jerry Mescher.

## Mel Mercier Remembers Jerry Mescher

I first saw Jerry Mescher play the bones at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, on September 23rd, 2000. When he stepped onto the stage and began to play I was mesmerized! The precision of his playing combined with the panache of his performance was thrilling and intoxicating.

As part of his presentation that day, Jerry spoke, with some intensity and emotion, about his father, Albert, and his sister, Bernie. I had the opportunity to ask him more about Albert, Bernie and his story when I interviewed him the following day; sitting face to face with him, we began a conversation that would continue for many years, forming the basis for our growing friendship and the narrative of my PhD about him, and Bernie, Albert and the Mescher Bones Tradition. My final conversation with him took place over the phone last week, just days before he passed away.

I had the privilege of spending time with Jerry at Bones Fests, at his home in Halbur, Iowa, and in Ireland. The process of researching and writing the PhD meant that I spent short, intense periods of time with him, followed by years thinking about him and his life: about his German-American heritage and, especially, the formative relationship with his father, Albert; about the ups and downs of lives lived, and livelihoods earned, by generations of Meschers on the family farm; about the growth of Jerry, the musician, alongside his father in the family parlour; and about his and Bernie's reinvention of Albert and Jerry's duetting practice.

From the moment I sat down to talk with him that first time in Chattanooga, to the final conversation I had with him last week, Jerry opened himself up to me with unbounded generosity. I think Jerry was compelled to tell his story, and I was blessed that he chose to share it with me. While I was first, and instantaneously, drawn to him by his exceptional musicianship, my fascination quickly developed beyond the purely musical dimensions of his life, to encompass the broader persona and biography.

Our conversations and time together

inscribed in me a deep sense of him, and I carry many rich and potent images of his life: carving his first set of bones from the wood of peach crates; playing along to polka music on the radio as boy, in the kitchen under the watchful eye of his mother; duetting with Sharon in the sitting room of our home, here in West Waterford; flying himself over the family farm in Halbur to check the alignment of the new barn; standing on the stage at Bones Fest IV, as we watch with him the video of his youthful self playing with his father on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour; the charged atmosphere, sharp intake of breath and release of sheer joy in the room when he launched into his scintillating rendition of Maple Leaf Rag; and the sight and sound, moments later, of brother and sister, their bodies and hands synchronized, in their wonderful moving ritual remembrance of their father, Albert Mescher.

I met Jerry at a critical point in my life and he gave me the gift of his story. He introduced me to his wife, Sharon and his sister, Bernie, and her husband, Tom, all of whom welcomed me and my family into their lives with great warmth and love. Like Jerry, and so many others in our community of bones players, I learned to play the bones from my father, and guided and gently encouraged by him I have enjoyed a life in music. Exploring Jerry's biography, gave me insight into my own, and I am also deeply grateful to him for that.

An elegant, musical, generous and hard-working man, Jerry loved to share his gifts and his story with all those he encountered throughout his life. In Ireland we often use the phrase *Ní Bheith a Leithéid Arís Ann* (We shall never see his like again) when someone dies, and this is certainly true of Jerry. Another saying that is often used to end an epitaph is *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dilís* (May his dear soul be at the right hand of God), which conjures up a comforting image of Jerry in the Heavens. However, given the man he was, it is also tempting to imagine Jerry, reunited with his father, entertaining the souls of the departed, reminding themselves and their celestial audience of the earthly pleasures of embodied music making, and carrying on the Mescher Bones Tradition across Eternity. *Mel Mercier*

## Bones Fest XIX Update

Bones Fest XIX is just around the corner, and included in this newsletter is a registration form. Note that you can register online on our website.

In addition to the program listed in the enclosed Registration Form, there will time to remember both Jerry Mescher and Walt Watkins who passed away a short time back.

For a preview of our host, Skeff Flynn, read his profile on Page 5.

The special Fest room rate is guaranteed on the block they held for us until the 6th of July. They will honor that rate afterwards as long as there are rooms available - it's just not guaranteed, first come first serve instead.

# Bones Fest

# XIX

## August 6-9, 2015

## Shepherdstown,

## WV

## Skeff Flynn, Host

## Registration Form

## in the newsletter.



The late Dan Murphy

## Remembering Dan Murphy

The first time I actually saw Dan was on a video tape the RBS had purchased showing the 2002 and 2000 All Ireland Bone Playing Championships. He had received a letter from Evertt Cowett applauding the Championship and Dan's efforts to promote and continue the championship, and was reading it into a microphone from the stage at the competition.

When he got to the last line of Evertt's letter, "may your bones be with you", he stopped and said, "I'd be in real trouble with out them!"

Dan Murphy, musician, businessman, festival organizer, and all around great human being, passed away April 10, 2015. He was the force behind instituting the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship as inspired by his friend, and Master bone player Sport Murphy. For many years Dan ran the Failte Bar in Abbeyfeale, and was responsible for bringing to the town many of Ireland's finest musicians. In 1994 he, along with his wife and a committee of very enthusiastic folks, started the "Fleadh By the Feale" in Abbeyfeale, a traditional music festival which included concerts, a busking competition for kids, set dancing, and classes in various instruments. In

trying to distinguish the festival from other festivals in Ireland, the idea of sponsoring the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship came to him. The local community was wildly enthusiastic, and the competition grew each year. Many of the local bone players competed, while his son, Donal Murphy, a noted accordion player, provided the accompaniment. The Fleadh is in it's 21st year this year, and the Bone playing Championship has been a part of it for many years.

Dan played the accordion, and told me once he had briefly been a student of the famous Kerry Fiddler Padraig O'Keefe. He also told me once that he was the only member of his family who had not won an All Ireland Championship. He tells a very funny story of playing the accordion for a police man to get out of getting a ticket. He had ambitions, at one time, of hosting the World Bone Playing Championship, much like the World Bodhran Championship held in Milltown, County Kerry. Unfortunately he became ill before that could be realized.

Dan did a lot for traditional Irish music, and for bone playing its self. Attendance at his funeral on April 12 reached 7000. I will cherish the time I spent with Dan, and his family in Abbeyfeale. He was not only a friend of the bones, but a true friend to me. RIP Dan Murphy!  
*Steve Brown*

## Lew Guernsey Gives Clappers To Bill Vits

Below is an email received from Lew Guernsey.

"I know the bones that I give to Bill (see photograph on Page 8) are old as the man who give them to me was older then me and that was 15 or 20 years ago. He said his dad had them and he wanted me to have them. Now I want Bill to have

them so they stay in the bones club with some one that likes them. Yours, *Lew Guernsey*"

It turns out that there is some history about these rhythm bones, and Beth Lenz included some catalog excerpts showing them.

Old catalogs, such as Sears, Roebuck & Co, circa, 1900, show them advertised as: "No. 7794. Clappers. made of Walnut with patent steel spring and lead clappers. Per set of two...\$0.02"

Then from the Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia; "Clappers. Patent. Flat Walnut with 2 Flappers. Especially recommended for boys and ladies. Price per pair, 15 cents postpaid." This version appeared to have one piece of wood with steel springs and lead clappers on both sides.

Advertisement for bones and bones clappers from Denison's Minstrel and Song Catalog, late 1920s-early 1930s. "Made of maple and steel band and double clapper. Fine for female minstrels. The amateur who finds the regular bones difficult to manipulate will have no trouble with these clappers as they are practically automatic in action. For this reason they are ideal for children use and for all amateurs, black face comedians, etc. Price, each, 20 cents; per dozen, \$1.25" They were advertised in the Montgomery Ward catalog from 1898-99 for 12 cents.

The word 'patent' sent me to our website to read Joe Birl's history of his patented rhythm bones, however, this patent was not mentioned and I could not find the patent for these specialty bones. If you find something, let me know and I will update the story.

Bill Vits said, "I remember I had something similar in my noisemaker collection and dug it out today (see photograph on Page 8). Looks like it was from the same era/catalog and is the same length and lead/spring steel construction. It says J. A. Wheelers(?) PAT APL'D FOR. You can get a sloppy triplet going with it, but that's about it. The single ones Lew gave me can get a loud clack in each hand and make a racket. Maybe we could ask our membership if they have other bones related novelties?"

Members if you have any such items let me know and they will be included in a future newsletter. *Steve Wixson*



## 71st NEFF

The 71st New England Folk Festival was held over the April weekend of the 24th through the 26th in Mansfield Mass, and yes the bones were well represented. Each year I sign up for a workshop to teach the bones, and invite several, mostly local, RBS members to assist me. In the past I've had John "Mr. Bones of Boston", Percy Danforth, Russ Myers, Everett Cowett, Martha Cowett to name a few. This year was no exception as Mr. Skeffington Flynn drove all the way from West Virginia to teach at the festival, and help me in my bones booth in the craft room. Fortunately for us we were assisted by Jonothan Danforth, and good friend Ken Sweeney, accomplished harmonica, banjo, concertina, and of course bones player.

What workshop at NEFF would be complete with out my son Jeremy Brown gladly clacking away for anyone to hear, and he was in fine form. Somewhere around 50 enthusiastic attendee's arrived promptly for the workshop, and were quickly inaugurated into the basics of the bones. Each of us went into the crowd after a brief explanation of the next element, spending a few minutes of undivided attention with the person before going on to the next. Each of us demonstrated our own personal style toward the end, before ending in a pass off dedicated to our departed friend, Walt Watkins.

Of course that did not complete the bone playing activities as we jammed through out the week end. Woody Pringle and Marek Bennett showed up Saturday evening, and we engaged in some civil war music before their performance. Bob Bloom cordially invited Skeff and I on stage during his tribute to Baba Tunji Olatunji, and the bones were gleefully played to African Music. Jeremy went to a Beatles sing along where he played the bones to every song. We met new friends, like Jerry Freeman of Whistle Tweaking fame, and many old friends. Close to one hundred RBS brochures and flyers for Bones Fest XIX were handed out with many new players making plans to travel off to West Virginia. Thanks to everyone who came, but especially Skeff Flynn who traveled the furthest! *Steve Brown*

## More Remembrances

We met Jerry Mescher in 2002 at the Greensboro, NC Bones Fest sponsored by the Cowett Clan. It was our first Bones Fest and we were overwhelmed at the different styles of playing bones. But Jerry Mescher stood out from the rest. He played with his sister, Bernie, and the two were mesmerizing as they performed a duet with perfectly synchronized movements and sounds. They wore beautiful matching western performance shirts with embroidered patterns. They smiled, they moved as one and they dazzled us with their precision and skill and color coordinated outfits. Then Jerry's wife Sharon joined the act and the magic continued as a trio! Jerry demonstrated the importance of practice and perfection. He loved performing and encouraged others by always being available to coach and teach.

But Jerry's greatest gift was making everyone feel welcomed and valued. He never failed to greet us and always had positive things to say about our performances and our "performance" clothing. Thank you Jerry Mescher for many years of friendship. We will miss you, but we will never forget you! *Frank & Mary Lee Sweet*

## Profile of Skeffington Flynn

I have always loved music and rhythm in particular. I played a few instruments not very seriously as a child before picking up the electric bass in high school. That lead me to pursue music in college and after taking the scenic route through my educational career I eventually earned a B.S. In Music from Towson University, just outside of Baltimore. After graduating I spent a few years in Baltimore teaching private lessons, playing in bands and working various odd jobs. About 10 years ago I moved away from pursuing music as my primary source of employment and have been working for a software company ever since.

When I moved to West Virginia in 2008 I befriended a family of spoons players. At the time there were four generations of spoons players under

one roof. They took me under their wing and we had a good time playing and singing at local establishments that offered karaoke. In the spring of 2009 they were asked to put on a performance at a local elementary school. Given my background in music they asked if I could talk to the kids. Of course I agreed and offered to give not only a quick lesson in playing but also a brief history lesson as well. In researching the history of spoon playing I stumbled across the rhythm bones and started watching videos of players on Youtube. I was instantly hooked. I ordered my first set of bones that night and have been playing ever since.

Last year I was asked to present at the Antietam Early Banjo Gathering as well as at Bones Fest XVIII. During the process of putting together my presentations I was able to flesh out an idea that had been on my mind. It seems to me that a small group of bones players in the 1900's did so much to preserve the instrument. Frankly I wonder if I would know about the bones at all if not for a handful of players that were what I call "Bones Ambassadors". The bones have brought a great deal of joy into my life and I feel that I in turn need to em-



brace the role of a self appointed Bones Ambassador to help bring the bones to others. My service on the board of the Rhythm Bones Society is a big part of that. Here's to a wonderful Bonesfest

## David Holt's State of Music

David Holt's State of Music PBS series premiered on January 29, 2015. The premiere show included Rhiannan Giddens on banjo and David playing rhythm bones on a couple of songs. A still from the video is shown on Page 8. You can view that show at <http://video.unctv.org/video/2365405328>.

## Rhythm Bones in Spain and England

The mention or sight of the bones in Madrid, Spain causes laughter, curiosity or even misunderstanding amongst modern Spaniards. Upon seeing me play they invariably cry "la castanuelas, la castanuelas!" and then make jokes about me being one or other of the great FEMALE flamenco stars of the distant Madrileño past. A quick demonstration satisfies the curious that my bones are indeed bones and not castanets, but my enquiries as to finding a living bones tradition on the streets or in the countryside quickly flounder. In what is a very traditional capital city, oddly I have yet to see a single bones player on the street and indeed, in all my years of being here, I have only seen ONE street castanets player, in Madrid's famous Rastro market. Personal enquiries yield little information either, with most people in their fifties and sixties greeting my questions about the bones with a shrug.

It was only when my Spanish girlfriend, Irene, mentioned my clacking activities to her Grandmother, Teresa, a lovely old lady of eighty - five years, that any light at all was shed on the matter. Abuela Teresa, who was born in the San Blas area, East of Madrid, clearly remembered seeing somebody playing the bones and NOT the castanets when she was young. Although it is difficult to make generalisations on such meagre evidence, we might assume that this sighting would have been in the 1930s or 40s. Given that the Spaniards in their fifties and sixties to whom I have spoken can say nothing about the bones, perhaps we can assume that they fell out of popular use in the modern Spain of the 1950's and 60's?

My native England seems to be a happier place for bones playing. Here I made two bones connections in as many days! While on my annual vacation back home in early September of this year, I spent a week in Birmingham with my cousin, Nick Ward, who is a professional vintage jazz percussionist. While depping for an ill Mr. Peter Eddowes, the resident drummer with the fantastic *Six In a Bar Jazz Band*, my cousin was told that Peter plays the bones as a novelty item as part

of the band's act. Upon my return to Spain I obtained Mr. Eddowes contact details, and he very kindly granted me a telephone interview.

Peter has played the bones since he was a child and started out with bacon rib bones! He says that these cut his hands. Peter then changed to a set of purchased bones in the 1950s or 60s; his Mother thought that these might be ivory, but he now believes them to be polished bone. They are certainly a prized possession and he worries about losing them. As a back up set he has improvised a set made from the tool bookmakers use to cut paper, although Peter says these don't make quite the same sound as his main set, which have a high treble sound. Peter plays in a two handed, syncopated style and does a duet with a flageolet player.

My other close encounter of the bones kind came quickly afterwards. My cousin was playing with the *Salon Rouge Jazz* band at the Hen and Hound pub in Bascote Heath, South Warwickshire and, upon hearing that I was a neophyte bones player, Nick's fellow musicians pointed me in the direction of an elderly gentleman seated in front of the band. This was Mr. Jones 'the bones' originally from Wales. At a guess I would say that he was in his seventies or eighties and he was initially a little shy in talking to me.

Mr. Jones started playing the bones at an early age with a set of bones - or "clappers" as they were known - made of Welsh slate from the roof of his parents house! He was told that if he was able to play the slate set he would be rewarded with a shop bought set. Mr. Jones then produced for me the set of four bones he had been bought as a child. They were a yellowy white colour, rectangular in shape and about four inches long - the smallest bones I have seen hitherto and almost too small for my hands. During the evening we were treated to a solo spot by Mr. Jones and he played a two-handed piece, even doing some stop playing with my cousin. He was rewarded with good applause.

I was left with the impression of a very humble man. When I asked him for advice on playing he told me that he had been playing for some 70 years and that if I had rhythm in my soul I would be okay. *Simon Talbot*

## 2015 All Ireland Bones Competition

Once again the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship were held in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, Ireland on the May Bank Holiday weekend.

Held as part of the Fleadh by the Feale, it includes both a children's or Junior competition on Sunday, and Adult or Senior competition on Monday evening. Bone playing in itself is well known in Abbeyfeale, in part due to Patrick "Sport" Murphy who was known throughout the community, and won the competition seven times. Although the Sport passed away in 2011, his legacy lives on through the many bone players in the Community. His son William is a well known player, and David Murphy (no relation) who himself has won the competition numerous times, and now teaches youngsters in the community.

This years judge was the well known bones and bodhran player Johnny "Ringo" McDonnagh. John played for many years with the band DeDannan, with whom he recorded a number of records, often using the bones, and his own band Arcady, with whom he is currently playing.

The Junior Bone Playing Competition was held on Sunday May 3rd, amidst unsettled weather, but continued outside. Six competitors vied for the title. The top three competitors were all related to David Murphy, past Champion, and are students of his. First place was awarded to Jaqueline Murphy, Second to John Ford, a previous winner, and third to David Murphy, Jr, last years winner.

The Senior Bone Playing Competition was held on Monday May 4th, and saw a very high standard among the seven competitors. First place was awarded to multiple winner Paddy Donnovan, who returned to form this year. Second place was given to Junior Davey, who place first last year, and third place to Galway resident Declan Donnohue, who has place as high as second in previous years.

All of the competitors in both divisions took the stage for a grand finale performance at the end. A grand fireworks display was held to end this years Fleadh by the Feale, and truly a grand time was had by all! *Steve Brown*

(Continued from Page 1)

Jerome 'Jerry' Mescher was born on March 6, 1941, the son of Albert and Ann Mescher. He attended catholic schools. He hobbies were restoring tractors, flying his 1947 Piper Super Cub, and building airplanes. Jerry served in the National Guard and was an American Legion member.

As a boy Jerry began learning to play the bones by imitating his father, Albert. With a pair of wooden bones carved out of an old peach crate he practiced alone for several years, mostly by playing along to polka music on the radio in the kitchen. Eventually Albert and Jerry started to practice together in the parlor and by the time Jerry was in his late teens they had built a strong musical relationship. They developed a unique style of duet performance in which they accompanied the player piano or gramophone recordings with beat-for-beat, unison renditions of Albert's bones arrangements. When he finished high school, Jerry decided to work on the farm with his father rather than go to college. They continued to play music together and farm together until Albert passed away in 1967. Jerry took over the farm after his father died and worked it with his mother for almost twenty years before she died in 1985. In 1986, he married his wife, Sharon, and they continued to run the 160-acre family farm. [This paragraph was taken from a PhD thesis by Mel Mercier (see below)]



Jerry and his father performed on



the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour television show. They had won a local talent contest and were invited to come to New York City to be on the show. It was Father's Day 1961 and Ted Mack introduced them as father and son. They did not win, but gave the bones some national exposure. You can see this performance at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIRG0ANd2yQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIRG0ANd2yQ).

Bernie never learned to play the bones while her father was alive, but one day in 1970 she sensed her dad's presence, and picked up the bones getting something out of them for the first time. Bernie got serious about bone playing after she found an old player piano and while pumping it and playing the bones she felt like she was reliving another era. She began playing with Jerry recreating the tradition started by their father.

Mel Mercier first heard Jerry perform at Bones Fest IV, and knew he had heard something unique. He describes this in his Remembrance on Page 3, and how it led to a doctoral thesis on the tradition created by Jerry's father. The thesis is titled *The Mescher Bones Playing Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape*, and it is the only known PhD thesis on rhythm bones. For more information on Jerry and the Mescher tradition, you can read Dr. Mercier's thesis on the Internet at [http://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/1530/2011\\_Mercier.pdf](http://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/1530/2011_Mercier.pdf).

Jerry and his wife, Sharon, and sister,

Bernie, have attended most of the Bones Fests. In the early years, Jerry and Bernie performed together as the Mescher Duet. More recently, Sharon got the rhythm bones bug, learned the tradition and joined them as the Mescher Trio shown in the photograph on Page 1. You can read a more complete story about the Mescher Tradition in a newsletter article by Bernie's husband, Tom, at [rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPVoll-13.pdf](http://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPVoll-13.pdf), and doing an Adobe search (ctrl+F) for 'Volume 8, No. 4).

Also in recent years with Bernie living in Florida, Jerry and Sharon have performed as a duet at events close to their home, such as nursing homes, schools, etc.

Jerry also made rhythm bones, and his first ones were made in his high school shop class. Jerry made a machine to make great bones consistently and in quantity. He preferred Ebony wood, but found many other woods that provided good sound for less cost. Only someone like Jerry, who had played bones for many years, could find just the right techniques and materials to make high quality bones.

Jerry performed as a professional in music technique and stage presentation. That requiring long hours of practice, and he taught his students the three Ds; desire, determination and discipline. He and his troupe would always rehearse/warm up before each Bones Fest performance. For public performances he was always in costume.

Joe Birl went to New York City to try and get rhythm bones on the David Letterman show. If he had succeeded, the Meschers would have been the act to be on national television as they were that good.

I titled this article "Jerry Mescher: A Man of Tradition. Jerry had plans to attend college and study aeronautical engineering, however, he instead stayed on the farm to continue the family tradition of farming. And there was this Mescher Tradition of rhythm bones.

I will surely miss Jerry, however, with the wonder of the Internet, I can spend a few minutes every now and then watching and remembering this special friend. *Steve Wixson* [Some text from brochures by Sharon & Bernie and Tom.]



Photograph of the Clappers Lew Guernsey gave to Bill Vits at BFXVIII. (Story on Page 4)



Something from Bill Vits collection of noisemakers. Must be by same manufacturer (See Page 4)



David Holt and Rhiannan Giddens in a still image taken from a video of David's *State of Music* PBS series (see Page 5)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 17, No. 3 2015

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## Executive Director's Column

With the memories of Shepherdstown floating around my head and the prospect of an exciting Bones Fest in New York starting to germinate, I'm just starting to take an account of where I'm at in this whole process.

Another big thank you to Skeffington Flynn and Alyssa Clem for all their hard work in making the Shepherdstown Bones Fest a success. From the Sheddoppers at the Hotel on Thursday night to the Opera House performance on Saturday evening, it was a true delight.

How great to see Wilma Myers again, and to keep Russ Myers memory alive. The tribute to Walt

Watkins, and Jerry Mescher produced tears, and happy memories of our good friends. And seeing the Mescher tradition continue was inspiring!

Having just spent the week end at the Hillsborough, New Hampshire Living History Event, one thing is clear. Although rhythm bones have been forgotten by the general public, they still excite and fascinate when the public sees them. I distributed 25 of our brochures on Saturday, and another 10-15 on Sunday. It will be interesting to see how many people actually contact us through this outreach, (Continued on Page 2)

## Highlights From Bones Fest XIX

Hello RBS members! I need to start out by saying that it was an absolute blessing to be able to host Bones Fest XIX. Throughout the weekend I was reminded of what an incredible community this is. I believe it was Mitch Boss who said to me "this is the only place you'll go where everyone you meet just wants to figure out what you're doing well." I couldn't agree more. We all seem to look for and to bring out the best in each other.

I should also note that there are far too many memories to fit into a single article. I will do my best to cover as much as I can but I know that I can't get to everything. Perhaps I'll do a follow up article but for now, bear with me and prepare to jump around a bit as I try to organize some of my favorite recollections of Bones Fest XIX.

Bones Fest XIX officially kicked off

(Continued on Page 3)



## Editorial

An amazing thing happened to me at Bones Fest XIX. At the end of the General Membership meeting, Steve Brown addressed the members listing some of my contributions to the Rhythm Bones Society. He followed that by presenting me with a wrapped box that I quickly unwrapped only to discover a set of Jerry Mescher Ebony rhythm bones. I had been after Jerry for years to make me a set, but he could not find the high grade of Ebony that he wanted. And this set is perfect as every combination or position in my hands sound great - the most acoustically matched rhythm bones I have ever seen. A big thanks to the RBS Board and in particular to Sharon Mescher for this wonderful surprise. I played them at the Saturday evening public performance.

As you will see in the highlights article by host, Skeff Flynn, beginning on Page 1, and in videos on our website over the next several months, Bones Fest XIX was another outstanding success. The facilities at Shepherd University and the Clarion Hotel more than met our needs, and the public performance in the Shepherdstown Opera House was to a full house (some people were turned away).

Thanks to Mary Lee Sweet for videoing the Fest and also to Art Sands for taking and photoshopping most of the photographs on Pages 4, 5 and 8. Our website and newsletter are the better for it.

There was not room for the minutes of the Board and the General Membership meeting, and these will be printed in the next issue of the newsletter. Of significance, Sky Bartlett was elected as a Board Member at Large taking Tim Reilly's place. Tim, thanks for serving.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XX.** August 4-7, 2016, Homer, NY hosted by Gerry Hines. Check our website; Tab: Current; Next Fest for details as they become available. Just imagine the T-shirt!

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 31 - September 6, 2015, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

(Continued from Page 1)

and if we get new members. If you think you will be at an event where you could distribute brochures, please let me know.

At the Board Meeting and General Membership Meeting, discussion on how to interest kids in our instrument and organization produced several good ideas about distributing starter kits to kids, and expanding membership to include families. Judging from the interest at the Living History Event, it doesn't take much to attract them to our ancient instrument, but keeping them interested is the tough part. A good number of children were at my booth over the weekend, each one wanting to get their turn to try them. Several teachers also took my card with the interest of having the bones to their schools. For those of you who have tried to teach groups of kids, it's not easy to give the necessary amount of attention to them, but it does yield some exciting results. The Board continues to address and define our role in working with kids, as the future of rhythm bones playing depends on it.

Lastly, we may be making our earliest announcement of a Bones Fest in our history over the next month. Gerry Hines is working hard to make the arrangements, and his results are impressive. So be prepared to make Bones Fest XX plans almost a year in advance! Thanks again to all Bones Fest attendee's, especially first timers, it was a blast! *Steve Brown*

## Letters to the Editor

The Bones Fest sounds good, as always, and wish I was a little nearer. But I do support the the bones in England playing in lots of venues. It was sad news to hear of the passing of our members some of them I met in 2006. Please give my regards to all who might remember me. Kind regards to all. *Charles 'Tony' Humphreys*

Although I've been a member for most of the last decade, this was my first Bones Fest, and I'm glad I got to put faces to names mentioned in the informative and friendly newsletters. Nice job with the writing and editing of it!

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

So many folks went out of their way to be welcoming. I didn't meet everyone, but it was easy to meet members, many of whom are happy to share tips and suggestions. Several stand outs in especially Skeff, our genial host, Steve, Hank, Spike, Jerry, Kenny and others, really made the weekend for me.

Everyone was invited to join in during breakouts, whether beginners or old rattlers. The deep affections possible were very apparent during the memorial service, from the touching eulogies expressed. If you, like me, have not been to a Bones Fest yet, this first timer hopes you will give it a try, and see how many new friends await you.

Thanks very much again to all. Educational, inspirational, fun! *Jason Ryan*

(Continued from Page 1)

on Thursday August 6th in the Tuscany Grille at the Clarion Hotel in Shepherdstown West Virginia. My good friends The Shedhoppers did what they do best. They brought their enthusiasm and their openness and played honest renditions of a wide range of material. Their support was the foundation for a great opening night and the bones players in attendance were more than happy to jump right in, playing and even singing along.

At one point I heard the normally diminutive Mary Gunderson King belting out a tune and thought to myself, "It's a Bones Fest Miracle!" I don't think I've ever heard her sing so loud. Mary's husband Mike King was as solid as ever on the guitar. Bruce Reich happily mentored Jessye Bartlett on the fiddle. Tim Quigley on guitar was, as always, our fearless leader (whether he'll admit or not). Kurt and Pat Cam provided emotional and rhythmic support with Kurt on the Cajon. Jonathon Albright and Hannah Geffert upheld other Appalachian traditions by rocking the washtub bass and washboard, respectively. And of course, Bill Newland's constant looks of surprise and amazement while rocking out on rhythm guitar were thoroughly entertaining.

Friday morning we moved in to the Shepherd University Student Center and got things going in the Storer Ballroom. The facilities were top notch, located a block and a half off of the epicenter of Historic Downtown Shepherdstown. We had a simple stage, ample seating and tables for vendors and registration. Jon Kalbaugh supplied the sound system and Alyssa Clem and I supplied soft drinks, snacks and coffee. The room got lots of natural light and we heard the sound of the town's bells on the hour.

A good bones player has rhythm, but even the best bones players seem to move on a time of their own. The phrase "herding cats" comes to mind. This is my first time hosting any kind of event like this and frankly there are a lot of things you can only learn by doing. Friday morning was challenging. And then Stan Von Hagen gave me a gift sometime after lunch. He asked about the program for the afternoon and I could see the sincere desire to learn in his eyes. He spurred me

to action. I said over and over throughout the weekend that I learned a lot about hosting a Bones Fest on Friday and that Saturday was better as a result. Stan was a big part of that. I see a real difference in Stan's playing this year over last and it's that desire to learn that will keep him moving forward. I'm awarding him the unofficial "most improved player" award this year (I 'unofficially' received this award myself in 2011 from Steve Brown.)

So let's talk about the workshops. In the weeks leading up to Bones Fest XIX Eric Fredenburgh and I discussed our approach. Eric offered to be my "close and play record player" and he came through big time! During the Friday morning session we were still finding our way but managed to rattle off some great tunes featuring acoustic guitar and vocals. The Friday afternoon session took it up a notch. We made things more intimate by moving down to the Blue and Gray room in the Student Center, where all of the workshops would be held from there out. Bill Vits and I talked through our thought processes in how we approached each of the grooves that Eric laid down.

On Saturday it all came together. Eric would start a tune and we would send it around the room pass off style. After each tune we would highlight accent points, recognize approaches that worked and field any questions on what we had covered. Eric's timing is impeccable and he made sure we had a solid foundation to build on. It's amazing how much we can learn from each other in these situations and the Saturday workshops, starting with Eric's, really reinforced what a valuable vehicle the pass off is. We are indebted to Walt Watkins for this and would do well to incorporate this into every facet we can in future fests.

There are definitely two separate and distinct notions about bones playing. One is that the bones are something of a novelty. The bones should be played fast and loud with flare and showmanship for a tune or two, taking a lead role in the music or in the performance. The other is that the bones should be understated and supportive of the music and as such could be present throughout. This latter position is one I have mostly found myself taking. No one ever told Eric that it was silly to have a bones player in the

band. No one ever told the Shedhoppers the bones were only supposed to be used on a tune or two . . . thank goodness! Identifying the context in which you are playing became a theme for the workshops. Knowing which role you are playing is crucial to determining what you should be playing!

The Shedhoppers returned on Saturday afternoon to put on a workshop I really wanted to deliver: How to Play with Acoustic Musicians. The workshop focused on being the foundational percussionist in an acoustic ensemble; getting under the music and supporting it. I was genuinely amazed at how responsive each participant was; whether they were a seasoned player or just beginning everyone involved accepted the challenge I put before them. Adjusting volume to match the ensemble, when to embellish, and when to play simple patterns were just a few of the topics discussed. The Shedhoppers graciously and expertly played a range of styles, tempos and grooves. The defining moment was when Mary Gunderson King led the group in a down tempo, very soft, rendition of "Oh My Mama" by Alela Diane. Haunting and a great showing by all who participated!

I'd be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to recognize Tim Sealy. A resident of nearby Hagerstown, Tim was only able to join us on Saturday. We were fortunate to have him in both workshops that day and it's my sincere hope that we see more of him in the future.

Bones Fest XIX was dedicated to the memory of Walt Watkins and Jerry Mescher. In my welcome message for the program I said that "the connections we make and the impact we have on one another's lives are at least as important as the music we play" and so on Friday afternoon we took time to reflect on the impact that these men had on our community and to celebrate their legacy. Steve Wixson put together some excellent video presentations that served as introductions for those that didn't know them and as reminiscence for those that did. Participants had the opportunity to share their favorite stories and we closed with a massive pass off. These two great Bones Ambassadors are surely missed but they live on in the vibrant traditions

(Continued on Page 6)





Randy Seppala



Tim Reilly with Peter and Nathaniel Johnston



Tom Worrell leading Remember Jerry Session



Ernie Duffy (Also led Remember Walt Session)



Adam Klein



Bernie Worrell



Wilma Myers - Bones Fest III on her back porch



Spike Bones



Rowan Corbett



Ivan Browning



Mitch Boss



Scott Morrison



Ben Denny & Adam Klein backing up Steve Wixson



Blue Hammond





Jason Ryan (See his Letter to the Editor)



Sharon Mescher



Gerry Hines - Next year's host for BFXX



Hank Tenenbaum



Dennis Riedesel



Sharon Mescher and Bernie Worrell



John Cohen and Mariah Mullins



Sky Bartlett



Steve Brown and Mitch Boss



Stan Von Hagen



Jeremy Brown



Kenny Wolin



Bill Vits



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet

(Continued from Page 3)

they helped instill in us.

After a break for dinner we reconvened in the Storer Ballroom. The plan was to jam, to share and to get ready for the Saturday night concert. This was also the first chance we had to introduce the Tin Roof Pickers to the Rhythm Bones Society. This leads me to a pair of stories, starting with the story of Ben Denny.

I first met Ben sometime about smack dab in the middle of the summer. We immediately hit it off and frankly I knew that there was something special about this young man. The reality at that point was that I was hurting for musicians. I knew the Shedhoppers would do everything they could to help out, but I also knew it was unreasonable to ask them to be there every night of the festival. So I asked Ben if he had a group of guys he normally played with and if they might be willing to help us out.

The Saturday night before Bones Fest I got to meet Andrew Montgomery and Paul Young and to play with the Tin Roof Pickers for the first time. I'm pretty sure all four of us were excited by the experience and any doubts I had were washed away. They came in on Friday and Saturday and absolutely saved the day. What a talented group of young men! And of course the fact that they got to jam with Rowan Corbett on Friday and play at the Opera House on Saturday was a feather in their cap as well. Good stuff all the way around!

I need to extend a special recognition to Ben. Ben was not just my entry point to booking the band. Ben made a point of coming early. Ben made a point of staying late. Ben talked to whoever he could. Ben sat in on any jam he could; and when the night was through we stood in front of the hotel and smoked cigars and talked about how lucky we were to be there. Many, many thanks are in order.

The other story I need to tell while we're on the subject of Friday night is the Story of Randy Jordan and Zack Serleth. Alyssa and I have a tradition of going to Delfest on Memorial Day weekend to celebrate friends and family and to enjoy some first class bluegrass performances and jams. In 2014 I was doing what I normally do around midnight on a Friday of Delfest . . . going to the gazebo to find

pickers to play with. The jam was good and went on to the wee hours. When it came time to pack it up the upright bass player (Zack) asked me if I'd be willing to show him the bones sometime. Tired but willing I told him where I was camped and suggested he come by the next day. My first task of the following morning was to lead an impromptu bones workshop for about a dozen people. Zack and Randy led that charge.

Randy and Zack were only able to attend the Friday night session. Randy texted me the next day to say it was the most welcome he had ever felt in a musical space. Randy and Zack are no strangers to musical spaces as they are both accomplished musicians that play regularly around Baltimore. In the short time they were able to participate in the festival they saw the richness, the diversity and the spirit of comradery that is a signature part of Bones Fest. We're currently working on putting together a Baltimore Bones Workshop for some time in October; stay tuned . . .

One of the things that I have treasured in my Bones Fest experiences has always been the late night jam sessions and Bones Fest XIX was no different. We were fortunate enough to have the Morgan Room at the Clarion hotel which was available to us both Friday and Saturday night. Tom Worrell seems to relish the role of late night DJ and I think we can all agree he deserves the job. Scott Morrison and Art Sands were first time Bones Fest attendees and both were regular and welcome fixtures at the late night sessions.

Perhaps my favorite story from late night this year (though admittedly I had stepped out of the room when it happened) came on Friday night. There was a wedding party at the Clarion that weekend and their 94 year old grandmother (complete with walker) happened by the Morgan room. She remembered hearing her Grandfather play the bones and asked if she could sit with us for a tune or two. Of course she was welcome! As she got situated Rowan jumped up and played the bones for her. As I understand it she was visibly jubilant, happily pantomiming the motions of playing the bones and tapping her foot in time with the music. Moments like this are truly a gift to everyone involved.

Speaking of Rowan, it was a real treat to have him at the festival, even if only for a day. Rowan Corbett is currently a member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops and is also part of the supporting band for Rhiannon Giddens' solo album. He has a beautiful daughter who is not quite a year old. He mentioned to me at one point that he wished he could be doing more for the Rhythm Bones Society (with a newborn, can you imagine?) but the fact is that he is doing more for bones playing than he realizes by being out in the world and playing the bones (among other instruments) in all of the venues that he does. I'm sure that anyone who had the chance to interact with Rowan on Friday will tell you that they were glad that they did. Eric Fredenburgh said to me at one point that he was enjoying watching some of the interactions and pointed to Rowan as an example. I said "yeah, I love Rowan", to which he replied "I love Rowan and I don't even know him!"

The public concert at the Shepherdstown Opera House on Saturday August 8th was absolutely the capstone of the event. Thanks to owner Larry Cumbo (who captured part of the performance on video for us), operations manager Nicola Larsen, Steve Cifala the sound guy, and Shane Harris the bartender for making it a night to remember. I believe we had a Bones Fest first as we had a capacity crowd and actually had to turn away about a dozen people due to lack of seating (fortunately about half of them came back and found seats after intermission). Nicola estimates that we had about 130 people in the room (seating plus general admission). It really was something. There is honestly no way that I can cover the concert in this article but I will share a few thoughts.

One of the primary concerns of the Rhythm Bones Society is to insure the continuation of bones playing traditions. The only way that happens is by getting young people involved. Peter Johnston learned to play the bones from his grandfather. He then passed that tradition on to his son Nathaniel, who at 15 has already become a formidable player.

Nathaniel is somewhat quiet, somewhat reserved. In a musical situation however, Nathaniel speaks volumes. As a fiddler, a drummer, or a bones player Nathaniel knows exactly how to commu-

nicate, to interact, to jam. This is a young man who looked around and saw that the American style of two handed bones playing with wooden bones was well represented; however the Irish tradition of playing animal bones in one hand was not. Situating himself at the center of a crew of phenomenal musicians from the RBS membership playing an Irish tune, Nathaniel delivered a stunning performance. I'm really looking forward to seeing this young man develop and hope to hear him playing the bones for years to come.

The Tin Roof Pickers opened and closed the event and did a fabulous job. I joined them to open the show and then it was off to the races! Sharon Mescher and Bernie Worrell had two great numbers and Sky ended his firecracker performance with a near perfect imitation of the Mescher style. Both were a fitting tribute to Jerry and a celebration of his legacy. Jeremy Brown closed out the first set by once again winning the title of the world's happiest bones player. For the grand finale the Shedhoppers joined the Tin Roof Pickers. All of the bones players assembled on the dance floor and the band launched into a chorus or two of "Momma Don't Allow" (no bones playing 'round here). Good stuff to say the least! The Shedhoppers always end with "Country Roads" and it only seemed fitting to close the concert with that number.

As close to perfect as I feel Bones Fest XIX was I need to make (at least) two apologies. Tim Reilly came to the stage early in the first act expecting to play to a CD. I failed to figure that out with the sound man, forcing Tim to sing A cappella and accompanying himself on bones. Everyone in attendance appreciated his flexibility. He nailed it. Unfortunately my other big mistake in laying out the concert program cost us something. Somehow I missed an entry from Randy Seppala and Jessye Bartlett. It really would have been nice to get those Nickel/Silver spoons ringing out in that room with Jessye on the fiddle. I've seen Randy perform on the spoons in the style of his mentor Johnny Perrona before and I wish we could have shared it with the crowd.

Sunday morning began with a farewell breakfast at the Clarion. For many it was

our last opportunity to connect and to celebrate our fellowship. What a wonderful site to see so many of our members enjoying a meal together.

We had access to the Morgan Room through Sunday afternoon. It served as a drop point and a hangout spot for those that weren't quite ready to say goodbye. Scott Morrison, Art Sands, Steve Brown, Adam Klein, Spike Bones and I were all glad to contribute. We did get one interested soul, Genevieve, who arrived with a strong single tap. By the end of our session she had the tap, the double and the triple – at least some of the time. It was promising that we were able to close Bones Fest XIX on a lesson, a passing on of our tradition.

I need to start wrapping this up so I'll do my best to keep it brief from here out. Again, I'm sure I'm leaving folks out and so I do apologize. That being said, I need to recognize a few more key contributors.

One of these contributors was recognized during the fest – Steve Wixson. For those of you who aren't aware, Steve is the very heart of the Rhythm Bones Society. Without his efforts I'm not sure that the RBS would exist. As part of the fest the Mescher Family with a little help from the RBS board presented Steve with a set of Mescher ebony bones. What a fitting reward to recognize all that he does!

My drummer friend Jon Kalbaugh provided the sound system for the student center and was with us for more than 12 hours on Friday and over 8 hours on Saturday. I handed Jon a set of unfinished Whamdiddle bones on Friday and he came back with a set of practically finished bones on Saturday. He even dug into Randy Seppala's bargain box to pick up a set for a friend of his. Overriding his objections I did manage to pay the man for his services, but in a compromise we diverted part of his compensation toward his first year's dues as a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Welcome Jon!

The Bones Fest XIX logo and t-shirt design were composed by Marek Bennett. We were able to put roughly 100 t-shirts in people's hand this year! I think they look great and should serve as a fantastic conversation starter for anyone who wears them. Skully made a great mascot!

Spike Bones provided the television

we used during the remembering Walt and Jerry Session. He also pulled the audience in at the Opera House using his patented flamboyant brand of showmanship. Mary Lee Sweet once again filled the role of videographer and I look forward to seeing what she captured.

Tim Reilly and I talked about the passage of knowledge and traditions from the "kings to the knights" and how the "knights become the kings". It's amazing to see that in action as Sky Bartlett assumes Tim's post on the board. Many thanks are in order to Tim for his service and I am excited to welcome Sky to the board! I understand that Tim and Kenny Wolin even managed to sit in with a heavy metal band in Shepherdstown after the concert . . .

Bones Fest is always an invigorating experience. It's our community that makes it great. Thank you to everyone who participated in Bones Fest XIX. It really was a gift to me to be able to host this event. We all know that there are people that love us but to see it demonstrated so clearly . . . I'll say it again, it's a gift. There's no other way to describe it. May your bones be with you and I can't wait to see you all at Bones Fest XX! *Skeff Flynn*

[The Rhythm Bones Society is happy to announce that Bones Fest XX will be in Homer, NY (Cortland area) on August 4-7, 2016, hosted by Gerry Hines. Just imagine the T-shirt.]

## Index to Page 1 Group Photograph

From bottom of stairs up and then left to right. Left Stairs: Skeff Flynn, Pete Johnston, Ernie Duffy, Nathaniel Johnston, Bill Vits, Scott Morrison, Spike Bones, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet.

Right Stairs: Jason Ryan, Steve Brown, Jeremy Brown, Sharon Mescher, Jennifer Brown, Wilma Myers, Tim Seals, Blue Hammond, Steve Wixson, John Cohen, Mitch Boss, Randy Seppala

Center from left to right: Janet and Gerry Hines, Kenny Wolin, Tom and Bernie Worrell, Hank Tenenbaum, Jon Kalbaugh, Dennis Riedesel, Art Sands, Annette Boss, Adam Klein, Ivan Brown-ing, Jessye and Sky Bartlett, Mariah Mullins, Stan and Jean Von Hagen.





Steve Brown, Jeyyse Bartlett, Kenny Wolin, Nathaniel Johnston on rhythm bones and Scott Morrison



Steve Wixson and Steve Brown leading meeting



Shedhoppers from Finale



Tin Roof Pickers and Skeff Flynn

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 17, No. 4 2015

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## Executive Director's Column

I'm sitting here in Old New England in very unseasonably warm weather, very glad the rain striking the window is not snow, regardless of the festive season. Time to do my usual year end reflection, to put the year past in some kind of bone playing perspective, and maybe think about where we are today, and what the coming year might bring.

Although I'm very grateful for my own good health and that of my family, I can't help but look back on the year with out acknowledging the loss of our good friends Jerry Mescher, and Walt Watkins. Their presence at bones fests will be sorely missed, and their personal friendship to me leaves a hole that will be hard to fill. I will remember them both as great players, but better friends. As a tribute to them I persist in working toward being a better bones

player, influencing others to do so, and teaching the youngsters when I can.

One moment from the bones fest brings me great satisfaction, that being recognizing Steve Wixson for his amazing accomplishments over the years, and with Sharon Mescher's help, to give him the set of Jerry Mescher bones he sought for so many years. Too many times we have meant to tell our friends how much they meant to us, only to wait too late. This time, we didn't. His full worth to this organization, and to continuing the art of rhytm bone playing in general, is, in my opinion, monumental, and I'm glad that he is at last aware of the great debt we owe him.

(Continued on Page 3)

## Lark in the Morning

Lark in the Morning is a musician's store originally founded in 1974 by Mickie Zekley. Lark specializes in hard to find musical items, instruments, music and instructional materials from around the world.

Lark in the Morning has imported from almost 1,000 different suppliers in 70 countries, and they claim that they had the largest selection of ethnic musical instruments in the world.

Lark Camps were established in 1980 to allow traditional musicians and dancers to get together and share their music and dance. It started out before 1980 as a music party at Zekley's home, but when 100 people were camping in the yard the party needed to move to a more appropriate location. It is an annual week-long world music and dance celebration that includes dozens of instructional workshops for both professional and beginner musicians and dancers. Camp instructors come from all over the world to staff the workshops.

Lark Camp takes place in the Mendocino Woodlands State Park, a National Historic Landmark nestled in 700 acres (2.8 km2) of redwood trees, ferns, and glades, near the coastal village of Mendocino, California.

Here is their rhythm bones story as told

by Mickie.

"I first became aware of rhythm bones in 1971 when I was living in London and getting by by busking on the street with my bagpipes and banjo. I would play in Portobello Road, and I saw someone playing rhythm bones and became fascinated. I looked around the market and founds some old bones sets for sale, one made of ebony and the other of whale bone. I started selling bones that I had made in Asia in the late 70s and was able to find (Continued on Page 3)



## Editorial

There is a theme for this issue of the newsletter - rhythm bones sellers, and it follows rhythm bones maker articles that started in Vol 14, No 4. The first is Mickie Zekley's Lark in the Morning, and that has a secondary purpose of remembering Percy Danforth since Mickie produced Percy's rhythm bones instructional video that has and continues to help new rhythm bones players. My first Danforth rhythm bones were purchases from Lark. The story begins on Page 1. Mickie has given us permission to include the non-instructional parts of that video as part of the Remember Percy Project.

There are stories about other rhythm bones sellers in this issue and a few more in the next issue. While there is good information in them, do not assume these stories tell their complete story.

There is a progress report on the *Remember Percy Project*. While the project is not complete, some of the collected material is now online. Check out Page 3 and if you have Percy items that should be included, send a message via our Contact Us page.

Check out the minutes of the Board and General Membership meetings to learn more about the internal working of RBS,

We've got a host for Bones Fest XX, Gerry Hines (see the ad on Page 3), however, if you are interested in hosting a future Bones Fest, contact us via our 'Contact Us' page for a copy of the Bones Fest Host Guide.

If that is more than you want to do, then read Steve Brown's article titled "What is a Regional Bones Fest?" These are one day events for people in a smaller geographic area. Such a Fest in the western part of the country is needed.

## Letters to the Editor

Hello my is Gordon, I'm 56 and I've been playing the bones from around 7yrs old taught to me by my dad. Around 1999 I appeared on the Micheal Barry more show, "MY KIND OF MUSIC" Which went down a storm, I then appeared at the Bristol Old Vic, on the "loose ends" radio show, BBC (then pre-

sented by Ned Sherrin) and I performed the opening music with the bones, also a stunt on local radio, I also used to teach the blind and they loved it. To me, playing the bones is like dancing, I don't think what I do when I play, it just seems that the beats come out naturally, I was also a natural drummer at an early age, and at 12 yrs old I played Buddy Riches drums with his orchestral at Colston Hall Bristol, England, while Mr. Rich sat with my dad in the audience. Thinking about it, I wish I had taken the bones along as I'm sure he would have liked that. I've several sets of bones, I've also got a pair made of Australian hardwood made by my dad. I played with the Chieftains at the Bristol Colston Hall around 15 years ago, though it was unofficial, I just jumped up onto the stage and started playing. I stood by Paddy Moloney while he played pipes and he smiled at me all the way through and signed my bones afterwards. What a buzz!!! Anyway a big hello to all bone players; keep up this skillfully art, *Gordon Maddocks* Bristol, England

I found this on the UCSB cylinder recording audio archive: *Rap, rap, rap, rap on your minstrel bones*, Performers: Edward Meeker. Issue Number: Edison Blue Amberol: 1576. Release year: 1912. Words, Lew Brown. Year of release and songwriter credit from "The Edison Phonograph Monthly," v.10 (1912). Dance song, orchestra accompaniment. <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/OBJID/Cylinder0654>. *Kathy Whisler*

## Mike Passerotti's Youtube List Updated

If you've not looked at Mike Passerotti's collection of Youtube rhythm bones videos, you are missing out on a terrific resource. Thanks to those who contribute links to these videos, Mike has over 200 videos in his collection organized by the rhythm bones player. You will find videos here easier than doing a Youtube search. However, when you find a new video, please forward the link to Mike. Some late additions include David Holt and Rhiannah Giddens and Dave Murphy from Ireland. Click our Resource Tab, then Audio & Video.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 17, No 4  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Renew Membership

Our fiscal year runs from January 1 to December 31 meaning it is time to renew your membership for 2016. go to <http://rhythmbones.org/renewMembership.html> to pay by PayPal or send a check for \$20 to Rhythm Bones Society, 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mtn, TN 37377

## Website Updates

The October update had a video of Adam Klein's performance at Bones Fest XIX and the Photo of the Month was Gerry Hines with the announcement that he is hosting BFXX. The November update was about the Remember Percy Project and the Video of the Month was about Percy produced by the University of Michigan in 1981. There was no December update.

(Continued from Page 1)

a source of bone rhythm bones.

“We were already selling and playing bones before meeting Percy Danforth, and meeting Percy was like meeting a superstar. We flew Percy out to California a number of times to be the rhythm bones instructor at Lark Camp. It was as amazing to Percy to be exposed to music that he had never heard of at Lark Camp and for people at camp to be exposed to him and learn bones from him and enjoy his stories and good companionship.

“He would jam with the people playing Middle Eastern, Balkan and French musics with rhythms that he couldn’t have imagined before and was inspired learning to play in 7s, 9s, 11s, 18s and more. It was wonderful to see him go from session to session with a sense of amazement and dive right in.

“We were having a music party at our house, and my friend Rod Cameron brought along his new video camera. We videoed Arrigo D’Albert playing the Hurdy Gurdy. When we showed the footage to Arrigo he exclaimed that that can’t be me. I am doing what I tell my students not to do.

I realized immediately what a great learning tool videos could be. I went out and bought some video equipment and immediately started producing a series of 24 how to videos.

Percy was a natural choice after seeing how people got so excited with his playing and teaching. We flew Percy out to California with the help of the local folklore society and produced a video using many of the local Mendocino musicians. Countless people have now learned how to play the rhythm bones from Percy using this video.

You can watch Mickie and family on youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5o69rxh5I10>. Check out his website at <http://larkinam.com>, and also their rhythm bones page at <http://larkinam.com/BonesSpoons.html>.

## Remember Percy Project Update

While this project is not complete, there has been significant progress on data collection. Some of Percy’s memorabilia given to Jonathan Danforth

by his uncle, Mac, at Bones Fest XVIII has been scanned into the computer and uploaded to our website. This is a large file and you can check it out at (<http://rhythmbones.org/documents/PercyScannedMemorabilia.pdf>)

In one of the boxes given to Jonathan was a professional quality video tape that was converted to digital and was the Video of the Month for November. It was produced by the University of Michigan who has given up permission to use it. An additional item is the non-instructional clips of Percy talking from his instructional video given to us by Lark in the Morning.

When data collection is complete there will be a definitive article on Percy in our newsletter and the collected information, will be better organized and uploaded to our website. If you have Percy items that should be remembered, let us know via our Contact Us page.

## Editorial (Continued)

Of course Sheppardstown was a highlight of the year for me, seeing all of you, experiencing West Virginia, and watching my son thrive in the light of our organization, brings me great joy. Hats off to Skeff, and Alyssa for hosting a truly memorable fest!

My retirement this year has presented me with a variety of opportunities, both musically, and personally, including a recording project I was involved in with Marek Bennett, and Woody Pringle, of which I am very proud.

Today I’m dedicated to fighting off the physical effects of aging and keep playing the bones. Those that went before me like Shorty Boulet, and Percy Danforth are models I aspire to, and I encourage you all, never give up, never surrender!

And the coming year is full of promise. I know Skeff and Steve are planning on joining me at the New England Folk Festival this year, I’m considering a return to Ireland, and of course really looking forward to the next Bones Fest hosted by Gerry Hines in Homer, New York this Summer. Jeremy is already asking about it while playing the bones in the car with me, and I hope to see all of you there this year. Let me take this opportunity to wish you the very best New Year, and “May your bones be with you!” *Steve Brown*

## RBS Brochure

The Board has been working on a RBS brochure for some time, and this year Skeff Flynn took on the project and the result is shown on Page 8 which as you see is really well done.

We have given them to Dom Flemons and Rowan Corbett to pass out at their performances. If you would like some, use our Contact Us page to let know how many and how you will use them.

# BONES FEST

# XX



## August 4-7, 2016

## Homer, NY

## Gerry Hines, Host

## Please Save the Date on Your Calendar

## Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown on August 8, 2015 at 12:20 pm in the Shepherd University Storer Ballroom. All Board members were present.

Steve Wixson passed a copy of the minutes as printed in the RBP Newsletter and a motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes. He also passed the 2014 RBS Treasurer's Report and noted that there was a balance of \$6,656 in the bank as of December 31, 2014. He noted that a copy of the report and all supporting documentation had been mailed to our Executive Director. A motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the Treasurer's Report.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to reimburse Skeff Flynn for \$274.92 for 2000 RBS brochures he had printed. Steve Wixson noted that he did not put a copy as promised on our website for people to download. He will do that soon. An RBS business card was discussed and Skeff will investigate and circulate a design.

The rhythmbones.org website redesign was discussed and Skeff will fulfill his promise to circulate a design document so we can agree on what we want the website to do.

Sharon Mescher reported on a letter she received from Albert Fisher, producer of the Ted Mack Original Amateur TV show, offering us duped copies of former shows with rhythm bones players. The cost of his proposal was still too high for us and no action was taken.

Steve Wixson gave a brief report on the 'Remember Percy' and 'Timeline' projects.

Steve Brown called the meeting to order as the Nominating Committee. All members indicated their willingness to serve another year except Tim Reilly and a motion was made, seconded and approved to present this slate at the General Membership Meeting.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn. We adjourned at 2:02 pm. Respectively submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown on August 8, 2015 at 2:15 pm in the Shepherd University Storer Ballroom.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the last meeting and a motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes as read. He gave a brief Treasurer's Report noting that there was a balance of \$6,656 in the bank as of December 31, 2014.

The Nominating committee nominated the current Board members except Tim Reilly for reelection. Steve Brown opened the floor for nominations for Board Member at Large and Sky Bartlett was nominated. Being no other nominations, the motion was made, seconded and approved to elect the following by acclamation; Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members, Sharon Mescher, Skeff Flynn, Kenny Wolin and Sky Bartlett.

Steve Wixson gave a brief report on the 'Remember Percy' and 'Timeline' projects. He noted the first printout from the Timeline Database was available for inspection.

Steve Brown, after listing contributions to the RBS, presented Steve Wixson with a set of Mescher Ebony Bones noting the help of Sharon Mescher.

There was a discussion about developing a starter kit with an instruction manual and rhythm bones for school teachers. The Board will look into this.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 2:30 pm. Respectively submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 4-7, 2016, Cortland, NY area, Gerry Hines, Host.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 29 - September 4, 2016, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

## What is a Regional Bones Fest?

I suppose the roots of the Regional Bones Fest lie in my first meeting with Percy Danforth. Percy and his wife Fran had traveled to Boston for a harpsichord lesson, and called me to let me know. I made a mad dash for their hotel, and spent the evening with them. A parade of bones players came and went during the evening, mostly to get bones from Percy, but I could see a sort of brotherhood existed. I only remember the name of one, Armando Bufferone, who was a member of the musician's union in Worcester!

Later that year Percy came to the Hartford Ct. Folk Festival, and I traveled down to see him. He did a workshop attended by about 50 people, and again other bones players were there. So when asked to do a bone playing workshop for the New England Folk Festival in 1980, I invited as many bones players as I could to join me, and have done that for each workshop. Over the years a whole host of players attended including: Percy Danforth, John Burrill, Johnny Muise, Ev Cowette, Shorty Boulet, Russ Myers, and many others. So the idea of bringing bones players together has deep roots, but it wasn't until after hosting my first National Fest in 2001 that I began gathering the local players for what I called a mini-Fest. The first was much like Ev Cowett's first bones fest, but even smaller, a total of 10 folks in my living room. Walt Watkins was in New England, Shorty Boulet drove down from New Hampshire, Jon Danforth came up, and we were on our way. I think I have hosted a total of 5 of this type of fest, and they have grown as large as 35 people. One was held at the Red Apple Farm, included workshops, and a public performance. Much like a regular Bones Fest, but only lasting one day, the focus has always been getting together, sharing our playing and giving encouragement.

Perhaps the largest scheduled never happened due to a hurricane and cancellation at the last minute, but I think we had some 40 people scheduled to attend. I think the essential ingredient to a regional fest is: 1. Desire- the passion to get folks together, regardless of location, to play and have a good time



2. Willing participants- people have to be willing to come, and the distance has to be reasonable, although that is about choice 3. You need a body of people you can draw from. We've always been lucky here in New England to have a good density of players with in our region, but people outside the region will come too, especially if they had to miss the national Bones Fest or can't make the long distance travel to the national. The form of it takes on the personality of the participants, workshops if wanted, or just hanging out, public performances or just jamming with folks. The location could be just your living room or a public park. I have idea's for the future Regional Fests, but have to get psyched up to do it. And there's always the New England Folk Festival in April, I know I'll be there, maybe you will too! *Steve Brown*

## **Dorothea Nelson Master's Thesis**

Dorothea Nelson's master's thesis is titled No Country For End Men: A Re-Evaluation of Small Ensemble Blackface Minstrelsy, 1843 To 1883, and it has enough rhythm bones description to be of interest to rhythm bones players. It is online at [http://www.bonedrymusic.com/v/d\\_j\\_nelson/no\\_country\\_for\\_end\\_men.pdf](http://www.bonedrymusic.com/v/d_j_nelson/no_country_for_end_men.pdf). Search for 'bones' if you are not interested in reading the entire 60 page thesis. It has an extensive bibliography.

Note that this is on Scott Miller's store website, and while you are there you might check out the rhythm bones he has for sale - he is also a rhythm bones seller.

## **The Jethros 'Shake Your Bones'**

There is a song that the trombone player in my band wrote specifically to highlight the bones; well, now a friend of the band who has a history of making great videos of our playing has posted a version of it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV-NopVYJCY>.

It's kind of too bad they cut out the intro, which gets zanier every time we play it and makes it nearly impossible for me to keep a straight face when we do the song.

These days it involves Rick (the trombonist) going on at length about how I

don only cycling shorts, carefully select a Bowie knife, and take down a buffalo after riding it down, in order to craft the bones which I'm about to play (which are usually, in fact, the buffalo ribs I got from Steve Brown), using all parts of the animal and donating the extra meat to orphanages. All this while I do quasi-bones-playing-calisthenics in order not to bust up laughing.

Anyway. I think the song is great.  
*Jonathan Danforth*

## **Rhythm Bones Player from Barbados**

I don't know if I am the only Bones Player on the Island of Barbados, but I don't know of any other one. I was taught by my grandfather, Garnet St Hill, when he was in his seventies, and I was a teenager. I am now 66.

He used to perform at various concerts and shows in Barbados back in the forties. I inherited his "bones" which are made of a very dark African wood. It's a very hard wood, and very loud volume can be achieved playing them.

I play occasionally at family get togethers, after sufficient rum has relaxed my own bones and inhibition, as there is no real place that I can think of locally that would enjoy this sort of thing today. I play to tap dance music from a variety of old recordings, many of which I found online for purchase, that my grandfather used to play to. My favorite is one by Jonny Maddox. I would like to attend the next Bones Festival (2016) to share my island style with the many veterans from the US and other countries. Here is a video of me at home a few years ago (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gddf-dOH9j4>). Cheers, *Peter Sheppard*, Barbados.

## **Kenny on Tour**

The Presidents 'Own' Marine Band' was on tour in the Southeast US from September 15 to October 15 giving percussionist Kenny Wolin a chance to visit some fellow members. In Greensboro he visited Mitch Boss and Martha Cowett (and the three got some Pub stage time), and in Chattanooga, me. The band plays a variety of band and orchestra music and they are terrific. *Steve Wixson*

## **RBS Plays Part in Percy's Bones DVD**

RBS played a part in the DVD version of Percy's Bones Instructional Video. The owner, Mickie Zekley, sold Lark in the Morning, and later when he took it back he could not find the master for the Percy video. Before he sold Lark, he had given RBS a copy of the video to review for the newsletter. When asked to borrow the master, he declined noting he had loaned the master to a video editor. Being a pack rat, I saved that email and was able to return the name of that editor to Mickie resulting in the DVD version of Percy's video. Mickie gave RBS a copy of the DVD. *Steve Wixson*

## **RBP Newsletters Added To Website**

Volumes 1 through 16 of the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter are now on our website. Click the Resources tab and then Newsletter tab and finally the HERE link.

The last two years of newsletters are available only in paper form as a benefit of being a member. If you want the latest newsletters, join RBS.

The newsletter file is large and takes time to download. A benefit of being online is you can do an Adobe search (ctrl+F). There is an enormous library of information in these newsletters.

## **Bones Fest T-shirts Ball Caps For Sale**

The following ball caps and t-shirts were left over from previous Bones Fests. They are \$15 each including packaging and shipping. If you want one, use our Contact Us page to let us know. We will follow up with availability and shipping details.

BFIX (Chattanooga); several baseball caps

BFXIII (Louisville w/RBS Logo); 2 - M, 4 - L, 2 - XL

BFXIV (Alexandria); 5 - L

BFXVII (Leominster); 2 - S, 2 - M

BFXVIII (Grand Rapids); 3 - 2XL,  
1 - 3XL

## Playing The Bones In South Africa

Several months ago I traveled to Durban, South Africa for a performance with the Kwazulu Natal Philharmonic as a member of the Bernard Woma Ensemble. I've been a member of Bernard's group for many years and we regularly present Gyl xylophone music of Ghana, West Africa along with related drum, dance, and vocal traditions. In more recent years, together with composer David Rogers, Bernard and I have written two concerti for Gyl Trio and Orchestra. This past May we gave the African premiere of these compositions with the Kwazulu Natal Philharmonic. Unfortunately, the third member of our trio was unable to travel with us at the last minute and we weren't able to secure a visa in time for another musician to replace him. As a result, Bernard and I found ourselves in Durban faced with the serious challenge of covering three parts between just the two of us.

One of the extra percussion parts I needed to cover was for the aslatua, a small double shaker from Ghana. The aslatua is remarkably similar to the rhythm bones in both its playing and sound as it involves spinning two small gourds together (held in one hand) to create a crisp click. While I was able to play the composed rhythms in the concerti for the aslatua, one of the pieces also included an extended improvised aslatua solo. Given that I feel much more comfortable improvising on the bones, I suggested to Bernard the idea of taking a bones solo with the orchestra in place of the aslatua solo. We tried it at rehearsal and Bernard liked this substitution so much he decided it should be a permanent change in the music. The audience in Durban, South Africa enjoyed the rhythm bones as well. During my solo with the orchestra at City Hall I got at loud "Yaboo (yeah!)" shout-ed to me from the audience. *Mark Stone*

## Hank Remembers Jerry Mescher

When I saw Jerry and Bernie for the first time I was all excited to find out about their gigs and what music they played to. I found out that they only

performed to pre-recorded music at Bones Fests because it was the only way they could practice without being together. One lived in Iowa and the other in Miami.

Of course the Meschers, Sharon, Bernie and Jerry, did their signature THING, playing a perfectly syncopated set to recorded music with perfectly choreographed moves. Truly, a thing of joy and beauty that should be seen and appreciated by bones players for generations to come. My friend, Vgo, couldn't stop talking about how blown away he was with their performance at the Orlando Bones Fest. BUT, I saw something else in the lobby of the Rosen Hotel, Orlando Bones Fest that evening. Something that will never show up on the You Tubes and videos. For the first time, I saw Jerry playing to live unchoreographed music with someone he'd never played with before. This was truly a magical moment and when the impromptu jam was over Jerry had a funny little smile on his face. Kinda like the kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar but didn't care 'cause he got the cookies anyway!

I feel blessed to have been there to see it. I am saddened that I will never have the opportunity to join Jerry in such an endeavor. But I am honored to have known him and enjoyed his performances. *Hank Tenenbaum*

## Ernie Remembers Jerry Mescher

I met Jerry Mescher at BonesFest V, the first Bones Fest I attended. I was immediately impressed with his bones playing skills and he set the bar high for those of us just learning how to play. We quickly became friends and got to know each other over the years. We enjoyed each other's company and I was glad to get to know the Mescher family. They were fun to be around and I looked forward to seeing them whenever I was able to attend a Bones Fest.

One of the things I remembered best about Jerry was at Bones Fest V when he and his sister, Bernie, played synchronized bones. I had never seen that before so it was a treat to watch. Later his wife, Sharon, joined them and they became a trio.

Jerry and Sharon were two of the people that I looked forward to seeing when I attended Bones Fest. I will miss his precision bones playing and his smile. I will also miss his slap on the back after I played at a public performance followed by "Good job, Ernie".

I am glad I had the opportunity to know Jerry and become his friend. He was a faithful member of the Bones Society. He shared his talents, served on the Board and was always encouraging. He left big shoes to fill in by those of us left behind and he will be missed by many. *Ernie Duffy*

## News from Jim Conner

Hi all! Keep up the good bone-ing out there in this nefarious & glorious world. I shook 'em at several concerts during John Denver week in Aspen CO, October 6-12 (Jim Connor in Concert on Friday, October 9th). I pick bones a time or two in each of my concerts nowadays.

I hand over my heart in memory of having Ted Goon on my paper route in Gadsden, AL when just a kid and yet had enough sense to listen and learn direct from the master! I still have a couple sets of 'Mr Goon' bones that he gave to me, and I would not take a million bucks for one of those sets!!!

By the way, who is making the best, or most usable, style of bones these days? And are they affordable? Years ago some one told me that the nicest sound and balance are made from the shin of an Ox. I have bone bones and wood bones and all and each provide distinctive soundings and rhythms. I have some aged bone from Midwest bison, but I have not made any bison ones as yet. I'd love to hear from other 'bone' folk about their variety of bone material and styles and their interpretations of sound and feel and ease of use. My rock maple ones are rich sounding, I also regularly use some persimmon ones and cow-rib ones, occasionally. I leave my original 'TED GOON' stamped sets at home.

By the way, my composition 'Grandma's Feather Bed' (a hit by John Denver) is a good un' to do rhythm bones with... naturally! Love. *Jim Connor*

[In addition to performing on banjo

with John Denver in concert, Jim was also a member of the New Kingston Trio. Jim attended Bones Fest VIII. For information about Ted Goon, go to our website and click the Resources tab, then History and then Mr. Goon-Bones. To hear him play, click on Steve Allen Show or the three links at the bottom of the page.]

## Elderly Instruments

It started back in 1971, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Sharon McInturff and I had both finished college, and we figured that if we searched for older fretted instruments then we could probably sell them, make a little profit, and have fun doing it. The shop opened on July 5, 1972 with about 15 or 20 used instruments. We called ourselves Elderly Instruments because we planned to carry only vintage instruments.

I'm pretty sure that we first became aware of the rhythm bones in the 1970's through our old friend Percy Danforth. Elderly Instruments was in East Lansing. Percy lived in nearby Ann Arbor and was showing up at all the local folk festivals, playing the bones with just about anybody that would have him (and playing any kind of music). He was a wonderfully versatile player and a great ambassador for the bones. I was playing in the Lost World String Band so we made Percy's acquaintance pretty early on. He was having his nice bones made by a woodworker he knew and selling them wherever he went. At some point we (Elderly) approached him (or perhaps he approached us) and we worked out a deal for him to wholesale his bones to us. For many years his bones were about the only game in town. They sold very well for us and we thus helped fuel the bones revolution that was going on (and which was largely due to Percy). As time went on, more makers appeared to sell an even wider variety of bones, and we continue selling them to this day. Regards, *Stan Werbin*

[They sell Danforth, Whamdiddle and Sampson rhythm bones. Check out their website - [elderly.com](http://elderly.com).]

## House of Musical Tradition

I grew up in a home of symphony musicians. I had an interest in world music and thought it would be great to put all those unique instruments under one roof. In 1972, the House of Musical Tradition opened for business, and over the years it just expanded to what it is today ([www.hmtrad.com](http://www.hmtrad.com)).

I learned to play rhythm bones from Joe Herrmann in West Virginia. About 1977, Rick Fogel was living in the Washington, DC area making hammered dulcimers and rhythm bones from left over dulcimer wood. Some of the Celtic musicians thought that Danforth rhythm bones were too light, and preferred Rick's heavier Whamdiddle bones. I also sold triple laminate bones made by Bert Lustig.

We sold real bone rhythm bones made by Szair Bourque, and when these were no longer available found member Dave Boyles who makes *Black Bart* real bone rhythm bones.

Founding member, Deborah Brower and member Rowen Corbett have worked at HMT. Rowan was first introduced to rhythm bones while there.

I also have a background in concert production and have put on shows featuring the Carolina Chocolate Drops. In one of those early shows when Dom Flemons was in the trio, Rowan got his first stage time with them. Now he is a regular member of the CCD.

For more bones info, go to [hmtrad.com](http://hmtrad.com) and search for 'bones.' *David Eisner*

## Deborah Brower & HMT

[RBS Founding Member Deborah Brower worked for a while at the House of Musical Tradition.]

HMT not only sold instruments, but provided lessons and eventually hosted small concerts. Those concerts eventually out grew the store and became the Institute of Musical Traditions.

HMT provided invaluable support to local musicians, serving as the hub of

information on the music scene. Even providing employment for up and coming musicians who went on to become national names.

From the beginning rhythm bones players could count on HMT to have a selection of bones and instructional materials. From the old standby plastic rhythm bones, to wooden ones by Percy Danforth.

I met some fabulous bones players like Sule Greg Wislon. He and I would trade licks when we would pass each other on the street in Takoma Park. Sule Greg introduced me to rag time bones playing. That is an example of what HMT truly is, a force in the lives of many musicians that goes far beyond being a place to buy an instrument.

What most people may not know is David is an excellent rhythm bones player. *Deborah Brower*

## Andy's Front Hall

We first met Percy at The Ark in Ann Arbor, MI. Our band, Fennig's All-Stars, was playing there and Percy showed up and played with us. He said that he had gotten out his bones after hearing that Tony Barrand was playing at the Ark and he used bones for a song or two. He met Tony and his singing partner John Roberts and Percy was out and about with his bones in earnest. Our book with Percy and Sue Barber was published in 1978, so we probably met him at the Ark a year or two earlier. Actually, all this history can be found in our book. We started selling the Danforth bones back then, but we can't get a good supply of them anymore, so we dropped bones from our website. ([andysfronthall.com](http://andysfronthall.com)) *Bill & Andy Spence*

## Claude Bonang Wins

I competed in the Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent Show again which took place in Topsham, Maine on May 9th, where I was one of sixteen performances. I played my rhythm bones to a medley of "Darktown Strutter's Ball," (Continued on Page 8)



Old rhythm bones with an interesting history



New Rhythm Bones Society trifold brochure

“Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” and “Bill Bailey,” and ended up winning another Judge’s Choice Trophy. For my performance I incorporated our son Chris’ latest invention—Glowbybandz—in my attire, of which I wrapped a white one around each wrist, which went around three times, and wrapped three—one red, one white and one blue—just above the rim of a plastic straw hat that I wore. The Glowbybandz do not show up too well in the photo. I also incorporated a gray vest in my attire, which I purchased the day before.

*Claude Bonang*



# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 18, No. 1 2016

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## Executive Director's Column

Have you ever thought about how the bones have changed your life? Not to get too philosophical on you, but I think back to that day in 1978 when I started playing the bones, and look at the path that I have taken it's pretty amazing. I realize I'm probably not a good example by virtue of the fact that the effect the bones have had on my life has been truly overwhelming. Just from the outset, I have traveled all over the country, as far west as Texas, as far south as Florida, and as far North as Wisconsin, and multiple states in between. I have met the most amazing people, and made the bonds of friendship which will endure as long as I'm alive. I have been privileged to play the bones on television, radio, on records, and in video, and have reached countless people through out the country and across

the world! I have been to Ireland seven times, and each time played the bones in numerous settings, including competing in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship five times! Bone playing has enriched my life beyond my wildest expectation.

But lets take my son Jeremy, a person who has Down Syndrome, who's speech, and physical abilities are significantly impacted, who can not read, drive a car, will never get married or have children. The bones have made such an incredible impact on his life beyond that which words can express. He has made such amazing connections with people, at festivals, Bones Fests, and any time he picks up the bones. The bones (Continued on Page 3)

## Bone Dry Musical Instrument Company

This store began as a pipe dream in the summer of 2005.

That's when the idea first popped into my head. It happened while I was checking out the "Bones Marketplace" during Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I thought to myself, "Wouldn't it be great to find a place like this that sells musical bones all the time?" That's how Bone Dry Musical Instrument Company got started. So on March 31, 2007, after nearly two years of research and planning, the online shop opened its doors for business. Being the first and only professionally hosted e-commerce shop specializing in rhythm bones we instantly saturated the market.

As you can imagine, the market for rhythm bones is highly specialized and teeny-tiny. So to help keep the store afloat we added additional products that might appeal to bones players. Among the first additions were bodhran beaters (made from old fiddle bows), and vintage washboards. Then we added washboard accessories such as tin cups, cow bells, and thimbles. Today, in addition to serving bones players, we are expanding our selection of hard-to-find rhythm instruments that might interest a broader scope of traditional folkroots musicians, and jug bands.

Besides our original online store, you can find selected products on eBay, and more recently at

Amazon. We are the largest distributor for most of our main suppliers and also produce several proprietary product brands. A few product lines have expanded beyond the folkroots community. Our customers now include a fair number of vintage car enthusiasts, museums, clowns, string musicians and ballet dancers (but that's another story).

Around 20% of our sales are global. At last count, our international customers represented 62 foreign countries. (Continued on Page 3)



Scott Miller and his Website

## Editorial

This issue continues stories about rhythm bones store, and because he is a member, Scott Miller gets Page 1. Nick sent a photograph and brief story about whale rhythm bones (see Page 8). I bought my first Nick Driver shin bone rhythm bones from Hobgoblin.

You can now register for Bones Fest XX. Many will remember Bones Fest X hosted by Jonathan and Melissa Danforth with the great group photograph at the Whaling Museum. We had our largest registration at the Fest and a large turn out for the Saturday night public performance. Bones Fest XX is a milestone and will be another great Fest. Hope to see you there.

I met Ramblin' Jack Elliott at the Woody Guthrie Center while attending a high school reunion in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Turned out that weekend was the Grand Opening of the center and the reason that Jack was there. Jack told me that he and Woody played together toward the end of Woody's career. He doesn't have much to say about Woody's rhythm bones playing, but documents that Woody played them occasional on stage.

I don't know if you can tell from this newsletter, but it is getting harder to find content. I invite you to submit articles, and remember that while this is a small newsletter it is housed and cataloged by the Library of Congress making stories available to future researchers.

There are a few subjects where I would love some help. I found a reference that said someone in the Will Maston Trio played rhythm bones, and that trio included Will Maston, Sammy Davis and a young Sammy Davis, Jr. We've also not had much on Civil War rhythm bones and minstrel rhythm bones players.

In Vol 8, No 1 Page 6 (newsletters are online, click Resources Tab) there is a story about EJ Jensen being the 1927 'Rattlebones Champ of the World.' The contest was in Seattle, and the Seattle Public Library did not have anything about the contest and if there is anything in old newspapers someone would have to search through microfilmed newsletters from 1927. It might lead to other rhythm bones player stories.

## Mel Mercier Appointed Chair at Irish World

Musician, composer and academic joins UL from UCC, where he was Head of School of Music and Theatre.

The University of Limerick has announced the appointment of Professor Mel Mercier as Chair of Performing Arts at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance.

Mercier, originally from Dublin, completed a BMus at University College Cork in 1989, and a Master of Fine Arts in World Music at the California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles, in 1991. He was awarded a PhD from the University of Limerick in 2011.

From 1992 to 2016, he was a member of the Music Department at UCC. He was appointed as the first Head of School of Music and Theatre there in 2009 and promoted to Professor in 2015.

Commenting on his appointment, Mercier said:

I am inspired by the Academy's commitment to artistic practice and its progressive approach to education in the performing arts, and I am very much looking forward to working with its students and staff as it develops its artistic and educational vision into the future.

A renowned performer on bodhrán and other percussion instruments, Mercier has performed, recorded and collaborated with Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin and many other musicians. Throughout the 1980s he performed in Europe and the USA with John Cage and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He is also director of the Cork Gamelan Ensemble, which released its debut album *The Three Forges* in 2015.

In 2012, Mercier was nominated for a Tony Award for his score for the Broadway production of Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*. He is currently working on several projects, including co-devising a new play with writer Pat McCabe and director Pat Kiernan for the 1916 Centenary.

Dr Sandra Joyce, Director of the Irish World Academy, said:

Mel's formidable reputation as a performer, composer and academic resonates deeply with the ethos and

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

vision of the Academy and he will undoubtedly bring great energy to the role. We are looking forward to the development of new pathways and collaborations according to his many and diverse interests. [First published in *The Journal of Music*. [journalofmusic.com](http://journalofmusic.com)]



(Continued from Page 1)

It was back in 1843 that Dan Emmett and the Virginia Minstrels (the group that started the blackface minstrel craze) brought the banjo and two-handed bone playing to England, Scotland, and Ireland - in that order. The minstrel craze soon spread to virtually all English-speaking countries. So not surprisingly, the vast majority of our international orders come from Canada, the UK, Ireland, and Australia.

Our online store might look big and fancy, but we are just a small home-based business. The inventory is warehoused on shelves in the hallway by the front door and also down in the basement. Also downstairs is the workshop. Upstairs is the photo studio and additional storage. Ironically, the shop has grown to a point where I am buried under a mountain of administrative tasks and can no longer get much "real" work done. (Career Opportunity Alert: Are you an ambitious copywriter with art & design skills and enough entrepreneurial drive to handle the reins of a small but growing e-commerce rhythm instrument business? Then drop me a note explaining why the heck you want to market rhythm instruments to folkroots musicians and jug bands.)

The best way to buy musical instruments is to try them first-hand. But in the world of musical bones that is rarely possible. So the prime goal of this online store is to make your shopping experience the next best thing to being there. We do our best to create product pages with ample photos and helpful information. And we are probably the one and only shop that makes a special effort to closely match pairs (and sets) of bones from our inventory. Our greatest challenge is to eliminate any surprises when you open the box. The store won't always succeed in that effort. But it does strive to reach that goal. As customers on our Live Testimonials page suggest, we have managed to achieve some success at providing the most satisfying musical bones shopping experience anyone can offer.

We love serving the world community of bone players and hope you will visit our little online shop soon. If I can answer any questions for you, just give me a holler. *Scott Miller* [bonedrymusic.com](http://bonedrymusic.com)

## Editorial (Continued)

have increased his self confidence, self worth, and given him a place where he truly performs! And he glows when he plays, and impacts so many people we could not began to count. So bone playing has enriched his life beyond our wildest expectation! So I ask you, How have the bones changed your life?

Ah, the high Holidays of Irish music are upon us, and a very Happy St. Patricks Day to you! And in that vein, did you ever think about going to Ireland? Well the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship will be held on the May Bank Holiday Weekend, this year being April 29th to May 2nd. It is without a doubt the best, most comprehensive bone playing contest in existence today (have to admit my biased here too!), the week end it's self has so much to see and do from the Busking competition on Friday night, to the Celebrity concert on Sunday, and many pub sessions in between. If you have an interest in Irish music, there's none better!

This year the New England Folk Festival will be held in Mansfield, Mass the week end of April 15th to the 17th, and is a real participatory festival, with dance and opportunities to play for all. I'll be doing a bone playing workshop on Saturday, and would love to see you. And yes Jeremy will be there, exhibiting his most amazing smile! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XX Preliminary Information

Bones Fest XX will take place in the central New York village of Homer on August 4-7, 2016. Homer is a small town that abuts the city line of Cortland a city of about twenty thousand. The venue for the Fest will be the Homer Center for the Arts. Housed in an old brick church building constructed in the 1890s. They have a 400 seat theater and a large meeting room which we will use for most gatherings. We will stay in Cortland at the Ramada Inn located just off Interstate 81. The closest airports are Syracuse (30 miles) or Ithaca (20 miles). A full breakfast is included in the \$89 per night

cost of the rooms. Friday we will have supper at the Center for the Arts and a casual show for our own entertainment. Our Saturday night show will be billed as a fund raiser for the Arts Center ([www.center4art.org](http://www.center4art.org)). Saturday before the show we will have a supper at the Homer Elks Club. Central NY's Finger Lakes country is a great place to vacation, Cayuga Lake near Ithaca and Cornell has 25 wineries and many microbreweries all around the lake. Greek Peak Adventure Center is nearby plus several museums etc. *Gerry Hines*

# BONES FEST

# XX



**August 4-7, 2016**

**Homer, NY**

**Gerry Hines, Host**

Registration and Preliminary Information  
in this newsletter

# Ted 'Darkie' Duckett

## New Forest Bones Player and Step Dancer

This photograph, taken during the late 1950s or early 1960s at the Bold Forester at Marchwood, is of the late and gifted New Forest bones player and step-dancer Ted 'Darkie' Duckett, who lived for a large part of his life a mile or so away at Hanger Corner on the Beaulieu Road. Although well known locally, he came as a young man from Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire, and married the daughter of Bert Doe, who had served in the cavalry compound at Denney Lodge before the widespread rehousing of all New Forest Gypsies in the new housing estates built at Hythe, Thorney Hill and Totton after the Second World War.



His lifelong ambition to perform on a London stage was not fulfilled until late in life, when he represented the Hampshire tradition at an annual National Gathering of the English Folk Song and Dance Society at their London headquarters. Prior to this he had appeared on BBC South television and at festivals and concerts, including Bournemouth Winter Gardens and Southampton Nuffield theatres, where - as always - he stole the show. He was also featured on the Forest Tracks record *First Tracks*, and in a BBC documentary on the Christchurch Folk Festival, where his great skill as a bones player is preserved.

Ted had been a Mummer in his youth, playing the role of Happy Jack, and as a dancer and bones player had often taken part in competitions, and 'never been beat'. He died after his wife at Netley View, Hythe, and is succeeded by his daughters.

Some memories by Dave Williams

### First Meetings

Although I had gone to school with his children, Joe and Ivy, and knew of Ted by reputation, I first met him at a family party of my childhood friends the Surplice family of Marchwood. Ted had been invited by the father, Vince, who was a great champion of the common man and community life, sometime Labour Parish Councillor, regular campaigner for and supporter of Labour attempts to gain New Forest seats, and onetime Welterweight champion of the Army, in which he had served as a farrier during the Great War. Surplice family parties were really quite exciting, as I remember them: lots of physical and boisterous games like 'The Queen of Sheba', 'Nelson's Eye', and the like, eccentric diversions such as hypnotising the chickens (yes really, and - rest assured - without harm!), feats of derring-do on big swings off trees in the garden in the names of famous motorcycles (all five sons and Vince had them at one time), and occasionally diving through open ground floor windows to practice newly learned judo rolls!

Ted was well able to acquit himself in such company despite his small stature, and as well as dancing and playing the bones, displayed the odd feats of strength like lifting large men off the ground with his teeth, using a scarf round their waists! In this exhilarating company a young lad like me from a comparatively sheltered environment could not help but be suitably impressed!

Early Musical Days - "I ain't never been beat!"

My real awareness of Ted's great musical skills came during the mid-1950s when, with Vic Wilton and other friends, I used to play music every Thursday at the Bold Forester. On occasion, we would be joined by the man who, in retrospect, provided a somewhat eccentric percussion element to our then principally American fare. All this was to change with the invasion of the village by a great number of men in blue pinstripe suits who had come to build the SEB power station, and one evening as we played in one room of the pub, we heard music coming from another which was thereafter to turn our heads. It was played by McAlpine's ganger on the site, the late Peter 'Paddy' Keane of Ennis,

on anglo concertina, who, with Michael Morrisroe (originally from Roscommon and now Langley) on concert flute and others, who played there regularly until the project was complete.

Ted was in his element here, especially when any of the number chose to dance a step or two. Not for Ted the restrained wait until the other had finished, but a tap on the dancer's shoulder, a pointed finger in the direction of his own feet as if to say "Like this!", and he was on his way to victory, even in his Wellington boots! For Ted the dance and any performance was very much a competition in which he could and did prove himself best, and as old age and infirmity overtook him, it had a noticeably quieting effect on his normally confident self.

The Bones Championship - "I had him on the doubling"

On one occasion a bones competition was organised in a Southampton Jazz Club at the Portswood Hotel, between Ted and Len Danks, a Southampton teacher who was really not a bad player. On the evening of the event, the Bold Forester's coachload of supporters came into town with Ted, descended the stairs into the murky depths to witness the contest, drink town beer and cheer on their man. Lots were drawn, Len went first and chose to play Whistling Rufus, accompanied by Southampton policeman Pete Beasley on piano. Len was flash enough to whistle at the same time, which drew cries from the Duckett camp of "Play fair! Play the bones straight! No whistling!" and other demands felt necessary at the time. But, as it transpired, without need: Ted stepped up in his turn, asked the pianist to "Play any music, Sir", and to Maple Leaf Rag proceeded to play like a man possessed, with all the breaks in place as if personally schooled by Scott Joplin. He won hands down (or, more appropriately, 'hands up'!)

Ted's success was self-endorsed and proclaimed with a proud and confident "I had him on the doubling!", which was and will be indelibly engraved forever in all our memories.

BBC - Bob Wellings and "the varnish off the ship's bottom".

There are many stories which have been ascribed to Ted, few I suspect being true, but there is one I remember hearing



from 'the horse's mouth', and the occasion of its telling. Ted had agreed to take part in an early BBC South TV programme, in which he was to talk about playing the bones and dancing and play to my accompaniment. Bob Wellings was the interviewer, and having run through a series of questions with Ted, including one which was to trigger him to 'look at the camera with the red light on and play', the programme rolled into action. At the appointed time and cool as you like, Ted leant over to Bob on camera and said, "Here, what camera was it you said I had to look at?" That was a real test for the whole studio on its first night of 'professional' action, and there were lots of sweaty palms to prove it!

That wasn't the only line to floor Bob during this baptism of fire. He asked why the bones were black and, having told him they were made of whales teeth, Ted quietly and with steely eye added, "it was the varnish off the ship's bottom, Sir!" I confess I loved every minute of it!

Mummers - "too much acting"

The late Eric Jones-Evans was a local doctor who divided his time between matters medical and being a well-known character actor. He also wrote for the Hampshire Magazine and had documented the East Boldre Mummers play he had seen in the mid-1920s at the Royal Oak at Hill Top. This was to become the vehicle for a rival team, which on a couple of occasions featured the good doctor himself and Ted in his original boyhood role of Happy (Little Johnny) Jack.

Ted's own play was very interesting in that it had no action at all, but merely a sequence of introductory lines from each character who then 'did a turn'. By comparison, although not as heavily laden as some, the East Boldre play does have a little verbal and physical interplay. Ted was never impressed by this - he always said there was "too much acting" and if we were to "get the hat round and visit other places" we'd have to cut it out!

The Winter Gardens and Nuffield Theatre - knowing one's place!

Bournemouth's 'Sinnermen and Sara', enjoyed a considerable wave of local popularity which led them at their height to stage a concert at the Bournemouth Winter Gardens. [Dave Williams' original article stated that the 'Sinnermen and Sara' modelled themselves on the

Settlers / Seekers style groups then popular on the folk scene. However, Annie Christopher, alias Sara, tells me that 'We were considered to be MGM's answer to the Seekers and our style had been set long before we hit the fame trail. The Seekers actually lived and worked from Bournemouth for a while, which was our home base. We had been firmly established in our own style before they ever arrived' - Ed.] Being of fairly broad outlook, they asked me, as compere, if I could recommend any suitable supporting and contrasting performers for the evening. I suggested a couple of then very young and charismatic Morris dancers, Geoff Jerram and Robin Plowman, and Ted Duckett accompanied by George Skipper on piano accordion. Past experience had told me that Ted would 'rise to the occasion' and this he did with a vengeance. His performance, enhanced by his usual show of sartorial elegance, took the audience by storm and he relished every minute of the applause. The killer came when the promoter gave me instructions for the 'planned encore' - Ted and the others were to come on at either end of the stage for their bows, the centre stage position reserved for the principals of the show, but this was not for Ted, who strode to the centre front, both hands and sets of bones raised in triumph to the biggest round of applause of the night!

He had shown very similar style at an earlier concert by Rory McEwen at Southampton's Nuffield Theatre, at which Ted shared a supporting spot with Peter Roud, a colourful harmonica player from Romsey. Both looked at one time as though the only thing to remove them would be a big hook! I have found this kind of upstaging of stars by unknowns to be rarely enjoyed by promoters, and suspect this was no exception, but it was clearly enjoyed by Rory and the audience as well as the performers in question!

On another occasion, Mike Seeger and Alice Gerrard were guests at a local concert for which Ted was again providing support. When the finale arrived, Mike graciously gave him prominence - an honest, reasonable and gentlemanly gesture.

Latter years - 'the glittery'

Toward the end of his life, and following the death of his wife, Ted suffered

from poor health, including, I suspect, chest and heart problems, compounded by rapidly failing eyesight, this giving him what he called 'the glittery'. This proved not to be good for performances where stage or other lighting could aggravate the situation. This was the case in a couple of his last public appearances, which were nonetheless high points to him. He represented Hampshire at the EFDSS National Gathering in London accompanied by George Skipper, who commented that Ted had played very well as always, but had sadly, and due to 'the glittery', walked into a lamppost outside, which shook him up a little.

The BBC television lighting for the Christchurch Folk Festival, at which Ted later played, accompanied by the High Level Ranters, must have proved equally trying, but he triumphed over it as one would expect.

One flash of the 'old' Ted was for me the highlight of that or the previous festival, and is something I will always remember as typical of him, even though he was not well. He was the special guest at a Reading Clog Dancer's workshop on New Forest step dancing, at which, having declined to dance due to ill health, he was to comment on the dancing of another dancer providing examples of his style of stepping. The lot fell to Ian Dunmur, who no sooner had started to dance than Ted walked to the centre of the floor and, with that characteristic style, pointed to his own feet as if to say, as I had seen so many times in the past, "Like this!", or, more likely, "Pick the bones out of that one!"

All those that were privileged to see and hear him, be it in home, pub, club, festival or theatre, can honestly say that they had been party to something special. I certainly was, and was always at great pains to tell others what they had missed! Tales of learning the "seven Lancashire steps", dancing on a 12 inch board in competitions against other dancers "put up" by other communities of "my people", the almost unfulfilled promise made in his youth of dancing "on the stage in London", and the knowing look and twinkling eyes as he either broke into a dance or played the bones, two and four in hand, without flaw but with ever more complex rhythms. I treasure them all. I eternally live (Continued on Page 6)

(Continue from previous page)  
in hope, but doubt if we shall ever see  
his like again. *Dave Williams* Musical  
Traditions Internet Magazine, August 15,  
1997,

## El Watson—Present at the Beginning

In Bristol TN/VA there is a museum  
which bills itself as “The Birthplace of  
Country Music”. It’s claim to that billing  
resides in the fact that, in 1927 and 1928,  
the producer Ralph S. Peer, working for  
the Victor Talking Machine Company,  
held a series of sessions to capture South-  
ern Appalachian music and its makers  
in the Tri-Cities area (Bristol—John-  
son City, TN—Kingsport, TN). These  
became known as “The Bristol Sessions”  
and served to introduce several soon-to-  
be famous country stars—among them:  
The Carter Family (Maybelle, Sara and  
A.P. Carter), Jimmie Rodgers (The Sing-  
ing Brakeman}, Ernest Stoneman (The  
Stoneman Family), and many others. In  
all about 142 recordings (of which 116  
were issued) were made over those two  
years.

One of these music makers was El  
Watson (Mr. El). He was a bones, har-  
monica and guitar player and the only  
African American involved in both the  
1927 and 1928 sessions. As noted in “The  
Bristol Sessions, The Big Bang of Coun-  
try Music” (the book which accompanies  
the 5 CD album) very little is known  
about him. He is the featured artist and  
composer on two songs: Narrow Gauge  
Blues (a train imitation on the harmon-  
ica) and Pot Licker Blues (harmonica  
and guitar). He also recorded with The  
Johnson Brothers—former vaudeville  
musicians—on at least four other songs:  
A Passing Policeman (bones), I Want To  
See My Mother (Ten Thousand Miles  
Away) (bones), Two Brothers Are We  
(bones) and The Soldier’s Poor Little  
Boy (harmonica). Two other African  
American musicians—Steven Tarter and  
Harry Gay (banjo, mandolin and guitar)  
recorded in the 1928 sessions.

Mr El went on to record for Victor  
and Columbia records in both Johnson  
City and New York. The Discography of  
American Historical Recordings ([http://  
adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/talent/in-  
dex](http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/talent/index)) lists several other songs attributed to

him: Bay Rum Blues (arranger, harmon-  
ica and bones), Sweet Bunch of Daisies  
(arranger, harmonica and bones) and One  
Sock Blues (composer, harmonica and  
bones). All were recorded in 1928.

All of the Bristol Session songs can  
be heard at The Birthplace of Coun-  
try Music Museum (an affiliate of the  
Smithsonian Institution). There is an  
interactive exhibit where nearly all of  
the 142 recordings can be audited over  
earphones along with accompanying text  
and information on the musicians, the  
recording and release dates (if known),  
photographs (if available) and discus-  
sion of the cultural backgrounds of the  
performers. There are some very well  
done exhibits as well including a note  
about bones as a percussive instrument  
together with a copy of William Sidney  
Mount’s lithograph—The Bone Play-  
er— a detail of which is close to that of  
the Rhythm Bones Society’s logo. The  
museum is well worth a visit for anyone  
interested in early country music as well  
as to note that a bones player was part of  
this birth. *Stan Von Hagen*

I have found two more You Tube re-  
cordings of El Watson playing bones.

The Johnson Barothers “A Passing  
Policeman” ([https://www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=sqoDgIUo-2o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqoDgIUo-2o)) and

“I Want To See My Mother”  
([https://www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=MgRqh4SRs8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgRqh4SRs8s)).

## Woody Guthrie Played Rhythm Bones

[Editor’s note: the following is a tran-  
scription of a telephone conversation.]

“Woody Guthrie played rhythm bones  
with me on stage sometimes toward the  
end of his career during the years 1951 to  
1953. I was performing with my guitar in  
Marin county, jut north of San Francisco,  
and we were playing some of Woody’s  
favorite songs. One of them was one he  
sang and played on the mandolin - Whis-  
tlin’ Rufus [Jack sang it without words]. I  
was in my late teens at that time. Woody  
was slowing down as he was getting sick.

“I don’t know if there are any tapes as  
he had a Webster/Chicago (Webco) tape  
recorder and recorded a lot of stuff when  
we played music together in the morn-

ings.

“I can’t remember what kind of bones  
he played, but he played two-handed. I  
never learned to play the bones.

“There was a guy out here in Califor-  
nia, Artis the Spoonman, who I remem-  
ber fondly and he would sometimes walk  
up and play a song with me. That was  
probably 30 years ago.” *Rambling Jack  
Elliott*

[To hear Jack play, watch .youtube.  
com/watch?v=X-5IDAK5\_9Q or search

## We Have Always Sung

The bells of ancient temples sound

In my wide eyed dreaming

Runes

Chants

Rhythm

Bones struck

Keeping time through the ages

Twisting the words into patterns

That have existed

Before the first wailing man-child

E’re drew breath

The eternal stars

Notes on black velvet sheets

I draw the sound of light

With each sleeping breath

And expell it

In measured stanzas

Of dreams

Of chords

And rhythms

Of burning

Hopeful

Life

By Ellenodale, Seeker Magazine,  
Vol. 3, Issue 5, May 1997. Reprinted  
with permission and with this postscript.

“When I was writing the poem, I was  
imagining the birth of music, and the  
subsequent use of rhythm in poetry...how  
it must have been taken from the natural  
world. To me, both music and poetry  
are ways to express our lives. Bones  
made sense to me as a metaphor of both  
life and the natural world. To use them  
to express rhythms for the first songs/  
poems simply seemed right.”

## Fun With Ernie

Ernie Duffy approached me one day to ask if I would like to play bones with him at a local inn. It would be a one-hour session, bones and canned music, nothing else. We would be in close quarters with about one or two dozen VIP guests, not as back ground music, but as a point of focus, a show.

Stop and think about the situation for a minute, small room, 18ish people, adults, who don't know what the bones are. One entire hour made up of 3 minute songs with bones playing along. No gags, no smoke or lights. Nothing but bones, myself and Ernie. Seemed like a recipe for disappointed guests to me. Most people like a bones song or two. A few minutes, then the novelty will wear off for 95% of people and you might be left with a couple people who are genuinely interested and want to see more.

Of course I happily agreed to join Ernie, confident that if there was a path to success he would find it. Most of my thoughts caught up in the fact that there was no such path. We arrived at the inn around 6pm. We were introduced as the entertainers for the night. If I recall correctly we were then treated to enjoy dinner with the rest of the guests. I remember it being amazing food.

Then dinner was over. I was doubtful of our success. This was a mistake on my part. For the first fifteen minutes Ernie stood up front, by himself, explaining what the bones were, where they came from, who we were, how we learned, why we play, I was in awe. It was like he wasn't talking about us, he made us and our instrument sound so cool.

Then it was on to some playing, I don't remember what we played first, I just remember the crowd loved it. Well after that first song the questions came on like a flood, how do you do that? Why do you hold them that way? Why do you two sound different? Ernie then spent the next fifteen minutes giving an in depth explanation for each question, all eyes and ears were on Ernie. A crowd of adults, acting like a room full of children, their questions seemed to never end, and they found satisfaction in every new piece of information.

While Ernie was doing all of this I was canvassing the room showing people how to hold the bones and passing pairs around. Well finally the crowd seemed satisfied enough to let us play another song, bear in mind at this point we are about thirty-five minutes into a sixty minute "show" and we've played one song. After that we settled into a pretty regular routine. We'd play a song then Ernie would tell some fantastic tale of our adventures at bones Fests or some other music festival we might have played, making everybody wish they too could play the bones, if at least to share in our crusades.



All of this went on just as gracefully as could be, Ernie taking questions unless they were directed to me, Ernie and I playing songs together, sometimes solo. Ernie and I were having the time of our lives, as Spike Bones will tell you, "bones players LOVE attention." But like all performances ours to had to end, and it did. Almost three hours after it had begun!

I sometimes wish people would ask me what the most impressive piece of bones playing I had ever seen was. Because for me the answer is simple and fun to recount. It was Ernie Duffy playing at the Inn on Golden Pond, where he had an audience of adults wide eyed and glued to their seats in a small room for three hours, using nothing but an Ipod, rhythm bones and a few stories.

To some the bones are viewed as a two-minute parlor novelty. That of course is sad to me. To some the bones are viewed as a sit in the back and try to not be heard accompaniment instrument.

That is important but it still does not speak to their whole potential. When I think of how far the bones can go and what the upper limits of their popularity can and could be I think of Ernie Duffy

. Ernie invested in my early playing to an extreme amount, bringing me with him to most every bones gig he went to for more than a decade. And then to see him perform like that, clean yet fancy and robust playing style combined with a stage presence that puts people at ease and invites questions and comments. It all makes me realize how lucky I am to have someone who cares so much and does so much as a friend and mentor.

If you need help or inspiration in regards to spreading the bones gospel be sure to take a few pages from the book of Duffy. *Sky Bartlett*

## Letter to the Editor

I believe I've created a small technique that incorporated within my style of playing the bones, If I am the first creator of this "small" technique, can you help me put a name to it and make it official that I am the creator of the technique, Go to [rhythmbones.org/video/DonroMaddocksLick.mp4](http://rhythmbones.org/video/DonroMaddocksLick.mp4) to see this lick. *Gordon Maddocks, Bristol, England*

[Editor note. Donro's lick looks like he is using a spoon technique with rhythm bones. I wonder if other spoon licks would work with rhythm bones. Kenny Wolin has done some related licks.]

## Bones Fest XX Registration Open

You can register for Bones Fest XX by going to our website and clicking the News box or the Current Tab and then Next Bones Fest. It will also be announced in the monthly email. A Registration Form will be attached to the April RBS email. You can pay by check, but please send in this form even if you pay by Paypal as the form contains information that our Host can use to finalize the program.



## Nick Driver on Whale Rhythm Bones

I hope this ticks your bones...a picture of the early whale bone that must date from the mid 19th century. Whale bone is unique as a material for bones playing as it has a natural cellular structure which makes them lighter than cow shin bone and also means they have a more

hollow sound. It is the perfect materials and when whale products were used for so many things during the whaling times, a common materials choice for rhythm bones. I have, though, only seen one small pair made from whale bone other than these. Such things seldom survive. Best wishes, *Nick Driver* [For a story about Nick, search the online newsletter on our website.]

I had a visit from Sky Bartlett as he was on a Wild West tour. He met me in Tombstone and played with the Silver King Minstrels for the afternoon. We had a great time of it. He stayed overnight with us and I took him on a Jeep tour of the mountains. I have enclosed a picture of Sky, Johnny Bones and me, 3 bones players on the streets of Tombstone.  
*Gerry Hines*

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 18, No. 2 2016

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## Executive Director's Column

I had an interesting experience a few weeks back, I judged the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship. This was not the first time I had judged a bone playing competition, but it was the first time I had judged a contest for adults. It was the first time I was judging people who I considered to be friends. A complete report will be in a forth coming edition of the Newsletter, but suffice it to say that I never realized how difficult this would be.

Out of the five times I competed in this contest, four of the judges I considered to be personal friends of mine. It's getting increasingly more difficult in this communication age to find judges, and perhaps competitors, in the circles of our little instrument, that don't know each other. Perhaps that's the way it is in any contest where the participants are engaged

in a some what eccentric activity, and where we naturally seek each other out.

I have always thought of myself as, Skeff Flynn has coined, a "bones ambassador" who encourages and cheers each and every bone player regardless of their experience and level of expertise, but now I found my self where my words and actions could be misinterpreted as unduly supporting one contestant over the other.

I've been somewhat critical of the Bones and Spoons Competition held in Iowa each year, and their method for selecting Judges. I could never understand why they didn't select Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, or someone of the caliber of Donnie DeCamp as a Judge who were right in their midst. But (Continued on Page 2)

## Percy Danforth Remembered

My granddad was Percy Danforth who a lot of people know as a teacher or they've seen his rhythm bones instructional video. He taught me when I was a little kid maybe four or five or so. I really never did much with them then, but I could do the clack and the triplet. Most folks in my family didn't do a lot with them as it was granddad's thing and we were real proud of him actually.

Percy was called a national treasure by the Library of Congress and the Folklife Archive recorded him for posterity. As for me, now playing rhythm bones, I see him as a person, rhythm bones player, teacher, performer, rhythm bones maker, rhythm bones seller and as a legend.

This article is supported with a Portfolio of Percy memorabilia including, photographs, documents, videos, and sound recordings. It is online at our Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) website ([rhythm-bones.org/PercyDanforthIndex.html](http://rhythm-bones.org/PercyDanforthIndex.html)) and hopefully it will available for many years. An electronic copy was sent to the Library of Congress for future historians.

### Percy the Person

Percy Owen Danforth was born in Grand Forks, North Dakota on March 11, 1900 to my greatgrandparents, Louis E and Marian B Danforth, and he died in Ann Arbor on June 10, 1992. In the summer of 1908, the family moved to Washington DC. In

1918, Percy moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan to attend the University of Michigan (UM) to study architecture. In 1929, he moved to Monroe, Michigan and worked as an architect until the Great Depression came along and people stopped building buildings. Since he was also a skilled artist, he then developed an art program for the Monroe Elementary schools and continued teaching until 1939 (Continued on Page 4)



Still photograph extracted from Percy's Instructional Video (courtesy of Lark In The Morning)

## Editorial

Percy Danforth is one of the most important people in the history of rhythm bones. 17 years ago when our first article appeared about him (Vol 2, No 1), maybe half of our members had a personal contact with him or learned to play rhythm bones from one of Percy's instructional materials. Percy's grandson, Jonathan, remembers his grandfather in a more comprehensive article starting on Page 1.

Gerry Hines, our host, has an update on this year's historic Bones Fest XX. I am practicing regularly so I can maybe do something I haven't done in previous Bones Fests. Can't wait to show you, and hope you've something new to show me and the others.

Check out my music magic story on the next page.

## Letters to the Editor

Percy had a combination of skill, a unique look and an educated confidence that made him legendary to many. He would try to play to ANTHING whether he was in over his head or not. That risk taking, in some way, is part of playing the bones in public. Has anyone mentioned the Dave Letterman clips of Percy? He would show a clip from Percy's instructional video for just a few seconds just to get a laugh. *Bill Vits*

Well my recollection about Percy to begin with was how totally unique he was. At that time I had no frame of reference for which to judge bone playing. I had heard the bones played on records but never seen anyone play them. He was totally over whelming in that regard. I think for many people they did not have any context of bone playing to judge Percy, he was it. And what he did was so amazing to watch, it was amazing to hear. My first night I met him, a number of folks came to see him and it was like disciples visiting a guru. They streamed into the restaurant to have an audience with the master. Percy was the consummate teacher, he never got tired of teaching or answering questions. Much of the beginner workshop I teach today came directly from the time I spent with him. *Steve Brown*

## Editorial (Continued)

one thing I will give them credit for, in my experience, you have no idea who the judges are. Two things became apparent during my experience, one was to hyper focus on each performance on that stage, and not to allow any factor other than what occurred there come in to play. The other was a reliance on my opinion, as in that moment, that is what mattered the most. After the contest, some contestants were happy, some were not, but all were willing to accept the results. The experience does make me reflect on the importance of contests, and whether they are "healthy" for the growth of our instrument. It makes me glad that the focus of Bones Fest has always been the unconditional love and support of the players who attend. But as someone who has both basked in the glory of winning, and cringed in the despair of defeat, I wouldn't trade either experience.

Speaking of Bones Fest, Bones Fest XX is literally around the corner. Gerry Hines has done an amazing job organizing the Fest which promises to be one of the best! We are in New York for the first time in a easily accessible area with lots to take advantage of. Jeremy is already gearing up, and I'm hoping to see all of you there! May your bones be with you! *Steve Brown*

## Bernie Mescher Worrell Receives Achievement Award

In July of 2015, Bernie received a call from Bob Everhart telling her that she would be presented a Life Time Achievement Award at the 40th National Traditional Country Music Association (NTCMA) Festival in Le Mars, IA. When Bob presented the award he said: "It is our sincerest desire, Bernie, that you carry on this incredible family tradition that is as amazing as it is". As she received the award, Bernie said: "I accept this award in memory of my Father who created this Bones playing tradition and my brother who did so much to enhance and continue it. I am

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

thankful for this award and the gift of the bones I have been given".

Bernie has felt especially close to her Father ever since she felt that he was in the room with her, telling her to go to the bookcase and pick up the bones. His inspiration got her to try the bones one more time – she was amazed as she was able to roll them for the first time. She appreciates that her brother was willing to make videos, work with her to perfect her bones playing, and encourage her to come to the NTCMA festivals in Iowa. She remembers, with great fondness, the times she and Jerry performed together to continue the Mescher Bones tradition. Bernie is also especially grateful to Mel Mercier for writing his PHD Thesis on the Mescher Bones; creating a legacy that will stand forever. As she plays at festivals, dances and places like Alabama Jacks in the Florida Keys, Bernie will always feel the presence of her Dad Albert and her brother Jerry; she hopes that



her sister in law, Sharon will join her in continuing the Mescher Bones tradition.  
Tom Worrell

## Bear On The Square

The complete name of this festival is *Bear On The Square Mountain Festival*, and this was its 20th year. I have attended a few times, but not for several years. There is a formal program, but many go just for the informal jamming (see [bearonthesquare.org](http://bearonthesquare.org)). There are hundreds of musicians and I counted 15 to 20 circles of players with a few who seem to stay and others that travel from one circle to the next. Since I am not in a band, I wear myself out playing all weekend.

The first time I attended I was invited to play with the Mars Hill Porch Pickers led by Dickson Lester, and in subsequent festivals I am invited back. The photograph on Page 8 shows Dickson to the right of the bass fiddle with a collection of musicians not all from his band.

My highlight of the weekend was not with him. Have you heard *Ten Feet Off The Ground* from the relatively unknown Disney film *The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band*. Here are a few lyrics; "When everybody puts their heart in it. Everybody plays a part in it. That's how music magic is made." Since I am just a pretty good amateur musician, I don't get many opportunities for music magic. That is when whatever you are doing is really working. In basketball, it

would be a low percentage shooter who hits 3 three pointers in a row.

I played three songs in a small circle group and was moving on when I heard the guitar player start to play a song. I got my Jerry Mescher *Ebony bones* (the ones that RBS with the help of Sharon Mescher gave me at last year's Bones Fest), turned around and faced the guy. He was really good playing melody and accompaniment to a fairly slow version of *Summertime*. Jerry's heavy bones were working for me on this slow music and I felt music magic. Don't know if he felt it, but there were a couple of places where he could have stopped playing, but did not. Sunday morning I found out he was a Festival Director, and I bet he has a new appreciation of rhythm bones.  
Steve Wixson

## Bones Fest XX Update

All elements of the Bonesfest are coming together. The hotel breakfast has been sampled and approved (I staggered out after too much sampling). While at the hotel this week I checked and we already have several people with reservations.

The Director of the Arts Center is excited to have us coming to rattle the halls. The Saturday show is going to be advertised by them as well as us with posters, local music blogs and anybody else I can hold down long enough to tell them about it. The director of the day camp and his staff are looking forward to us teaching the kids. The theme "Clone Dem Bones" will hopefully come to pass between the kid's camp and the open to the public beginner's bones class at the center.

The tee shirt graphics are done and at the shop waiting for our order. My next week's meetings are with the Elks about food and senior living directors about performances on that Friday afternoon. I am hoping we have a large turnout so we can really present the rhythm bones to Central New York.

Our live band to the weekend "Metku" a Finnish name picked because it is one of the few names people can pronounce. They are friends of mine from a jam I

have been attending for four years. They will have a list of tunes and probably can play most anything you request.

Central New York is a beautiful place to vacation, rolling hills, the Finger Lakes, lots of shopping for the ladies. So come early or stay late and enjoy the sights.

Get your reservations in and let's make this the best 20 year celebration we can, as we remember all those founding members of the RBS that envisioned carrying bones playing into the future. *Gerry Hines*

# BONES FEST

# XX



**August 4-7, 2016**

**Homer, NY**

**Gerry Hines, Host**

**Registration and Update**

**Information**

**in this newsletter**

(Continued from Page 1)



Photograph courtesy of Doug Danforth

when he returned to Ann Arbor.

In 1941, Percy returned to the university to obtain a doctoral degree in art education, but he did not get to complete it because he was drafted into the Army. During the war he worked in a bomber plant, and afterwards at Bendix Corporation supervising mechanical engineers. In 1968, he helped launch Balance Technology, and worked in sales, engineering and as personnel manager.

In 1926, he worked up the courage and asked my grandmother, Frances Adams, for a date, and he was flabbergasted when she accepted. They went to a dance and he knew after dancing 3 steps she was the one, and life would be different after that. On April 14, 1927 they were married.

Fran grew up surrounded by music, and at age of 18 she went to New York to study piano and composition. The next year she enrolled at UM to continue her musical education. This love of music would be important when Percy took up playing rhythm bones seriously. Fran also kept Percy organized.

He called himself 'Pers' pronounced as 'purse.'

### **Percy the Rhythm Bones Player**

Percy told the story of his introduction to rhythm bones many times over the years. He attended elementary school in Washington, DC, and some kids took spare-rib like bones out of their pockets and began rattling them. He told his dad about this and his dad told him about Mr Bones and Minstrel Shows. His dad showed Percy how to hold the bones.

He lived in a section of town that was

next to a black section. There was a concrete corner lit by a gas street lantern and boys from both sections would gather there on summer evenings. The black kids would, very unceremoniously, get sand from the gutters and throw it on the concrete and soft shoe dance by the light from that gas lantern. They would also get out their bones and play them while they danced. Percy learned how to play the bones at that corner.

With education, family, and work, rhythm bones were set aside and brought out occasionally.

Here's the way he got back into it in 1973. Fran was doing composition and she decided she wanted to find out how to notate percussion instruments. She went to Eastern Michigan University to work on a Master's Degree in Composition, and took a percussion class. They went through a lot of percussion instruments and at the end of the class there was a little time left so the professor started talking about all these unusual instruments that nobody had ever seen before. He mentioned rhythm bones and Fran's hand went up and she said "My husband plays rhythm bones."



Photograph at their home by Bob Kalmbach.

That's how he got started because he was invited to come into that class and demonstrate the bones which he hadn't played much for 50 years. His son and my uncle, Malcolm, remembers, "We had a big back porch outside the house and he was there practicing the bones to get ready for his first bones gig."

Percy loved to play with pine bones as he thought they weren't too loud for ensemble use. He liked to play with a variety of music, and he would play to classical music as his wife was a pianist.

Beth Lenz was a UM percussion student. Percy taught her how to play

rhythm bones and become a better musician. She picked the subject of rhythm bones for her Master's Thesis, and Percy turned over to her all the information he had collected about rhythm bones which gave her a solid foundation. Her 312 page thesis, completed in 1989 and titled "The Bones in the United States: History and Performance Practice," contains two chapters directly about Percy, one an analysis of his playing style and the other a long detailed interview. Beth graciously gave permission to include these in the Portfolio.

One thing about Percy that frustrates some people who to move just like him was he was really quite ambidextrous, he could do really independent things with each hand.

There are examples of his rhythm bones playing as well as rhythm bones rudiments he developed in the Portfolio.

### **Percy the Teacher**

Percy had three careers, architect, engineer and teacher, and teaching was his favorite. Percy is known as a teacher be it in person, at workshops or through his instruction books and video. He was a rhythm bones evangelist using every opportunity to expose and educate.

Dianne Baker helped Percy teach children for many years. She said, "He would travel to many schools and events with me and play the bones. At schools Percy would go with me first and demonstrate and then teach the "most interested" kids how to play the bones for an assembly later or to be used in a musical I wrote called "T-I-M-B-E-R." Percy also told kids the stories of the beginnings of bone playing including experiences he had playing bones on streets of Washington D.C."

Sue Barber was an UM Ethnomusicology student. As she tells it in the "Remember Percy" session at the Grand Rapids Bones Fest (view it in the Portfolio), "One night I and some friends went to some performance and there was Percy performing. I had a required paper for a class to write and there it was. I talked to Percy who graciously said yes." That meeting resulted in an article titled "The Bones: Ancient to Modern" that is on our RBS website, a chapter on rhythm bones in a 1977 book titled "How to Play Nearly Everything, and a 1978 booklet titled "How to Play the Bones" that is





Elizabeth Bergmann and Percy Rehearsing. Photo courtesy of Bergmann

still being sold today almost 40 years after it was written.

Sue also wrote an article in the October 1978 Michigan Alumnus magazine that tells Percy and wife, Fran's, love story and how she contributed to Percy's rhythm bones avocation (see the Portfolio). The photograph of just the two of them came from that article.

In 1979, Board Member, Kenny Wolin, attended a Master's Class which was a rhythm bones workshop. By the end of the class he learned how to play and bought his first rhythm bones. He is now a "President's Own Marine Band" percussionist playing rhythm bones at the White House and places like the Kennedy Center. Our Assistant Director, Bill Vits, principal percussionist with the Grand Rapids Symphony, also attend a Percy Master Class and plays rhythm bones on occasion with his orchestra.

There are lessons in a 1983 Sing Out Magazine issue that is in the scanned memorabilia in the Portfolio. There is also a chapter in Beth Lenz's Thesis on how to play rhythm bones.

Mickie Zekley, who created Lark in the Morning, was selling rhythm bones before he met Percy. When he met Percy it was like meeting a superstar, and Percy was invited to teach rhythm bones at the annual Lark Camps. Someone brought a video camera to camp and Mickie immediately knew this was a great teaching tool. Percy was the natural choice for the 1989 video titled "How to

Play the Bones with Percy Danforth" reissued as a DVD in 2011. This is and has been the learning tool for many a rhythm bones player.

#### **Percy the Performer**

Percy was a great performer and some of festivals he attended are below (the number in parentheses is the number of times he attended); Altamont (3), Baltimore (1), Bath, England (1), Bowling Green (1), Cambridge (1), Chicago (1), East Lansing (5), Ekins WV (1), Foster Memorial, Florida (2), Fox Hollow, Troy, NY (3), Hartford (3), Indianapolis (1), Lacrosse (3), Lansing (3), London (1), Los Angeles (3), Louisville (1), Maraposa Toronto (3), Moline (1), Lincoln Center (1), Philadelphia (7), Phoenix (2), St. Louis (1), San Francisco (2), Smithsonian Folklife Festival (1), Toledo (1), TryWorks, New Bedford (1), Wheatland (5), Winnepeg (2), Wolf Trap VA (1), Washington (4) and more.

There were also workshops with a performance. He was on National Public Radio, the Hugh Downs "Over Easy" show, and lots of local radio, television and community events. There are posters and programs for many of these events in the Portfolio.

In the early 1980s, Bonnie Rideout, the award winning Scottish fiddler, came to the UM to study music. She went to the Wheatland Festival and was introduced to Percy and right there on the spot played a song for one of his rhythm bones demonstrations. She said "We struck up the most amazing relationship, and he kind of adopted me as a little granddaughter." She and her fiddle went with him to festivals and senior homes. She said, "Wheatland was Percy's favorite festival and he became so well known that headliners would invite him on stage. Some people would attend just to hear him play." In 1981, the Festival honored him with a hand carved wood plaque as the Number 1 Bones Player (see a photograph in RBP, Vol 16, No 2, Page3). "He was funny and super generous with his time, always accessi-

ble, always available." A transcript of a telephone interview with Bonnie is in the Portfolio.

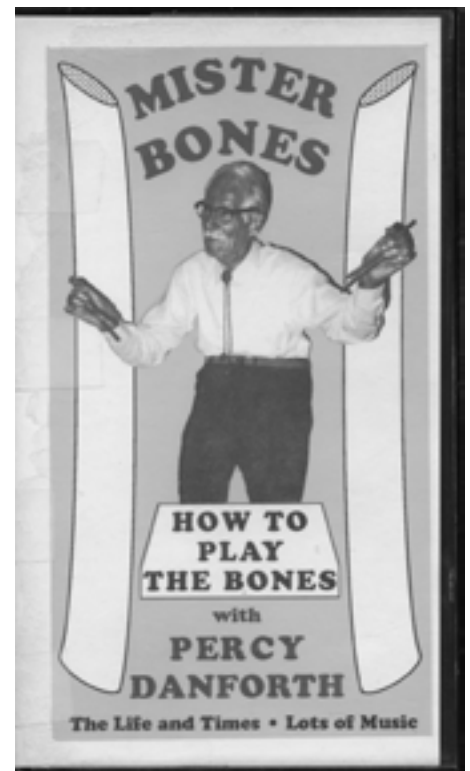
Grammy Award Winner, Marcy Marxer, remembers Percy. "I grew up in Michigan when Percy was remarkably active. My band used to add him to any of our gigs for which he was available. We also went to visit him and his wife who was also a musical genius. I loved Percy!"

In both the Library of Congress video and Beth Lenz thesis, Percy talks about the connection he felt between dance and rhythm bones that began with the soft shoe dancers in Washington, DC.

The well known Liz Bergmann was head of the UM Dance Department. She heard Percy play and asked if he would be interested in a collaboration. It took three months to establish rapport and organize a program. She remembers, "In 1978, I was on sabbatical and did a solo concert. One of the pieces was "The Bones and Me" which I did with Percy. I had a wonderful time dancing with him. He was on stage playing the bones and I danced. He somewhat moved around the stage with me. He was a great partner and I had a lovely time working with him." A rehearsal photograph is to the left.

Percy did

(Continued on Page 6)



Cover from the Bones Instruction VCR video



Photograph by Sue Tussa

some solo performing, just bones improvisation alone. He said, "You walk out on a stage like Alice Tully Hall in the Lincoln Center, just me and the bones. It's quite an interesting challenge."

Most of the recordings of Percy playing are of low quality, and maybe the only recording in a professional studio was produced by Robert Winans in 1985 and titled "The Early Minstrel Show." That recording recreated the early minstrel show format with period banjo, fiddle, tambourine and rhythm bones. There are three tracks from that CD in the Portfolio that New World Records gave us permission to include.

### **Percy the Rhythm Bones Maker**

In the University of Michigan video in the Portfolio, Percy talked about the inconsistent sound of animal bones which started him thinking about making them out of wood. Percy designed some bones to resemble rib bones which is one of the origins of the instrument, and his original drawing is shown on Page 7.

By 1976, Percy had enough bones students that he needed a steady supply of high quality wooden bones. Percy played everything from genuine bones to ones made of plastic and ivory, but he preferred the sound of wooden bones, especially pine.

He came to Ray Schairer's workshop one day in 1976 and showed him the bones and asked if he could set up a system to turn out large quantities of wooden ones. A business relationship

and friendship was formed which lasted till Percy's death and even beyond. A more complete story about Ray is in the Portfolio.

People asked about other woods so Ray began turning out bones made of cherry, hickory, walnut, oak, maple and exotic woods like ebony and rosewood. Ray estimated that he made over thirty thousand Danforth bones.

Before his death in 2011, Ray continued to send royalty payments from the sale of bones to Percy's wife, Fran, and then to his children. Sandor Slomovits, who learned to play rhythm bones from Percy, has taken over making 'Danforth' Rhythm Bones.

### **Percy the Rhythm Bones Seller**

While most of the 'Danforth' rhythm bones were sold by Ray as described above, Percy sold 'Danforth' bones at his many concerts and workshops, and at schools, coffeehouses and festivals.

Again here is my uncle Malcolm. "He and I worked the Philadelphia Folk Festival together a few times. There was a rule at the Festival back in the 70s that a performer could only appear there 3 times. Pop was there for 7 years. He and I would go and I would get out my clarinet and he'd play bones with me. We'd gather a crowd and people would say "those are neat. Where can I get a pair." He had a bag of red bones which he would pass out to the crowd to guarantee to get them back. Percy would say "Oh, we happen to have some." We would finance the trip from Ann Arbor, gas money, staying wherever we stayed, and go home with more money than we left with. That's as close to making money with bones he ever had."

### **Percy the Legend**

The dictionary says a legend is a famous or notorious person, especially in a particular field. I think Percy qualifies under this definition.

However, there were other people who made bones popular then and since then. Bones were very popular for a short while in the 50s, and Ted Goon had a couple of top 40 hits with rhythm bones (check out Mr. Goon-Bones on our RBS website). Before that they were popular in Vaudeville acts and Brother Bones was

in movies and many people have heard bones in the theme music of the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team with a piece call Sweet Georgia Brown. They popularized the bones way before Percy did.

Member Russ Myers was also recorded the Folk Archive of the Library of Congress, and there is a Russ Myers tribute video on the RBS website. Frank Brower was the first minstrel bones player which led to more people playing rhythm bones than any time in history. The late Jerry Mescher was one of the best rhythm bones players in the history of the instrument, and he learned from his father. Fred Edmunds produced one of the other early rhythm bones instructional videos now available on our RBS website, and we consider Fred the grandfather of the Rhythm Bones Society. Then there is Everett Cowett who organized the first Bones Fest on his back porch and who we now recognize as the father of the Rhythm Bones Society.

A lot of the folks in the Rhythm Bones Society can show you that Percy was far from being the only player. These folks, especially in the older generation, didn't learn from Percy, but learned from their father or grandfather.

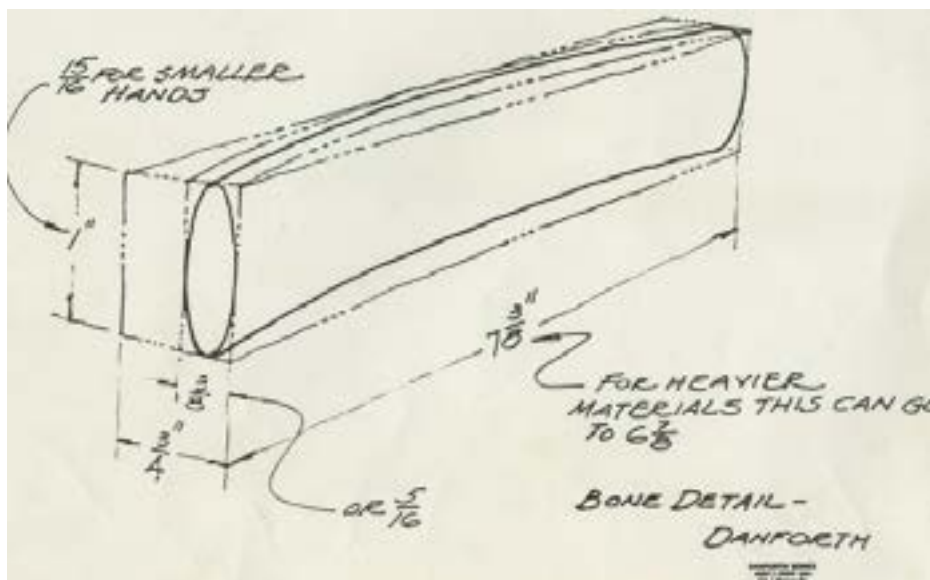
Percy did a lot to revitalize rhythm bones in America. He spread the word in American folk music scene and popularized the awareness of the instrument. As described above, he went to a lot of festivals in his time and people who were interested in learning a new instrument would learn from him or pick up his video. This rhythm bones instructional video now lives beyond his life span.

Finally, here is a quote from Percy, "It's the potential of the bones I have labored to demonstrate - their potential as a percussion musical instrument."

Percy's influence fades with passing years, and I hope the Rhythm Bones Society can keep his legacy alive. *Jonathan Danforth (and Steve Wixson)*

**Portfolio Contents** The Percy Portfolio is online at - [rhythmbones.org/PercyDanforthIndex.html](http://rhythmbones.org/PercyDanforthIndex.html). It will be updated with more items over the coming years. The abbreviation 'RBP' means the Rhythm Bones Player Newsletter.

1. Video highlights of the life of Percy (not complete at the time this article was published.)



Percy's original Danforth Rhythm Bone design drawing

## San Remembers Percy

I met Percy Danforth in 1976, after my brother Laz saw him play the bones in Donald Hall's play, "Bread and Roses." "You won't believe how much music he can get out of four little pieces of wood!" Laz told me. I called Percy and asked him if he would show me how to play, and with his typical generosity, he said, "Of course." I was not a quick study, but he was a patient teacher, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Finally, like thousands of others Percy taught, I started to get the hang of it.

We performed together dozens of times over the next sixteen years. I remember the way he'd kid around on stage: "Welcome to the rehearsal," he'd tell the audience, then joke about "tuning" the bones—which he actually could do by adjusting them in his hands. But most of all, I remember the dreamy look on his face as he "danced" the bones, and his surprised, joyful expression when we hit the final note together. He'd laugh, shake our hands, and say, "That came out all right." With Percy, countless times, from formal concert halls to folk festivals, coffeehouses, and schools, it came out all right—and much better than all right.

The last time we played a concert together was at a senior citizens' Christmas party in 1992. We invited him to play a few tunes with us, and Percy, at age ninety, was still in great form. The seniors, many younger than he, were inspired.

On June 1, 1992 Laz and I played at Hillside Terrace, the retirement community where Percy and Frances, his wife of sixty-five years, lived. As usual, I introduced him as "the man who taught me everything I know about the bones." I also told him what a thrill it still is for me when people come up and say, "You must have learned to play the bones from Percy Danforth—you look just like him when you play."

He died nine days later. Goodbye, Percy. Thank you. *Sandor Slomovits*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XX.** August 4-7, 2016, Homer, NY, Gerry Hines, Host.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 29 - September 4, 2016, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

2. *Tribute to Percy* by Beth Lenz from RBP, Vol 2, No. 1.
3. A copy of this article titled *Percy Danforth Remembered* from RBP, Vol 18, No 2.
4. Video interview of Jonathan Danforth about Percy.
5. Library of Congress Video. This was recorded in 1975 when Percy was a 'young' old man. It is broken into several shorter videos:
  - a. Young Percy's life in Washington, DC.
  - b. Percy learns rhythm bones from sand dancers.
  - c. Fran takes a world music percussion class and volunteers Percy to demonstrate rhythm bones.
  - d. History of rhythm bones and also minstrelsy.
  - e. Percy teaching children. We can all learn something from this video to help us be a better children rhythm bones teacher.
  - f. Percy jamming at some party.
6. University of Michigan video about Percy released in 1981.
7. Non-instruction parts from Percy's Bones Instructional Video that Mickie Zekley gave permission to include.
8. Review of Percy's Bones Instruction video in RBP, Vol 4, No 1, Page 3.
9. Video of the Remember Percy session from Bones Fest XVIII in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
10. Scanned papers donated by Percy's son, Malcolm. The most important of these were scanned, and more might be scanned in the future.

11. Timeline of Percy's rhythm bones life with lots of detail. This will grow as additional information is discovered.

12. Percy interviewed by David Holt. This is a link to a Youtube video.

13. Andy Cohen and Percy Danforth performing at the 1983 Old Songs Festival (a Youtube video).

14. An article on Ray Shairer, Percy's rhythm bones maker, from RBP, Vol 5, No 2, Page 3.

15. Sue Barber and Percy Danforth's Bones Instruction booklet and CD published by Andy's Front Hall store.

16. Sue Barber's Michigan Alumnus magazine story titled "It Was Love at First Fox Trot."

17. Three tracks of Percy playing from 'The Early Minstrel Show CD. This may be the only studio quality recording of Percy playing rhythm bones. Included with the permission of New World Records.

18. Chapter III, Danforth Style of Playing and Chapter V, A Conversation with Percy Danforth from Beth Lenz's Master's Thesis.

19. An article from Hank Tenebaum about his first meeting with Percy from RBP, Vol 14, No 3, Page 3.

20. Transcript of a telephone interview with Bonnie Rideout, the Scottish fiddler.

21. Liberty Film Percy Danforth Project overview. This was a documentary film about Percy that was not completed as funding ran out. We hope to include this someday,

22. Odds and Ends. Items too short to have their own entry above.





Steve Wixson playing at the Bear On The Square Mountain Festival in Dahlonega, Georgia (see Page 4). From the left are Ron Cline on banjo, Member Tom Bumgardner on guitar who also plays rhythm bones, Steve on rhythm bones, Jimbo Wright on bass, Dickson Lester on guitar and leading the group, and Robin Daniel, mandolin and leader of the bluegrass band called 'The Peach Mountain Gang.' The names of the two musicians with their back to the camera are unknown. Photograph by Janet Wixson.



A 1985 color photograph of Percy Danforth courtesy of Andy and Bill Spence of Andy's Front Hall Store

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 18, No. 3 2016

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*Bones Fest XXI is in San Antonio*

*Mitch Says Thanks*

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*Minutes of the General Membership Meeting*

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## Executive Director's Column

People come and go in organizations. Whether it be a burst of enthusiasm from a new experience, and the excitement of learning, people come on the scene, some stay, and others fade away. There are always people who change the environment by virtue of their presence. Just having them around inspires people, and makes not only a better event, but a better organization. This organization has always thrived on a family feeling to our events, gives us a glowing feeling, and impresses new comers. This year the Board established an award to be given to just such a person. Someone who creates a presence, and makes us better, not only as players but as people, by being who they are.

The first Rhythm Bones Society Community Enrichment Award was given to Mitch Boss. Mitch

has attended Bones Fests since 2002, and hasn't missed one since. His easy going nature, self deprecating dry humor, and excellent bone playing skills make him a joy to be around. Thank you Mitch for being you!

This year the Board also gave a Meritorious Service award to Mary Lee Sweet for her extensive work videoing Bones Fests. Mary Lee has hosted one Bones Fest, and attended many Fests, and has worked tirelessly to bring us amazing video, Thank you Mary Lee!

The Board wishes to extend our thanks to out going board member, Sky Bartlett. We wish him all the best in his future endeavors and would welcome him back. And the Board wishes to welcome Dennis (Continued on Page 3)

## Bones Fest XX is History

Here I sit on Monday morning and Bones Fest XX is over. The 43 participants from 19 states and 1 Canadian Province have scattered back to their homes and I sit here in a partial coma. The last week has been a whirlwind of activity for Janet and me. Except for this report the paper work is done, the bills are paid and unless Steve Wixson thinks of

something else this one is in the bag.

Oops, he did think of something else. I forgot to publicly thank Jim Conner for the inspiration for the BF XX t-shirts. Back at Bones Fest X he made a prophesy that the shirt would have a picture of the world with twenty bones coming out like rays of the sun. (Continued on Page 6)



Bones Fest XX Group Photograph. First Row from left; Janet Hines, Ernie Duffy, Mary Carty, Annette Boss, Devin Giles, Bruno Giles, Jeremy Brown, Jennifer Brown, Steve Brown, Tim Reilly, Jim Hesch, Marie Bruschi, Sharon Mescher, Dutch Kopp, and Jonathan Danforth. Second Row; Adam Klein, Jim Runner, Skeff Flynn, Rowan Corbett, Lynda Bertrand, Bill Vits, Melissa Danforth (and Emmett Danforth), Bob Goulet, Stan Von Hagen, Michael Ballard, Kenny Wolin, Mike Korec, Katrina Mackey and Mike Ludgate. Third Row; Richard Carty, Dennis Riedesel, Spike Bones, Mitch Boss, Ben Denney, Blue Hammond, Ron Bruschi, Phil Robinson, Gerry Hines, and Steve Wixson. Photograph by Art Sands.

## Editorial

Bones Fest XX is over and I am sitting at the airport waiting for a delayed flight. There are many Fest highlights and our host, Gerry Hines, writes of them starting on Page 1. The photographs in this issue were taken by Micheal Ballard and Art Sands, and thanks to both of them for their great work.

The Fest was again videoed by Mary Lee Sweet and in appreciation for that work over many years, the Board of Directors presented her with the *Meritorious Service Award*. The Board also recognized Mitch Boss with a new award, the *Community Enrichment Award*. Mary Lee's BFXX video can be seen on our homepage for the next several months.

I played a tribute to the late Jerry Mescher at the Fest. Jerry's signature song was Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* recorded by Jo Ann Castle, and I played to a 30 second shortened version. I would not have been able to do this except Mel Mercier had written down Jerry's arrangement of the song in his PhD thesis (Pages 431-39 and you can search for it online). I slowed it down on the computer and worked up to full speed over time. I was pleased with my performance, but it was not at Jerry's level.

I tip my hat (i.e., rhythm bones) to Steve Brown for the excellent job he did as Emcee of the Friday and Saturday evening performances. Also to Steve, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Tim Reilly and helpers for leading interesting workshops.

## Letters to the Editor

Thank you for allowing me to participate on the Board. I love you all and missed you all very much, it's never fun to miss a Fest. I understand that Dennis has been elected to fill "my" position. I think that he will be an excellent Board member. Please do not take my decision to not serve again as anything more than my desire to not interface with a computer. At any point in time if there is no one of a more agreeable and useful nature to serve on the Board I would be happy to serve again. *Sky Bartlett*

Gerry, It was as if you were never here. You inhabited and left the place wonderfully. If only all of our guests could be like you! We (the Center) and myself were pleased to have hosted this national event, and would be happy for repeat visits! Thanks again for thinking of us and don't be a stranger! *Ty Marshal*, Director, Homer Center for the Arts

Glad as ever to have made it to the Fest, not glad I couldn't stay till Saturday. Glad to talk to some new people and get interesting insight into things like reasons to need quiet bones, reasons to make bones that play well in the Skeff position. Glad to hang out with old friends again. Anyway I sold enough pairs to be making bones again, this time mostly American Chestnut - why? because I can. *Adam Klein*

Thank you, Janet and Gerry, for hosting the 20th Bones Fest in such a beautiful setting of New York State's mountains and valleys.

In planning to attend this fest, I was determined to attend as many workshops as possible. I was not disappointed. There was information for everyone: playing with the metronome, learning about Irish tunes, the history of shanty songs, and a beginner's bones class. I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated all of these "down-to-earth" workshops. Our bones society seems to be blessed with talented teachers, bones players, and characters.

Jamming with all the "characters" is one of my favorite times at the fest. And, then, I look forward to sitting back and enjoying all the performances on Saturday night. Each performance this year was a "WOW" moment for me.

I look forward to being with you next August in San Antonio. *Sharon Mescher*

## Bones Fest XXI in San Antonio

The Board is happy to announce that Bones Fest XXI will be in San Antonio hosted by Dennis Riedesel. Dennis hosted Bones Fest XV, and you can search online newsletters for Vol 13, No 2. One fun event was the dinner cruise on the San Antonio river which will be repeated. The date is August 24-27, 2017, and look for details in the future newsletters.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)



Dennis Riedesel performing at Bones Fest XX

## Editorial (Continued)

Riedesel to the Board. Dennis is a past and future host of a Bones Fest and will be a great addition to the Board.

Bones Fest XX is still ringing around my head as I suspect it is with most attendees. A very big thanks to Janet and Gerry Hines for all their hard work to make Bones Fest XX a joy!

Several moments stand out to me. The facility of the Homer Arts Center was fantastic and a great environment to germinate our Fest! The stage and facilities were just amazing! Our second attempt at Community Outreach was very rewarding at both the Assisted Living Center and the Day Camp.

Saturday's performance was one of our best with stellar performances by all the participants. I have to say that the late night jamming at the hotel was my favorite, and watching Jeremy jamming with his bones brothers was thrilling!

I'm very excited at the prospect of returning to San Antonio Texas next year. Dennis Reidesel is already putting together a stellar Fest with some very interesting features which will make our stay in Texas truly memorable. I encourage all of you to watch for specific dates and plan accordingly. Yee Haw!  
*Steve Brown*

## Dr. Mel Mercier at Notre Dame

For about 20 years, Notre Dame has hosted the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, and this year it was held April 1-3. The institute focuses on the gathering of educators and students to study Irish culture. This year, for the first time, the institute invited professors of



music and performance arts to participate. One of the professors was our own Rhythm Bones Society member, Dr. Mel Mercier, who, in March, took over as Chair of Performing Arts at the University of Limerick (refer to his story in the newsletter article, Volume 18, No.1, 2016).

Jerry and I had traveled to Ireland in 2011 to visit the Merciers, experience all things Irish, and attend Mel's PhD graduation. That was the last time Jerry and I saw the Merciers. So, because Mel was coming to Notre Dame, and close to Iowa, I took the opportunity to travel to Notre Dame to visit Mel, learn more about Irish music and culture, and meet other interesting academics.

At the invitation of Notre Dame, Micheal O'Suilleabhain and Helen Phelen, Mel was asked to take part in presenting with his two colleagues. The focus of their seminar was recognizing the importance of including the study of all types of world music along with the performing arts in the university setting. In Mel's words, "The performance part is still not fully recognized as being equal or a part with being a more traditional scholar, i.e., writing books and articles.

So, there have been issues for people like me... who would consider themselves performance scholars... or composers. I'm producing CD's, performances and competitions so I'm asking the university to value that and to accept it in the same way as they accept written works. Our panel was really about that... There is still a sense that Irish music is an outlier... This is not a music conference but there is an aspiration that Irish studies would begin to include and embrace the study of music."

Part of Mel's contribution to the presentations with Micheal and Helen focused on two themes: his musical relationship with his father, Paedar, and comparing the traditional Irish bones musician to Jerry's style of bones playing.

At this time, Mel is "in a dialogue with my father" because he is "making a radio documentary about him." Mel realizes he

had a special relationship with his father: playing the bodhran and the bones. In their relationship there was "created a certain kind of bond and empathy."

With tongue-in-cheek humor, Mel shared this: "I was a one-handed bones player. When you're an Irish traditional one-handed bones player, you always sit down. And you make yourself kind of invisible. There's a kind of apologeticness about it, (as if to say), 'I'm not in the room; or 'I'm sorry.'

"When I met Jerry Mescher at the bones fest in 2000 at Chattanooga, what I saw, what I experienced was something entirely different." At this point, Mel stands up, extends both arms outward with his bones in each hand, and imitating Jerry, says, "Here I am; and I'm not ashamed." Of course that comes out of vaudeville and minstrelsy; Brother Bones, one of the end men. So I began to learn to play like Jerry. I can tell you that through that I began to feel like Jerry. I developed an empathy with him."

The weekend flew by at lightning speed, but was worth every moment spent with Mel and many of his Irish colleagues. It was an honor to be with Mel, listen to his story about his relationship with his father, and, in many ways, learn more about Jerry from a different, personal perspective. *Sharon Mescher*

[To listen to Mel's Paedar Mercier story, search Google with RTE Radio 1 doconone Paedar Mercier and click the play button]



Sharon Mescher performing at BFXX





Steve Brown's Irish Tunes Workshop showing part of the great facilities at the Homer Center for the Arts



Newcomer Lynda Bertrand and Bob Goulet play rhythm bones and dance French Canadian style



Bones Fest XX Host Gerry Hines and band Metku. They are from the left Mike Ludgate, Katrina Mackey, and Phil Robinson



Dutch Kopp plays the bohdran with rhythm bones instead of a beater



Spike Bones gets the audience involved



Stan Von Hagen



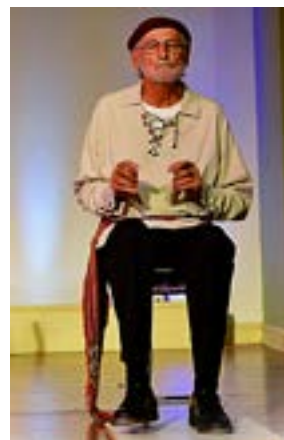
Bill Vits



Tim Reilly and Steve Brown duet



Rowan Corbett surprised us with the band ilyAIMY. From the left; Kristen Jones, Rowan, and Rob Hinkal



Bob Goulet sitting and playing and dancing



Ben Denney plays rhythm bones while Mary and Richard Carty dance

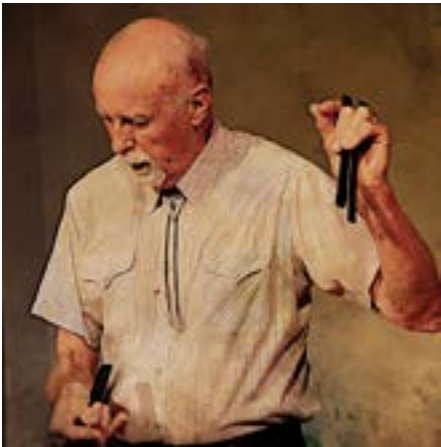




Mitch Boss (left) and Steve Brown ham it up on stage. Mitch received the first 'Community Enrichment Award' on Friday evening.



Bill Vits leads Day Camp Outing. From left are Bill, Bob Goulet, Adam Klein, Ben Denney, Jonathan Danforth, Skeff Flynn, Stan Von Hagen and Bruno Giles



Steve Wixson played a short version of *Maple Leaf Rag* as a tribute to the late Jerry Mescher



Jeremy Brown



Blue Hammond



Jim Runner



Kenny Wollin playing a unique playing style



One of several Rhythm Bones Marketplace tables



Michael Ballard



Skeff Flynn with Phil Robinson and Ben Denney



Ernie Duffy



Mary Lee & Frank Smith with Ben Denney and Jonathan Danforth. Mary Lee received Meritorious Service Award

(Continued from Page 1)

Glad he came up with that as a picture of a Cortland apple playing the bones was my first thought. Thanks Jim.

A word about Steve Wixson. He is the background guiding hand that makes these festivals come to life. The Host's guide book, time line and the periodic email that says it is time for this or that keep things moving along. Between his help and the advice of Steve Brown from time to time most of the stress was of my own making. In the last week I learned not to schedule events on too tight a time line. I also learned that dealing with a group of musicians can be like herding cats. But those cats can make a Bones Fest purr. In the opinion of everyone I spoke with it was a huge success.

The Friday morning seminars by Bill Vits and Steve Brown were enlightening and confusing at the same time. Enlightening because they both touched on aspects of bones playing I struggle with and confusing because if I live to be a hundred I will never gain the skill set of either of them. It is sufficient that I pick up a tidbit here and there to move me forward in my practice.

The Friday afternoon outreach projects were my most stressful points of the weekend as I timed things too closely after lunch and did not figure on an overwhelmed restaurant. A couple of phone calls to delay things a bit and everything turned out great. The folks who entertained at the senior living center had a small but very appreciative audience. Those of us who went to the day camp at Lime Hollow Nature Center had the opportunity to teach 71 campers aged 8 to 14 to play the bones. Amazingly a few of them got it right off. Bill Vits has a way with kids and really gets in their face making them pay attention. The kids had all been on an overnight campout and were up until 1:30 in the morning (sounds like a bones jam.) and were filthy and tired. With Ben Denny, Jonathon Danforth and Adam Klein on guitar, fiddle and banjo respectively the kids were all wide awake. The Dutch Penny Bones (invented by Dutch Kopp) were a big hit. A few of the more greedy campers figured out how to loosen the pennies but most tried to play them.

Our Friday night meal was consumed with great gusto. We had gotten 7 party

sub platters from Subway. Janet and I were wondering how we were going to get rid of all that food. Our worries were in vain of course as 43 hungry bones players demolished those platters plus the 108 cookies that came with them. Evidently bones' playing is a high calorie burn.

Our Friday night rehearsal show with the live Band "Metku" was great entertainment for ourselves and gave us a chance to get the kinks out. Ty Marshall who is the director of Homer Center for the Arts sent us a sound tech, Seth Asa who has some very real skills and made us sound like the professionals that many of our leading bones players are. Speaking of professionals Adam Klein had only one day available to be with us and wowed us as usual with an acapella voice and bones routine. Moving into the planning of the Saturday night show we realized that a five minute time limit was going to be necessary to get all 24 acts into a 2 hour show.

Back at the London room in the hotel the serious (OK, maybe not serious, Mitch was there) jamming continued into the night as it did all 3 nights. These jam sessions are probably the highlight of every Bones Fest as we are not performing for anybody. We are relaxing and enjoying being with good friends and playing the bones.

Saturday morning was another outreach to the public with a beginner's bones playing class. It started with Kenny Wolin and Tim Reilly doing a "Shanty Sing" tying in the old time sailor's life and the bones. They got the audience ready for the serious (really?) teaching done by Steve Brown. Steve Wixson acting as teacher's helper had a friend of Janet's playing with 2 hands before the end. Either Steve is a great teacher or she is a natural. Both of those things are probably true. Several attendees bought bones from our vendors both after the class and during and after the evening show.

It is hard to pick "the" highlight of the Saturday show. Rowan Corbett and ilyAMY would certainly be on the list. The vast improvement of Stan Van Hagen, Kenny Wolin's disco routine, Steve Brown and Mitch with their usual antics, Ben Denny being backed by Ron and Marie Bruschi waltzing in the colored

lights against the back wall, Bob Goulet and Lynda Bertrand displaying a French Canadian Bones duel, Dennis Riedesel's bones light show. All off the acts were wonderful and different and showed off the many talents of our RBS members. I hope without mentioning all 24 I haven't hurt any feelings. I can't leave out of course our World's happiest bones player Jeremy Brown whose Superman act brought down the house. At the end of the show the crowd was on its feet in a standing ovation.

The last jam session of Bones Fest XX kept us (them) going until after 1:30 AM. I fell in a heap about 12:30. Two ladies who attended the show at Bones Fest XIX drove all the way from West Virginia for the Bones Fest XX show and stayed up until almost midnight at the jam session. They were grinning from ear to ear all evening.

Sunday morning breakfast. A bitter sweet experience. A good bye to family for another year. If any of you get to Arizona this winter look me up and we will rattle the streets of Tombstone together.  
*Gerry Hines*

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 1:41PM on August 6 in the Homer Center for the Arts. All members were present except Sky Bartlett.

The Secretary read the minutes of the last meeting and they were approved. He noted that the following email motions were approved between Board meetings; approve BFXX, Meritorious Service Award to Mary Lee Sweet, creation and awarding a new award, the Community Enrichment Award, to Mitch Boss and a color cover for the BFXX Program.

The Treasurer gave a report noting that as of December 31, 2015 we had \$5,605 in the bank and it was approved.

Old Business. Skeff reported that he had not circulated a design document for a website update, but will do so soon.

We discussed the Starter Kit idea brought up at the last General Membership Meeting. In order to get an idea of what members want in a kit, Skeff will add a section to the website survey document.

New Business. We discussed the mechanics of email motions. There is a need for a separate email with the Subject: Vote: Name of Motion. Steve Wixson will formalize this and email to Board Members for approval.

Dennis Riedesel made an informal proposal to host BFXXI in San Antonio again. A motion was made, seconded and approved to ask him to submit a formal proposal.

Steve Wixson noted it was time for another Special Newsletter Issue covering Bones Fest XI to XX. Sharon Mescher, who edited the earlier special issue volunteered to edit it.

Scott Miller sent RBS a collection of rhythm bones made by the late Clif Ervin. He had received them from Clif's daughter, and he thought we could preserve them better than he could. While we have rhythm bones memorabilia, it does not seem feasible to have a real Museum though the concept of an online Museum seems possible. Steve Wixson will see what is possible. Clif's daughter also wanted RBS to gift some bones to members and the Board will discuss criteria for this.

A motion was made, seconded and approved that Board members get administrative rights to our Facebook page so they can post items.

Steve Brown called the Board to order as the Nominating Committee. A motion was made, seconded and approved to nominate the current Board for next year less Sky Barlett who ask not to serve.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn, and we adjourned at 3:04.

Respectively submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 3:08 PM on August 6 in the Homer Center for the Arts.

The Secretary read the minutes of the last General Membership meeting and they were approved. The Treasurer gave a brief report noting we have \$5,605 in the bank.

Steve Brown reported on the Starter Kit project (see Board minutes).

Steve Wixson reported on the Remember Percy Project noting it is essentially complete and available to view on our website.

Steve Brown reported that the Board asked Dennis Riedesel for a formal proposal to host BFXXI. Dennis gave a brief overview of his ideas asking for members to comment.

Steve Brown opened the floor for nominations for the Board for 2016/17. The secretary presented Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher and Kenny Wolin. Mary Lee Sweet nominated Dennis Riedesel to fill Sky Bartlett's vacancy, and a motion was made, seconded and approved to elect all by acclamation.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn the meeting, and the meeting was adjourned at 3:25 PM. Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Mitch Boss Says Thanks (We Think)

I would like to take this moment to thank the Board of Directors of our great society for expressing their rather dark sense of humor by awarding me with a plaque stating that I all by myself have enriched the Rhythm Bones Society. Evidently I am the only one who has paid up dues.

I don't mean to be unthankful, but I can't help myself. Of all the other mediocre bones players (not all are mediocre, some are less proficient) why me? Is it because I try to show no disappointment when in conversation with men obsessed with sex and Pokemon.

Annette said she would hang the plaque up for me in the shower. I did not think that was appropriate so I hung it in plain sight next to the etagere with all my bones stuff on it.

You may know that I'm retired and live in an old folks home. My 'friends' are all physically and mentally detained. Some have expressed to me how much they like the way my plaque is framed; none of them can read it. The plaque gets

harder and harder to read, it is slowly erasing itself, was that intentional?

I want the Board of Directors to know how much I appreciate this award and all the laughter and knee slapping it has given so many old people....*Mitch Boss*

## Mary Lee Sweet Says Thanks Too

I would like to thank Mitch Boss for thanking the Board of our great society for awarding him an elegant certificate. (Hey Mitch! I paid my dues too!)

Without his example, I may have forgotten to properly express my appreciation for the award given to me.

Exactly how many awards have you gotten, Mitch? Albert Einstein said, "Many of the things you can count, don't count. Many of the things you can't count, really count." Are you counting?

Thank you Board for presenting me with the Meritorious Service Award. (I did notice an IOU in that word! (Check the accounts! I paid my dues, just like Mitch!))

In order to receive my award, I was required to take the stage. I really didn't want the stage. Just the award. I love awards! I couldn't be happier! But like Reese Witherspoon said, "It's funny that it all becomes about the clothes. It's bizarre! You work your butt off and then you win an award and it's all about your dress.

Thank you to the Rhythm Bones Society for gifting me with a written, framed document that says I am appreciated. Receiving it in the beautiful, historic village of Homer, New York where "past and present blend like a good stew" made it memorable. Jonas Salk said "The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more." I intend to do just that! *Mary Lee Sweet*

## Bones Calendar

**Fleadh by The Feale All Ireland Bones Competition**, May 1, 2017, Abbeyfeale, Ireland

**Bones Fest XVIII**, August 24-27, 2017, San Antonio, TX, Host is Dennis Riedesel,

**NTCMA Bones Contest**, August 28 - September 3, 2017, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.





The Grand Finale. A few minutes after this photograph was taken Skeff Flynn lead the traditional congo line of all rhythm bones players around the Arts Center

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 18, No. 4 2016

## In This Issue:

*Reflections on 20 Years of Bones Fests*

*An Unofficial History of Bones Fests*

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*Obituaries This Second Decade*

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*Guest Editorial*

*Bones Calendar*

## Reflections on 20 Years of Bones Fests

Paraphrasing the Beatles, "It was 20 years ago..." that the concept of a bones players gathering, a Bones Festival if you will, was hatched, and put into reality by Everett Cowett, his enthusiastic family, and applauded by Fred Edmund, Russ Myers, and all that attended (see the upper photograph below). They were collectively thrilled that a group of people who played the bones got together and celebrated this ancient instrument which had given them so much joy over their years.

We who have witnessed the development of Bones Fests, while sharing in their joy and enthusiasm, couldn't really feel what they experienced that first Bones Fest. They were literally doing something that hadn't been done before, and starting something that would live beyond their years. We now have a very specific picture of what a Bones Fest is, based on our experience, and expectations of what it will be, but for them, it was entering the unknown with

only their friends, family, and love of the bones to accompany them.

As the years went by, and each Bones Fest unfolded, one thing became clear, the Fest takes on a personality of its own, directed by the host, forged by the area in which it is held, and percolated by all the attendees. Whether we were eating pancakes in a nature center in Wisconsin, standing by the St. Louis Arch, playing the bones in the Alamo, BB Kings blues club in Orlando, a flash mob in Grand Rapids, an Opera House in Sheppardstown, playing for seniors in Leominster, or kids in Homer, we were taking the original vision and spreading it around the country.

For anyone who has attended a Fest, the experience leaves a distinct impression, and many come back again and again.

I know you will get that feeling from this perspective of our second ten years. Even after 16 years, and 15 Fests, I get

(Continued on Page 4)



Bones Fest I



Bones Fest XX. See Rhythm Bones Player, Vol 18, No 3 for the names of attendees

## Editorial

Sharon Mescher, now a RBS Board Member, returns as Editor for the *Reflections on 20 Years of Bones Fests* issue of our newsletter. She edited the issue on the first 10 years of Bones Fests back in 2006, and it being Vol 18, Special Issue, is available on our website.

It is a bit hard to believe we have been around for 20 years. Rhythm bones players like Dr. Fred Edmunds, Percy Danforth, Ted Goon, Freeman "Brother Bones" Davis, and Frank Brower (all these before our time) would have been proud to be a RBS member.

And we can be proud of what we have accomplished in twenty years. There were about 100 webpages when we started and now there are at least 12,700. There have been 20 Bones Fests, and these show that the quality of rhythm bones playing has dramatically improved as demonstrated on our Saturday evening public performances. We have an outstanding website originally created by Martha Cowett, and an eight page *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter that is housed and cataloged in the Library of Congress making it available to future historians.

Disappointments. We do not have a path to teach youth other than one on one. In Southwest Germany as part of their Easter celebration, children make rhythm bones (they are called Klepperle), learn how to play them and then compete to be King and Queen of the local parade.

We couldn't capture the flashmob at Kimball Farm and downtown Grand Rapids so maybe it would go viral on Youtube.

We have not gotten national television exposure (with the exception of Sky Bartlett who had 20 seconds when he was a contestant on the ABC Whipeout program).

We are saddened by the passing of so many players and friends since we were organized. Those who passed in our first ten years were listed in the Vol 8, Special Issue and those in the last ten years are listed in the next page. On the top of that list is Everett Cowett, the father of RBS.

And my recurring disappointment, that more people do not research, write about and share stories with our community in our newsletter

I have not included a story about myself in the newsletter since over the years I included short stories about some of my

rhythm bones experiences. In this issue, Sharon presents me in a most flattering way. It's a bit over the top, but thanks Sharon.

These reflections would not be complete without recognizing our elected leaders. The current Board members are listed in the box to the rights. Previous Board members include Everett Cowett, our first Executive Director, Russ Myers, our first Assistance Director, Mel Mercier from Irealnd, Jonathan Danforth who was webmaster for years, Sally Carroll, Jerry Mescher, Gil Hibben who also served as Assistant Director, Tim Reilly, and Sky Bartlett.

## Guest Editorial

In the *Rhythm Bones Player*. Vol 8, Special, Issue celebrating the first 10 years of the Bones Fests, Ev Cowett wrote, "The question I am asked most often asked by rhythm bones players is: 'In your wildest imagination, after the first Bones Fest, did you think that 10 years of Bones Fests would produce such a result?'"

Ev's vision of "having a real big bones festival where you invite people other than just bones players" has evolved beyond our wildest imagination.

The first Bones Fest for Jerry and me was Bones Fest IV at Steve and Janet Wixson's home. Watching all those bones players have so much fun was intoxicating. Just before leaving the Fest for home, I picked up a pair of Steve's purple heart bones, and did "something." Steve exclaimed, "You did a triplet!" My response, "I did???" Wow! The spark was lit!

Once we returned to Iowa, Jerry became my mentor. He had wanted to teach me for years, but I believed I could not play them. So, because of Jerry and Steve's exclamation at his Bones Fest, I decided I just may be able to play them. Once that spark was lit, I realized that I wanted to be a partner with Jerry in playing the bones. And, without a doubt, I very much desired to join in all that intoxicating fun at every Bones Fest. No more sitting on the sidelines!

As you read the special issue celebrating our 20th year of Bones Fests you will readily intuit that this Rhythm Bones Society is rich with a diverse group of remarkable people/personalities who happen to share a passion for playing the bones.

Why do we bones players so look forward to each year's gathering? From my

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

perspective there are several reasons. We share the love of an unusual, prehistoric instrument. Each bones player has his/her unique manner of playing. Subsequently, each of us desires to learn from one another. We can't wait to gather for those magical jam sessions where we "let go" and "make crazy." At the heart of the Rhythm Bones Society is a deep, unspoken, non-judgmental respect for each other. And, when we are together, I believe our spirits are, for another year, sated with joy. Over the years, I had shared with my family what I felt about the RBS friends and the Bones Fests. So, my sister joined us at the Sweet's Orlando Bones Fest. At the end of the first day, she told me that she understood why I loved being with the people of the RBS. She had experienced that extraordinary joyful "spirit" with an extraordinary group.

Twenty years after that first Bones Fest, Ev Cowett's vision of a thriving Rhythm Bones Society is a miraculous reality. With grateful hearts, thank you, Ev. *Sharon Mescher*

## Ev Cowett's Summary of Bones

Certain elements of each Bones Fest have remained the same over the 10-year span, but each fest has been uniquely different. Only Wilma Myers, Val Cowett and I have had the privilege of attending each of them. Something new and/or different has occurred at each of them making them particularly remarkable. I always look forward to "what will happen this time."

At **Bones Fest I** it was meeting Russ Myers and Dr. Fred Edmunds and sharing bones playing techniques, instrument construction material, musical preferences and having fun and fellowship. Very little has changed.

At **Bones Fest II**, hosted by the Cowetts in Bur-Mil Park, And by this time Martha Cowett had established a webpage for rhythm bones players called Rhythm Bones Central (now rhythm-bones.org).

**Bones Fest III** was hosted by Russ and Wilma Myers in their almost one-century-old home overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was here that the boning world opened to all of us with the arrival of "Spike Bones" Muhrer, John "Mr. Bones" Cahill, David "Black Bart" Boyles, "T" Paul Dehon, Mel Mercier (from Ireland), Joe Birl, Sally and Terry Carroll, Vivian Cox and Matteo the classical castanet player. It was here too that the Rhythm Bones Society was founded. What a party and weekend to remember!

**Bones Fest IV** was hosted by Steve and Janet Wixson at their home overlooking Chattanooga and in a nearby Mountain Opry house. It was here that we first met Ida May Schmich who knocked our socks off; Barry Bones Patton, who has incredible speed; Gil and Linda Hibben who very soon became an important part of the Rhythm Bones Society; the brother/sister act of Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell playing synchronized bones tunes; and Bill Vits from the Grand Rapids Symphony with something different.

**Bones Fest V**, held in a barn on Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, MA, was a real blast. It featured the Dave Reiner band and introduced us to Don Decamp, Dave Gagne, Nick Driver (from England), Norm Conrad, Gerard Arseneault (from Canada) and the NH gang of three, Shorty, Ernie and Sky. A great weekend.

**Bones Fest VI** was held on the Guilford College campus in Greensboro, NC and hosted by the Cowett family. Performances were heard in a real planetarium. Dan Griffin, a CT rocker and Jeff Newman a TX copy of Don Decamp were great newcomers. Russ Myers was honored and designated Fellow of the Rhythm Bones Society. Brother Bones (Freeman Davis) was recognized on what would have been his 100th birthday with a special birthday cake. The Conga line was introduced by Gil Hibben as was the "pass-off" by Walt Watkins.

**Bones Fest VII** was hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben in Louisville, KY, and the venue was a real antique Kentucky Theater. This Fest was truly a family affair. The Cowetts, Fraziers and Hibbens were prominent, and the brother/sister act of Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell were also there demonstrating precision bones playing, and don't forget Mary Lee and Frank Sweet in 1800's regalia and music.

**Bones Fest VIII** can be characterized as the Fest with the many successful workshops. It was hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll in Reston, VA. There was something for everyone: bones making, scrimshaw carving, bones playing tips and techniques and much more.

Kenny Wolin made his first appearance here. Between Kenny and Bill Vits even our old stand-by experts were learning something new too.

**Bones Fest IX** took us back to Chattanooga with Steve and Janet Wixson hosting again. It was almost a repeat of Bones Fest IV with many new and improved bones players. It can be noted that Steve Wixson, Mel Mercier, John Davis, and Walt Watkins are now two-handed bones players and some who could not play at all 10 years ago now play very good.

**Bones Fest X** was a real happening in New Bedford, MA. It was hosted by Jonathan and Melissa Danforth, and what a job they did. There were over 100 attendees. New Bedford is a multicultural community with a famous whaling museum and maritime music heritage and the Rhythm Bones Society fit right in. Each year the bar of excellence and innovation has been raised at the annual Fest. This is the mission of the Rhythm Bones Society. At first I thought it was due to simple practice in anticipation of the up-coming Fest, but I came to realize that it was the addition of new licks and tricks picked up from other members. Of course practice means a lot for without it nothing much happens.

**Thanks** for the efforts of Dan and Al Cowett for sound effects and Master of Ceremonies duties that were recognized at Bones Fest X. Spouses such as Val Cowett, Wilma Myers, Linda Hibben, Sharon Mescher, Jennifer Brown, and Kay Cahill who did so much to keep us all going at so many Fests should not be overlooked. Thank you.

"May your bones be with you" *Ev Cowett*, First Executive Director

## Obituaries This Second Decade

This issue of the newsletter is dedicated to the following RBS members who died during the last ten years, Shorty Boulet, Norris Frazier, John Perona, Mary Seel, John Cahill, Ida Mae Schmich, Ray Schairer, Joe Birl, Everett Cowett, Guy Gillette, John Davis, Dan Cowett, Bill Rexroad, Bones Fiedler, Walt Watkins, and Jerry Mescher

Non-members include, Dan Murphy who organized the All-Ireland Bones Competition at the Fleadh by the Feale in Abbeyfeale, Ireland.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXI.** August 24-27, 2017, San Antonio, TX, Host is Dennis Riedesel,

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 28 - September 3, 2017, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

## Continued From Page 1

that exhilarating feeling every time. And seeing the look in the faces of the attendees, whether it's their first or tenth, gives me the strong feeling that the original intension of those that started this event have been realized.

They say each snow flake is different and has it's own unique pattern, although I'm not going out there with a magnifier to verify, and I don't have to with Bones Fests. There's no question each varies by virtue of the hosts personality and location. What follows is my personal recollection of Bones Fest's XI to XX. Note that due to a medical emergency I did not attend XIII. My recollection is based on my participation in the planning, and feed back from attendee's.

## An Unofficial History of Bones Fests

It seems like decades (because it was) ago when I received a single sheet newsletter, in red ink, from Dr.Fred Edmunds, announcing, among other things, a gathering in Greensboro, North Carolina, of people who, like myself, played the bones. I gave it a full 30 seconds of thought, when I concluded,"who in their right mind would go all the way to North Carolina to play the bones?" In retrospect, I have now traveled enough miles to cross the country several times attending Bones Fests, and I suppose it puts me in the "not in my right mind" category, but in very good company as people have traveled much further to attend one Bones Fest, and begs the question, why? So as I peruse my own experiences, and reflect on our general experience of attending Bones Fests, perhaps we can ferret out some answers to that question.

I did not attend Bones Fest one, two, and three, but I was invited to each one. What initially seemed like an odd idea, eventually became the theme to a Bob Dylan song,"Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is....Do you..." Mr. Brown? And when Ev Cowette contacted me and told me I had been nominated to the Rhythm Bones Society Board of Directors, I felt obligated, and more than a little curious, to travel off to Chatanooga to attend Bones Fest IV. There I began to understand why they were continuing, and starting to draw people from around

the country, and indeed around the world. Mateo smiled that genuine smile, and played his castanets, Dave Boyles hugged me like a long lost brother, Jerry Mescher played like I had never seen anyone play, and everyone treated me like their long lost family member who had finally came home. I left that Fest floating on a cloud, like a magic carpet, that would carry me back again and again.

I've only missed one Bones Fest since that day, and the thing that calls to me every time is what will the amazing recipe of people, place and thing be this time when we all gather to create another Bones Fest experience by interacting together, and the magic flows. It could be in the performance, like Donnie Decamp and his long lost son at V, or Ed Steakly finally meeting his bones family at 99 just before he passed, or Mel Mercier, Tim Riley, Kenny Wolin, and Aaron Plunkett performing together at X, or countless other experiences at the many Bones Fests yet to come. In this review of Bones Fests XI to XX you will read about many of those experiences where the magic blossomed. Enjoy!

**Bones Fest XI** held in the great state of Wisconsin in one of the most idyllic settings, including performance at the Milwaukee Irish Festival, legendary to those of us interested in Irish music. The wild night at the Irish Pub sticks in my memory.

**Bones Fest XII** held in St. Louis Missouri, while limited due to Obama's last minute visit to the city, provided an amazing location for a Bones Fest including the University facilities, and the very impressive St. Louis Arch!

**Bones Fest XIII** was a return to Louisville, Ky, sparked by the performance of our personal New Orleans style Jazz band, the Rascals of Ragtyme, and one of the most beautiful performance facilities we have had the pleasure of playing in.

**Bones Fest XIV** held in Alexandria,VA had it all! An amazing facility, excellent attendance, performing in the ancient Alexandria Square during a farmers market, and of course, a wedding, between our hosts, Teri and Kenny Wolin!

**Bones Fest XV**, deep in the heart of Texas, included multiple performances both at the Texas Folk Life Festival, and the Alamo, not to mention our dinner cruise down the River Walk! My biggest regret was not spending more time in San Antonio, a regret I am soon to remedy in August!

**Bones Fest XVI** in Orlando,Fla. Was a

## Bones Fest XXI

San Antonio, TX

August 24-27, 2017

Host is

Dennis Riedesel

[dennis.riedesel7@gmail.com](mailto:dennis.riedesel7@gmail.com)

Email Dennis with  
Fest ideas or to  
volunteer

Put the date on  
your Calendar now

true delight, from the hotel, to our Performance at Raglan Road in the Disney Complex, and BB King's Blues club. A special time for me was the gospel sing and bone along Sunday morning.

**Bones Fest XVII**, surely I must have been crazy to sponsor another one of these, but it all worked out, my favorite memories include the community out reach at the Boys and Girls Club, and the Senior Center, and the Worlds first Bone playing flash mob at Kimball Farms.

**Bones Fest XVIII** was Grand in Grand Rapids, one of the greatest jams on Thursday night at the restaurant, experiencing Grand Rapids it's self, and all that Polish food! The best Fest for beer!

**Bones Fest XIX** in Shepardstown,WV will always be the most historical fest from the surrounding area to the amazing old Opera House, and our great facilities at the College, great fun.

**Bones Fest XX** again featured an amazing facility both for workshops and performance, my most memorable moments were truly the after hours jamming at the hotel, and our cozy breakfasts together, great moments of fraternity!

I want to thank Sharon Mescher for all of her hard work in putting together this special issue, and the strong support of Steve Wixson! *Steve Brown*, Executive Director



## Steve Wixson

In the special edition of “Reflections on Ten Years of Bones Fests”, (Volume 8, 2006, page 3), Ev Cowett wrote, “At Bones Fest II... Steve Wixson entered the picture and nothing has been the same since. Within six months he generated 100’s of e-mails and Internet searches all related to bones and bones playing. What a find. What enthusiasm. A newsletter was in progress before we had a society...” No truer words have been written! The “picture” has never been the same.

Steve and Janet Wixson hosted two festivals: Bones Fest IV, where began the tradition of “making it a full weekend event”, and Bones Fest IX.

Steve is the Secretary/Treasurer of the Rhythm Bones Society. He works tirelessly on the newsletter, introducing us to numerous subjects: bones players from the past and present, different types of bones from around the world, and the history of bones. When Steve sends out emails to the Board members asking for newsletter ideas, I can only speak for myself, but that is anxiety-time! The conversation in my head is on the order of, “What can I contribute? I don’t know anything!” Then, I go silent from embarrassment. During Bones Fest XVIII in Grand Rapids, the Board met to discuss old and new business. Someone complimented Steve on all the work he does for our society, and maybe he could slow down. Steve’s response was, “I can’t sit and twiddle my thumbs!” In the blink of an eye, and in unison, the Board members said, “Please, sit and twiddle your thumbs!”

Words do not do justice to convey the breadth and depth of Steve’s incomparable influence. Below is a meager list of his contributions to the Rhythm Bones Society.

Without his research we may never have known about several bones players. Ted Goon, “Mr. Goon Bones”, was a popular recording bones artist in the 1950’s. “His recording of “Ain’t She Sweet” was seventh on the Jukebox Billboard chart in 194 and sold a million, 400,000 copies...” (RBP, Volume 11, No. 11, 2009). Robert Goon, Ted’s son, sent “all kinds of memorabilia” to Steve, i.e.,

photos, news articles, recording charts, letters. He was a member of a trio that “had what appears to be the biggest catalog of recorded rhythm bones music of all time.”

Another legend was John Henry “Bones” Nobles from Texas. Charles Kuralt profiled John Henry on his “On the Road” program. He began his bones playing career after “he stumbled across a dead cow, extracted a couple of ribs, and discovered he could make music with them.” Wherever John Henry was his bones were with him. He appeared in two movies, played at parties, schools and festivals (RBP, Volume 10, No.1, 2008). As Steve wrote in his tribute to John Henry, “I wish I could have known him.”

Steve told me that his most proud contribution was his research, and subsequent article, about Frank Brower (Volume 6, No. 1, 2004). He wrote that,



Steve Wixson at Bones Fest VI with his Bone- Drums consisting of drum sensor on rhythm bones, selection switches in hand wired to a drum synthesizer

“There is not much written about Brower and even less about his bones playing.” Nonetheless, because of Steve’s persistent and never-give-up research, he wove together, “large sections of material from three articles along with other material...” Brower was born in 1823 in Baltimore. In... “1841, Brower first introduced ‘bones playing’ before an audience.... Therefore, I presume no person will dispute the right to the title of, ‘The Original Minstrel Bones Player’” to Brower. (To RBS members, this article is well-worth your reading because of Steve’s detailed research about a most interesting and important bones player.)

If anyone personifies the title, “World Ambassador of the Bones,” it is Steve Wixson. He diligently searches for the

history and knowledge of all-things-bones, experiments with all types of bones, and plays them around the world. This passion has led to articles that include topics such as the German bones called “Klepperle” (RBP, Volume 13, No. 1, 2011). Adam Klein and Steve collaborated on a detailed article titled, “Nachere (castanets) in Etruscan Paintings” (RBP, Volume 16, No. 2, 2014). The paintings of the ancient “castanets” date from 530 B.C.

At many of the Fests, Steve has surprised and entertained us with all types of bones which include: drum bones (shown in the photograph), different kinds of wooden bones, and probably the first bones made on a 3-D printer! He has shared his talent and love for the bones around the world. In 2009, he played in the theater of the ancient city of Ephesus, Turkey, and played on the Great Wall of China.

In Steve’s words, “There is a rhythm to all Fests with people buying in the Bones Market Place, performing to their peers, jamming anytime they can, attending workshops, passing-off, eating good food and joining the conga line finale. There is a feeling of a family reunion at each Fest. These can obviously continue for many years.” With Steve Wixson at the helm, there is no doubt that our society is passing on a bones legacy in a growing family.

Steve, we thank you and will be forever grateful to your passion and love for the bones and the Rhythm Bones Society. (One more thing – could you take just one moment to sit and twiddle your thumbs??) *Sharon Mescher*

It was around the spring of 1999 that I first heard the name, Steve Wixson. It was at the end of a short email, with the instructions: “What can you tell me about the bones?” After a short interaction, he was off and running. It seemed as if he was like something from a Star Trek episode where the machine is running around the universe gobbling up planets, but with Steve he was taking in vast amounts of information about the bones, processing, cataloging and moving on to the next. It wasn’t long after that, I received the Ted Goon article, and soon after that the first Newsletter about Bones Fest III. To be in Steve’s presence is like witnessing a  
(Continued on Page 19)

# Bones Fest XI

## August 16-19, 2007

### Newburg, WI

“WOW!! How do they do that? What a hoot!!! I don’t believe it!!! Those people are great!!! That’s the most fun I had in a long, long time!!! Etc., etc., etc.” The accolades kept rolling in from folks who came to the evening shows. Most came with not a clue of what to expect, and left as believers in the rhythm bones.

In a few words --- Bones Fest XI, held on August 18-20, 2007, was a magical weekend!!! What made it magical? Maybe the setting (Riveredge Nature Center is a special place), the weather, the food/drink, the organization or Irish Fest? Sure



Ev and Dan Cowett with Razzmatazz on our stage at Irish Fest

all that helped to create the atmosphere needed to make the weekend special, but the true magic was YOU!!! YOU, Rhythm Bones Society people who cared enough to come from all over the country to connect, to play, to listen, to teach and

to learn. That’s where the magic came from.

Many people gave many hours to make Bones Fest XI happen...a heartfelt “Thank You” is in order for the following:

a. The Rhythm Bones Society and the Board of Directors for having the faith that we could do this and the freedom to do it our way.

b. The Riveredge Nature Center who co-sponsored the event and provided the logistical support.

c. A special mention to the following people: Kathy Gordon (brochures, forms, all printing and kept us moving), LaVonne Suring (registration), Tammy Lorge (accounting), Lynne Bergschultz (T-shirt design), Laura and Tony Kasshin

(T-shirt production), Barb Gilmore (food/drink), and all the others who volunteered in the planning, running, and clean-up for Bones Fest XI.

d. The bands, Finbar McCarthy, Razzmatazz, and Frogwater, who made Friday dinner, Saturday evening, and Sunday morning special happenings.

But the real thanks go to you, the Bones Fest participants, who took the time to come and share with each other your enthusiasm, your knowledge, your

skill, your art. Lots of factors make an event special, but the people make the magic. Thank you. Oh, yeah, on top of everything else, Bones Fest XI did even make a little money. *Dave Boyles and Don Gilmore*



Hosts Don Gilmore and Dave Boyles



Host Dave Boyles performing with his band, Razzmatazz



# Bones Fest XII

## October 17-19, 2008

### St. Louis, MO

We raised and lowered the flag on BFXII and carried the RBS banner forward through the Arch and back again. And now, onward to BFXII!!!

It was an honor to serve with co-host Scott Miller in bringing our great Bones Fest to St. Louis, Missouri. It was a mighty big city for a wee group, but we were welcomed, honored and graciously served by the folks at the office of Mayor Francis Slay, who proclaimed this festival as Bones Fest XII Weekend. The Crowne Plaza Hotel, as well as the faculty and staff at the University of Missouri-St. Louis were just as welcoming.

Our group was small, but we carried

our bones high, and left a large historical footprint in the gateway, along-side footprints of Lewis and Clark, Mark Twain, and President Barack Obama, who stepped right on top of our riverboat cruise and arch-riverfront celebration. I am referring to the last minute cancellation of our riverboat cruise because of security concerns for the Obama/Biden political rally. What happens when you plan a party for 50, and 100,000 show up and they are not there to hear bones? I guess someone thought a boat load of bones players could be a dangerous thing. We are reminded that rhythm bones playing is a part of our history and continues on in spite of history.

In the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, we promised that BFXII would have these four elements: 1) lots of bones playing; 2) reunion of old and new friends; 3) the teaching and learning of all things bones; and, 4) lots of bones playing. That we did,



Co-Host Spike Bones



Co-Host Scott Miller



Host Spike Bones in the middle and Scott Miller at right and the Arch

thanks to all the support, creative input, hard work and hard play by the RBS Board, its members and all the BFXII participants, and Show Me Bones Family volunteers. The bad news for all of you who could not attend is that you missed a great festival. The double good news is that, "Bones Fest XII: The Movie", will soon be coming to a DVD player near you. This DVD will not only document BFXII events but will also include greetings and boning by members who were unable to attend... As our clock strikes 12, BFXII will always be a celebration of twelve great Bones Festivals. *Spike Bones*

# Bones Fest XIII

## August 28-30, 2009

### Louisville, KY

Once again, we had the pleasure of hosting Bones Fest XIII. First, we thank Mike Carter for suggesting the Clifton Center in Louisville, KY. It turned out to be exactly what we needed: from seminar rooms, to a fully equipped kitchen, to a beautiful stage and theater seating. The lighting and sound was superb, and our professional fest recording was great!

On Friday night, we had a catered pizza party at the Clifton center; enough pizza of various types and drinks to feed a small army! That night happened to be the birthday of Spike Bones' mother and he had a special surprise for her – a cake and a “Happy Birthday” song.

We had a wonderful selection of bones vendors, probably the largest selection we have seen to date. It was really fun

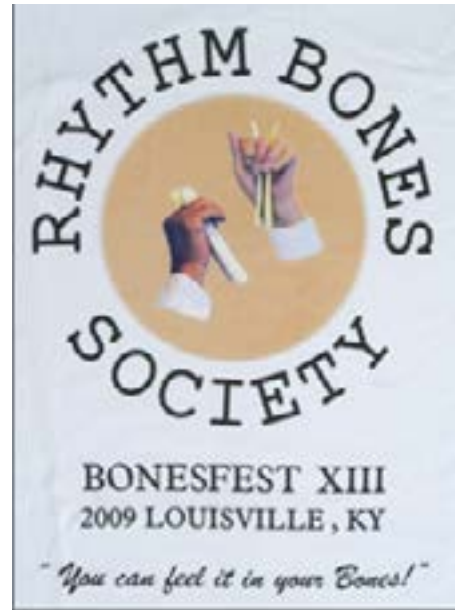
to hear everyone picking up new bones and trying them out. Some of the sounds were just amazing!

We want to thank Martha Cummings for letting us rope her into being the MC for the evening. We have to say she did one heck of a job. Her brother, Al Cowett, who was MC for many years, better watch out! Martha, you are the best!!

Steve Brown was dearly missed as he had a last minute emergency involving his son, Jeremy. We are happy to report that Jeremy is doing fine. We'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Steve Brown researching and arranging for the live music we had at this year's event. The Dixieland Band, The Rascals of Ragtime, was just awesome—they ROCKED!

Our Ceili Band was just as amazing with Jonathan Danforth on fiddle, Kenny Wolin on concertina, and Teri Davies on her Martin guitar. They were joined by local musicians Cathy Wilde on flute and whistle, and Larry Green on fiddle. Amazing how everyone who played with this group did so with precision and FUN!

A big highlight was when Kenny Wolin proposed to Teri Davies on stage. He dropped to one knee, and in front of all of us, popped the question. Teri was stunned; she said, “YES!” How cool is that?? Gil and Linda Hibben



Kenny Wolin Proposes to Teri on Stage



Hosts Linda and Gil Hibben



Bones Fest XIII Grand Finale



# Bones Fest XIV July 23-25, 2010 Alexandria, VA

When I go to a Bones Fest, magic happens because talented people attend, and Bones Fest XIV was no exception. The Lyceum, steeped in its own history in historic Old Towne Alexandria, VA, was the perfect venue for the Fest. Across the Potomac River was our nation's Capitol and the home of "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band with hosts Kenny Wolin, a member of that band, and Teri Davies, who as you will see, was moving from Buffalo to Virginia.

The Fest began on Thursday evening with a reception in the RBS Hospitality Suite in the Crown Plaza Hotel for those folks for whom two and a half days of rhythm bones playing was just not enough.

The Fest officially began Friday at 11:30 AM with a reception of food and drink, jamming, the Bones Marketplace, and people renewing old and making new friendships. In the afternoon there were two workshops. Steve Brown led one on how to play Irish music and how to join in an Irish session. Tim Reilly led one on how to play drum rudiments on rhythm bones.

Can there be a Bones Fest without a rib bones dinner? This was catered by the Red Hot and Blue Restaurant, and the rest of the evening was fun with informal performances by most everyone.



Irish Bones Jam at Farmer's Market

On Saturday, there was an Irish Bone Jam Session at the Alexandria Farmer's Market on the City Hall Pavilion Stage. One of the grand highlights was holding the largest pass-off in history, and tried to get it sanctioned by the Guinness Book of Records. Music was provided by Shepherd's Pie and some of our hosts' friends.

After lunch, there were more "Art" workshops in the Lyceum: Tim Reilly started them off with "The Ancient Art of Bone Scrimshaw;" Spike Bones led "Rhythm

Bones and the Art of Dance;" and Kenny Wolin's was "Taking it to the Next Level – The Art of 2-Hand Independence".

After a pizza dinner, we reorganized for our public performances. The doors opened at 6 PM for beginner lessons led by the Meschers and an open Bones Marketplace. At 6:30 the show began, and continued until everyone who wanted to perform did so in some kind of costume or better dress. Apart from the wedding host, Teri's greatest Bones Fest highlight was performing bones on stage for the first time with her daughter, Emily. Everyone had a great time.

Most of us went back to the hotel and jammed until the wee hours. Greg Adams and Bob Winans, both with their period minstrel banjos, played for a couple more hours. Lots more rhythm bones jamming!

According to the hosts, the highlight of the weekend happened Sunday morning. At 9 AM sharp, attendees gathered in the lobby of the hotel and waited for Gunnery Sgt. Kenneth Scott Wolin, in full dress uniform, to walk down the stairs and lead everyone to Trans-Potomac Canal Central. Music was provided by Jonathan Danforth on violin and Mary Audette on flute, playing Teri's favorite waltz, "Give Me Your Hand." The crowd hushed as Teri Davies walked down the curved stairs to the landing, where, after pausing, walked down more stairs passing through the raised bones of the Rhythm Bones Honor Guard. It was a beautiful culmination of Kenny's proposal to Teri on stage at Bones Fest XIII (to the surprise of Teri and all

(Continued on Page 16)



Hosts Teri and Kenny Wolin were married at the Fest



Bones Fest XIV Group Photograph



# Bones Fest XV June 10-12, 2011 San Antonio, TX

I really enjoyed being with all of you during Bones Fest XV. I hope you enjoyed San Antonio and all the activities.

On Friday and Saturday mornings, all the attendees gathered at the Alamo Courtyard to jam and play for many spectators. The Alamo staff personally thanked me for having this event.

Many of you commented about how much you enjoyed the dinner cruise. This enjoyable dinner cruise was a first for me, too. I also enjoyed the parts of the river that the tour barges do not visit so that was also a “baby book” experience



for me. I chose the Casa Rio Restaurant for two reasons: It is my favorite place to eat when I am downtown, and Steve Brown said he wanted some real Texas Chili. From the 1860’s to the 1930’s, the San Antonio Chili Queens plied their food wares from their carts on Alamo Plaza. The chili on our dinner plates was one of the Chili Queen’s recipes!

I also hope you found the Alamo and

the I-Max movie informative. If we had been in another part of San Antonio I would not have scheduled this event – but since we were right across the street...

My music folks shared with me why they enjoyed this event: 1) they really liked the configuration of players that were able to assemble for this gig. We stayed and jammed until after 1 AM Sunday morning after all of the bones players left; 2) they were glad that they were once again able to perform at Folklife since it has been too many years since the last time they performed there; and, 3) they were enthralled with the talent the bones players brought to the jam sessions and public performances. When I asked them what they thought of the bones players that had much more talent than I do --- they said, “Wow!”

A big “Thank You” goes out to Walt. Walt had contracted with a duo to play for the Friday and Saturday jam sessions. After much negotiating, we were allowed to use the hotel’s meeting rooms for jamming. The duo was wonderful and really added extra enjoyment to the jamming.

Steve Wixson and I discussed how much we enjoyed planning and executing this Fest. With Steve’s encouragement, and prediction that in 5 years I could host another Fest, I decided that I would be happy to serve once more. (And, that prediction is a reality! Dennis is hosting the Fest in 2017!)

Performance highlights that I enjoyed: The way the pattern of the notes of “Golden Slippers” is played on the Hammered Dulcimer allows for this



Host Dennis Riedesel

song to be played at a very high tempo. When Sky and Dana shifted through the gears into super (Continued on Page 16)



Dennis Riedesel on the right with the Tanner Family Minstrel Band



# Bones Fest XVI August 9-11, 2012 Orlando, FL

Our “Sweet Sixteen” Bones Fest XVI was celebrated in Orlando, Florida, at the elegant Rosen Plaza Hotel. Cuisine from gourmet to deli fare was available in the hotel, as well as a game room and a nightclub for the night owl bones players. Across the street was Pointe Orlando, with a myriad of restaurants and pubs.

Our weekend began on Thursday night when 31 bones players and guests ventured into Pleasure Island, Downtown Disney, to have dinner and play bones at the Raglan Road Irish Pub. Colin Farrell and Damien McCarthy of the house band, Creel, gave us “cead mile failte” (meaning, “a hundred thousand welcomes”) and invited RBS members to play with the band.



Some of the Performers at BB King's

The first to go were Jonathan Danforth and Skeff Flynn. They did a “talking bones face off” and wowed the crowd. Their bones danced in their hands and the call and response conversation of the bones kept us all wondering what would happen next.

Then, came the four showmen – Hank Tenenbaum, Mitch Boss, “Spike Bones” Muhrer, and “Black Bart” Boyles – who asked the band to play Bill Staines’ song, “All God’s Creatures Got a Place in the Choir”. Demonstrating four different styles of bones playing, they rocked the pub. They played low, higher, loud and they were on fire! Off the stage they came, conga-line snaking through the tables. Imagine our surprise when they boldly climbed on top of the Irish dancer stage among the dining

tables! Spike returned to the main stage, strutting gracefully while Hank, Mitch and “Black Bart” Dave turned back to back and played their bones facing the audience from all directions. The crowd roared, whistled, hooted and applauded! The band grinned in wide-eyed wonder. Everyone loved it! The three made their way back to the stage, and a foursome once again, they ended their tune to a standing ovation from about 160 people in the audience.

We finished the show with our champion “All Ireland” bones player, Steve Brown. The Band, Creel, cranked up the music and played a lightning fast set as Steve matched them note for note. It was fast and furious and everyone could clearly see how the champ won his title. Steve and the band raised the roof! The crowd was on its’ feet stomping, dancing and clapping to the rhythm of the bones. Bones Fest XVI players created an unforgettable night for all at the Raglan Road Irish Pub.

Friday was an astounding, full day of workshops, bones stories, and jamming. We spent the day in our conference room at the Rosen Plaza where music was provided by Brogan’s Blues Band and Just in Time, an old time music band. Sharon and Jerry Mescher kicked off the informal workshops by demonstrating and explaining how to hold the bones and how to make the first movements to get sounds. Sharon then asked everyone to think about and share “what you know” and “how you do it”.

Every Bones Fest is different. A Fest personality develops from the camaraderie of those who come, and you never know who will come. We were all surprised and delighted by new bones player, Jim Steakley, from Sanford, Florida. At 99 years old, he decided to learn to play the bones. His daughter, Jimi, from Alabama, brought her father to his first fest. I suggested that her father might prefer to attend the afternoon jamming and performances, but, no, her father wanted to attend the workshops so he could learn to play better. In 1948, at a West Virginia restaurant, Jim remembered seeing a coal miner play three bones in each hand. “I went to the restaurant just to hear him



Hosts Mary Lee and Frank Sweet

play the bones; came today to learn. Don’t know if I will learn, but I have the opportunity. I tried to straighten the bones, but they don’t straighten!”

Jim played the bones and Steve Brown got the audience to clap a rhythm... Jim Steakley’s opportunity to learn more about playing the bones will surely be one of the “precious memories” that BFXVI attendees will treasure. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJF3cGpxdSM>)

Throughout the day, methods were shared by Mitch Boss, Steve Brown, Steve Wixson, Skeff Flynn, Dennis Riedesel, Jonathan Danforth, Jerry and Sharon Mescher, Dave “Black Bart” Boyles, and Darryl “Spike Bones” Muhrer. Many others who shared ideas during the jams included:

- a. Hank Tenenbaum, quietly circulated and offered

(Continued on Page 16)



Bones Fest XVI Group Photograph



# Bones Fest XVII August 9-11, 2013 Leominster, MA

As I look back at my second fest, it's hard not to reflect on my mistakes as well as the successes. My biggest mistake was focusing too hard on a location that I could not get, and I wasted a lot of time trying to make it work. When I finally accepted the direction it was going, it was a real joy. My favorite moments were spread over the entire weekend.

On Thursday night I had arranged for a group of us to go to the local cable TV company and perform on the Mayor of Leominster's weekly program. We met as a group and took turns performing in front of the camera. Afterward we went to one of our favorite restaurants. As a group of about 20, we sat down together and had a marvelous dinner. With all the stress of organizing just going out the window, and the joy of getting together, the real focus, I think I relaxed for the first time that week. On Friday, we attempted to perform the first community outreach visits as part of a Bones Fest.

The first was at the Boys and Girls Club of Leominster/Fitchburg. We met at the hotel and I went with the group to make introductions and settle them in. Within minutes, Bill Vits had taken control of the audience and had their undivided attention. With the event in good hands, I ran off to the Senior

Center to set up and organize that visit. Adam Klein was already there and entranced the seniors with his voice and banjo. Seeing the events take off through our members was a real thrill for me. On Friday, I had arranged for a casual evening of jamming with a friend, Paul Luria, and Bob Goulet's band who had graciously donated their time. The evening was in great form when an old friend, Victor Albert, dropped in with his fiddle. Victor, now in his 80's, had played at my first Bones Fest. It was a great thrill for me to see him jamming with our members. At the end of the night, the entire Cowett family arrived, and that was inspiring.

Saturday afternoon we attempted the first bones playing flash mob at Kimball Farms in Lancaster. One of the best ice cream restaurants in the area, they are always crowded. In the huge tent to one side of their building, Jonathan Danforth and Frank Sweet started with a fiddle tune. Soon 40 something bones players joined in and the ice cream goers were amazed! We hung out for several hours, repeating our performance, and getting free ice cream to boot!

The Saturday night performance took on the persona that many of our Saturday night performances do --- it was marvelous!

I thank each and every attendee, the musicians, and our hosts for making it a special time! *Stephen Brown*



Host Steve Brown



First RBS Flash mob at Kimball Farm



Bones Fest XVII Group Photograph taken at the Kimball Farm



# Bones Fest XVIII August 7-10, 2014 Grand Rapids, MI

At Bones Fest XVIII, 50 attendees gathered in my home town of Grand Rapids, MI. Once people had arrived at the Riverfront Hotel on Thursday, many folks went to the One Trick Pony for dinner and a rousing evening of bones playing with Sean & Seamus – guys that are dear musical friends who played “bone-friendly” tune after tune. San Slomovits surprised many with Emily & Jacob and a mini-set of their intimate music (<http://sanemilyandjacob.wix.com/sanemilyandjacob>).



Flashmob in Downtown with Celtic Kilroy

On Friday, the Fest started at the Guest House in the cheesy charm of the old Polish Hall, which made us feel right at home. At 12:30 we all converged at Rosa Parks Circle where Celtic Kilroy was “frozen” as a bronze statue with bones. A crowd of spectators started to develop at the “What is that?” sight! Suddenly, 30 bones players brought him to life and played along to Irish tunes from a hidden speaker. Steve Wixson and I enjoyed jamming with a local street musician. Yes, we played a medley including Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean”!

After lunch, we returned to the Guest House for Stephen Brown’s clinic on beginning bones. With his logical and relaxed approach, several newbies were playing in no time. Teaching bones requires patience, humor and physical contact, and Stephen has the magic.

I did a clinic on rudimental bones and covered flams, paradiddles, doubles as they can work into our bones playing. I enjoy playing the bones at a small drum set which adds lots of possibilities.

This Bones Fest was a tribute to Percy Danforth and we were blessed to have his son, grandson, and great-grandson(!) in attendance. Another special guest was Sue Barber, who wrote and documented much of Percy’s rhythm bone history. Discussion and stories were lively and all agreed Percy would be thrilled to see our organization. Malcolm “Mac” Danforth brought an inherited treasure box of his father’s memorabilia: clippings, pictures, drawings and awards that Percy had received. We all found something in that box that excited or touched our hearts. One article quoted Fran, Percy’s wife, saying, “Percy is a musician like a bird is...but I’m a trained musician.” Mac gave this treasure trove to Percy’s grandson, Jonathan Danforth.

Friday evening we were treated to a Polish dinner, and my wife Stacey’s desserts. After the meal we still had energy to all get up and perform as a rehearsal for our Saturday night show. Jay Round and Tom Devries supplied hammered dulcimer, bass and guitar for live music while Jay ran sound and coordinated CD’s, iPhone tablets and anything with an output. For the Saturday night show we had 26 acts to coordinate.

Saturday found some second day registrants and folks jammed while we snuck in a board meeting. Randy Seppala and Ste-



Host Bill Vits

phen Brown were selling beautiful bones of all types between teaching and giving tips. At lunch time 90-year old Lew Guernsey, from Ionia, arrived in a BMW convertible. Lew knew Percy (Continued on Page 18)



Bones Fest XVIII Group Photograph



# Bones Fest XIX

## August 6-9, 2015

### Shepherdstown, WV

Hello RBS members! I need to start out by saying that it was an absolute blessing to be able to host Bones Fest XIX. Throughout the weekend I was reminded of what an incredible community this is. I believe it was Mitch Boss who said to me “this is the only place you’ll go where everyone you meet just wants to figure out what you’re doing well.” I couldn’t agree more. We all seem to look for and to bring out the best in each other.

I should also note that there are far too many memories to fit into a single article. I will do my best to cover as much as I can, but I know that I can’t get to everything.



Stage at Shepherdstown Opera House

Bones Fest XIX officially kicked off on August 6th in the Tuscany Grille at the Clarion Hotel in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. My good friends, The Shedhoppers, did what they do best. They brought their enthusiasm and their openness and played honest renditions of a wide range of material. Their support was the foundation for a great opening night and the bones players in attendance were more than happy to jump right in, playing and even singing along.

A good bones player has rhythm, but even the best bones players seem to move on a time of their own. The phrase “herding cats” comes to mind... Friday morning was challenging. And then Stan Von Hagen gave me a gift sometime after lunch. He asked about the program for the afternoon and I could see the sincere desire to learn in his eyes. He spurred me to action...I learned a lot about hosting a Bones Fest on Friday and Saturday was better as a result. Stan was a big part of

that. I see a real difference in Stan’s playing this year over last and it’s that desire to learn that will keep him moving forward. I’m awarding him the unofficial “most improved player” award this year (I ‘unofficially’ received this award myself in 2011 from Steve Brown).

We had workshops on Friday and Saturday. During Friday’s workshop, Eric Fredenburgh would start a tune and we would send it around the room pass-off style. After each tune we would highlight accent points, recognize approaches that worked and answer questions. On Saturday, The Shedhoppers put on the workshop. Some of the main topics we covered were: adjusting volume to match the ensemble, when to embellish, and when to play simple patterns.

There are definitely two separate and distinct notions about bones playing. One is that the bones are something of a novelty. The bones should be played fast and loud with flare and showmanship for a tune...taking a lead role in the music or in the performance. The other is that the bones should be understated and supportive of the music and as such could be present throughout. This latter position is one I have mostly found myself taking.

Bones Fest XIX was dedicated to the memory of Walt Watkins and Jerry Mescher. In my welcome message for the program I said that “the connections we make and the impact we have on others lives are at least as important as the music we play”, and so on Friday



Host Skeffington Flynn

afternoon we took time to reflect on the impact that these men had on our community and to celebrate their legacy. Steve Wixson put together some excellent video presentations that served as introductions for those that didn’t know them and as reminiscence for those that did. Participants shared their favorite stories and we closed with a massive pass-off. These two Bones Ambassadors are surely missed but they live on in the vibrant tradi- (Continued on Page 18)



Bones Fest XIX Group Photograph at Shepherd University Student Center

# Bones Fest XX

## August 4-7, 2016

### Homer, NY

Here I sit on Monday morning and Bones Fest XX is over. The 43 participants from 19 states and 1 Canadian Province have scattered back to their homes and I sit here in a partial coma. The last week has been a whirlwind of activity for Janet and me. Except for this report the paper work is done, the bills are paid and unless Steve Wixson thinks of something else this one is in the bag.

Oops, he did think of something else. I



Another Kenny Wolin Advanced Workshop

forgot to publicly thank Jim Conner for the inspiration for the BF XX T-shirts. Back at Bones Fest X he made a prophesy that the shirt would have a picture of the world with twenty bones coming out like rays of the sun. Glad he came up with that as a picture of a Cortland apple playing the bones was my first thought. Thanks, Jim.

A word about Steve Wixson. He is the background guiding hand that makes these

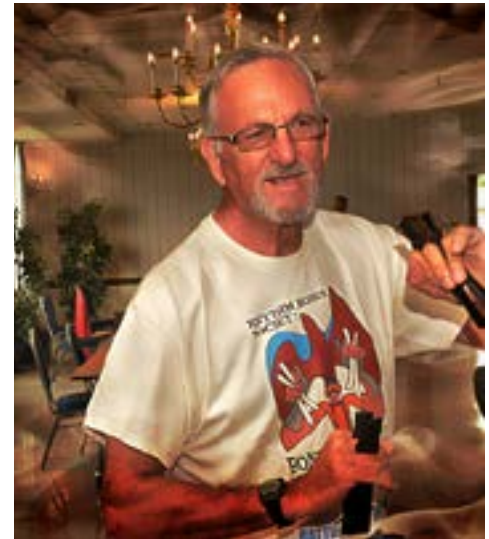
festivals come to life. The Host's guide book, time line and the periodic email that says it is time for this or that, keeps things moving along. Between his help and the advice of Steve Brown, from time to time, most of the stress was of my own making. In the last week I learned not to schedule events on too tight a time line. I also learned that dealing with a group of musicians can be like herding cats. But those cats can make a Bones Fest purr. In the opinion of everyone I spoke with it was a huge success.

The Friday morning seminars by Bill Vits and Steve Brown were enlightening and confusing at the same time. Enlightening because they both touched on aspects of bones playing I struggle with and confusing because if I live to be a hundred I will never gain the skill set of either of them. It is sufficient that I pick up a tidbit here and there to move me forward in my practice.



The Grand Finale

The Friday afternoon outreach projects were my most stressful points of the weekend as I timed things too closely after lunch and did (Continued on Page 19)



Host Gerry Hines



Lime Hollow Nature Center Day Camp Outing led by Bill Vits

## Bones Fest XIV

attendees). Then it was back to the hotel for a champagne breakfast and farewells.

Steve Brown thought the new attendees were quite impressive, and there must have been 10-15 folks who had never been to a Fest. Each and every one of them was enthusiastic and charmed by the event. He was pleased to see Wilma Myers, who looked in good health, and the Cowetts, all playing together again. He was thrilled that Bob Winans had come, and he was, Steve thought, impressed with the event. Many thanks to Bob and Greg Adams for coming back to the hotel and playing tunes and informing us about the banjo, long into the night. *Kenny and Teri Wolin*

## Bones Fest XV Continued

overdrive it was all I could do to keep up and I was thumping along on the beat—pity those musicians that had to fill up less and less space in between the beats!

Jessye and Sky's duets on Celtic Fiddle and Bones were a treat.

Mary Lee and Frank Sweet's sets were enjoyable. And, a big "Thank You" to them for being willing to time their performance so the band could get a break.

Naturally all of the individual performances were wonderful for me to observe, but I was especially enthralled when the players formed the various combinations to perform together in twos and threes. I do not recall seeing many of these combinations in past Bones Fests so it was interesting to watch each player fit their technique into the technique of their partners. I am glad things worked out time wise so we could do more of these group performances than what we were able to do in past Fests. And while I am thinking in terms of duets and trios, it is always a highlight experience to watch the Meschers. Randy's silver spoon bones were very interesting when applied to the waltz. I can only recall Randy doing this to, "Silver Bells". After I heard him play some of the other waltzes, I thought maybe I could throw Randy a curve when I asked the band to play my favorite

waltz, "OOT PIK", but Randy's spoons were beautiful with this song.

After determining who was attending the Fest, I did not schedule formal workshops because everyone wanted to jam with Jay and Tammy and the Tanner Family Minstrels. They attended workshops as they watched each others solo performances and then watched each other during the pass-offs and picked up techniques via that method. I was also interested in those of you who played along with Gene's blues guitar. I have performed along with him in the past so I was interested in what could be done in concert with this instrument.

For an off stage event I had asked Larry to bring along his "Fiddle Sticks" fiddle. Steve Brown, Bill Vits, and a few others got to try out or see this percussive technique.

I do not know why the Alamo Staff was so interested in the bones. They had a modern set in the archives collections and brought the set out to the patio. I did not see this, but Steve Wixson told me that Dr. Winders, who led our special Alamo tour, actually played in our final group on Saturday. I was also pleased to see those who were with us, at the hotel, rattle out the triplets. Thank you, teachers; maybe we can actually get some new members. *Dennis Riedesel*

## Bones Fest XIV Continued

one-on-one instruction;

b. Chuck Spano...let the non-musicians know about the importance of ending at the same time as the music;

c. "Spike Bones" explained that you have to "feel it in your bones"; he taught us a flat clap, a cup clap, and a flat cup clap to show different sounds one can achieve;

d. Steve Wixson and Dave "Black Bart" Boyles demonstrated how to keep a steady blues beat as the audience plays along with them...;

e. Steve Brown told how Percy Danforth taught two elements of play – the tap and the rattle...and added the double tap...;

f. Dennis Riedesel demonstrated the "fly swatter" technique and stressed flipping back and forth. But his unique contribution...was his lecture on the "science of playing the bones";

g. Dave Boyles performed with his washboard and bones to different types of music;

([http://youtube.com/watch?v=PBfu-](http://youtube.com/watch?v=PBfu-47OoSkA)

47OoSkA)

h. Skeff Flynn shared that a bones player should pick out the melody and accent it with the bones... Mitch Boss joined Skeff to demonstrate a duo sound: playing the same beat, different beats at the same time, and playing in tandem;

i. Steve Wixson showed different styles of play and different types of bones;

j. Jonathan Danforth played fiddle while Steve Brown gave tips on playing Irish... While Barry Brogan played a slow blues song and sang, Jonathan demonstrated how to listen for the opportunities to insert bones rhythms and how to use varied patterns of play. When a performer is singing, one should use quiet beats;

k. The Mescher Trio threw caution to the wind by playing to live music with Bluesman Barry. As Jerry, said, "...We're in dark territory here". But, when it was over, Barry declared, "It worked"!

Bones jamming, singing and stories highlighted Friday evening. The bands played and everyone rattled their bones while experienced players found new players to coach:

l. Dave Boyles started a sit-down pass-off, a traditional pass-off and a conga line.

m. Dennis Riedesel, Gerry Hines, Steve Brown, Larry Benson, Bob Gross, Ivan Browning and Mitch Boss shared bones stories.

n. Steve Wixson gave a one minute history of the bones.

o. Jonathan Danforth fiddled while the "Happiest Bones Player", Jeremy Brown, played his bones.

p. John Davis from Virginia, who has played bones for 66 years, wowed us with his expertise!

q. Larry Benson asked all bones players to back him up while he sang the old country song, "I'm My Own Grandpa".

r. Dave "Black Bart" Boyles, was the man in black – black pants, shirt, hat and a silver "washboard" tie!

s. First time Bones Fest attendee, Philip "Vgo" Terry, a Florida musical treasure, played and sang while Mitch Boss, Sharon Mescher and Dave Boyles played in their different styles.

t. Bob Gross played ukulele and sang how ukuleles are not allowed in bluegrass music because Bill Monroe never had one.

u. Hank Tenebaum, who played with



Vgo, busking on the streets of D.C., 40 years ago, rattled his bones while Vgo did the traditional ragtime, "Talking Hard Luck".

v. Dave Boyles got everyone on their feet in a conga-line leading to the exit and a good night to some while others did a bit of pub crawling. Rumor has it that one young man, after the pub crawls, spent the rest of the night dancing the Zumba with the Zumba Conference ladies at our hotel!

Saturday morning began with a very elegant, delicious, and beautifully presented catered breakfast buffet.

Back in the conference room bands played, bones rattled, Steve Brown, Hank Tenenbaum and others provided coaching, and ninety-nine year old, Jim Steakley, enjoyed practicing his bones and getting individual instruction. Many thanks to his daughter, Jimi Johnson, for bringing him. Steve Brown presented a workshop on making bones and how to choose the right bones. Then, we all headed to B.B. King's for our "Blues Bones Show".

Josh Pender, manager of B.B King's Restaurant and Blues Club at Pointe Orlando, graciously sponsored the Bones Fest XVI, "Sweet Sixteen Party" on Saturday afternoon... We presented a one hour rhythm bones performance in the bluesiest style we could muster. Blues and jazz music by Barry Brogan, Florida legend Philip "Vgo" Terry, and old time mountain blues by Just in Time, provided the rhythm and the beat for a variety of bones players. It might have been the first time a blues club featured a banjo player.

The Saturday evening program was emceed by Steve Brown, with his traditional style and grace keeping the audience's attention while bands changed and bones players rotated on and off the stage. The fast paced show highlighted:

a. Our Mescher Trio (All members of the Iowa Country Music Hall of Fame);

b. The "bone-off" between "Black Bart" and "Spike Bones";

c. The talking bones of Jonathan Danforth and Skeff Flynn;

d. The old time skills of John Davis;

e. Hank Tenenbaum, who played with Vgo's music, made it look smooth

and easy as he matched any beat played. He had bones in his shirt pocket and a bag of bones hanging from his belt;

f. Dennis Riedesel joined Spike for some talking bones;

g. Mitch Boss played "Kansas City Blues" with Black Bart and Skeff;

h. Jonathan Danforth entertaining the crowd when Steve wasn't talking and the band wasn't ready;

i. During "Alabama Jubilee", Mitch, Spike and Black Bart showed their entertainment chops: they played to the left, they played to the right, they wiggled in the middle, did a circle "round and a butt bow"!

j. Jeremy Brown, "the happiest bones player", was introduced, and his smile lit up the room.

k. Then, everyone was invited to join the traditional bones conga line. Even General Manager, Josh, grabbed a pair of bones and joined the parade...all bowed and retired from the stage to order some of the most excellent food served by B.B. King's. Memories are made of this!

l. Saturday night we told stories, played music, performed bones playing to CDs, or the bands, and got to know each other a little better. Philip Chan told us a story and played his harmonica for us. Skeff Flynn told a story and played bones, as did Mitch Boss.

m. Kathy Whisler boldly played bones while singing the ballad of "Anne Bonny". She ended with a smile that should be on a poster advertising bones playing! Frank and Mary Lee Sweet told the story of a Florida cow hunter, Bone Mizell, and sang "Camp Town Races". Larry Benson treated us to a humorous song about a medical expert, and Gerry Hines told us his example of a "moral story" about his Aunt Mary;

n. Jonathan Danforth showed us how to play with palm frond bones (suggested by son, Emmett) as he whistled a tune in his talented style. Spike took his clothes off in the dark, revealing an amazing ability to stand on one foot in his glow-in-the-dark skeleton suit. The skeleton danced, the audience applauded, and the bones rattled;

o. Skeff Flynn began with a story of spoons players in West Virginia and then played bones and sang, "Country Roads", accompanied by Just in Time.

"Dopplegangers, Mitch Boss and Steve Brown, clowning around as they played bones to the music and amused us all.

Our night ended, for the first time ever, with the music of Bob Campbell's bagpipes. He played his pipes as everyone tried their hand at a new sound and beat. Black Bart led the conga-line parade as we bid another Bones Fest adieu.

On Sunday morning, Bones Fest XVI participants gathered at the Café Matisse Restaurant and enjoyed the breakfast buffet. Those who remained were treated to an hour of Gospel Bones. Hosts Frank and Mary Lee Sweet displayed the lyrics of the songs on a screen and everyone joined them in singing and playing the bones. Frank played banjo, Philip Chan played harmonica, Steve Brown played the penny whistle, and Jonathan joined in with fiddle. Amazing Grace was requested and proved to be challenging...but as Hank Tenenbaum noted, Jeremy Brown "nailed it"!

A Special "Thank You" to:

a. All the spouses who came and joined us for shows and meals.

b. Jonathan and Melissa for bringing Emmett, great-grandson of Percy Danforth.

c. Pat Spano for designing our Bones Playing Gator T-shirt.

d. Chuck Spano for having the T-Shirts produced and playing percussion with two bands.

e. Frank Sweet who provided the sound system and served as sound man.

f. The Mescher Trio for the precision, artistry and matching outfits that make them stars.

g. Dave "Black Bart" Boyles for keeping the show moving and leading the conga lines.

h. Steve Brown for being the best emcee a Bones Fest could have.

i. Darryl "Spike Bones" Muhrer for the showmanship and star quality performances.

j. Hank Tenenbaum for one-on-one instruction to so many and for bringing his friend, Vgo, who shared so much talent with us.

k. Steve Wixson for being the man behind the curtain. He provided information, answered questions, made suggestions, listened, printed name tags and programs, helped with the fest proposal, the budget and the financial report, did

incredible things with the website and reimbursed me for out of pocket expenses.

“Thank you” to ALL of YOU who came and shared your stories, your songs and your love of playing rhythm bones. *Mary Lee Sweet*

## Bones Fest XVIII Continued

and even made a set of bones on his machinery. He shared his wonderful collection of bones with me and even gave me a set of noisemaker “cheater bones”. He had never seen such a congregation of players!

Saturday saw clinics by Skeffington Flynn on bones history and beginning bones. Skeff is doing great things for the RBS, including a brochure that is now available to promote the bones. Spike Bones got the crowd loose by circling the players and encouraging participation. Celtic Kilroy gave great tips on harmonica and bones while busking. His multi/instrument energy was infectious. A quick membership meeting featured lowering our dues from \$25 to \$20.

Saturday’s dinner had more great food... while Stacey made more delicious desserts. Before you knew it, it was almost show-time and folks wandered in not really knowing what to expect.

After doing three radio and TV promotions, we had a good turnout of interested listeners. The show was fast paced and the variety of styles and techniques was astounding. All the regulars performed, but I must mention a few others. The next generation of bones players were Anika and Joseph Kooi who played the bones AND tap danced! Jack Frost cracked me up when he played a gallop rhythm and pretended to “whip the horse.” Kathy Whisler sang and played with a wonderful voice (she’s a lawyer). Jeremy Brown, the “Superman of the Bones,” closed the first half with a crowd pleasing performance to “Happy” which caused big smiles all around.

The second half featured the Mescher family, Mary Lee & Frank Sweet and more veterans of previous fests. Gerard Arseneault brought out the smiles, and Sky Barlett blew the roof as he looked like Bruce Lee with rhythm bones. Celtic Kilroy showed his musical versatility, Steve Wixson jammed with Jay on the upright bass and Spike Bones put on a mini-minstrel show. The grand finale was our conga line with all

participants on their feet.

After the show, tear down & clean up, we celebrated back at the “Danforth Suite” and said our good-byes at brunch the next morning. The RBS is healthy, happy and teaching new people to play the bones. Thank you all who traveled to GR and trusted me to host Bones Fest XVIII. *Bill Vits*

## Bones Fest XIX Continued

tions they helped instill in us.

Ben Denny needs special recognition as, not only did The Shedhoppers provide music, he also stayed late, sat in on the jams, and introduced the Tin Roof Pickers, who played for the Saturday night program. Many, many thanks are in order.

Perhaps my favorite story from late night...came on Friday night. There was a wedding party at the Clarion...and the 94 year old grandmother...happened by the Morgan room. She remembered hearing her grandfather play the bones and asked if she could sit with us for a tune or two. Of course she was welcome! As she got situated Rowan jumped up and played the bones for her. As I understand it she was visibly jubilant, happily pantomiming the motions of playing the bones and tapping her foot in time with the music. Moments like this are truly a gift to everyone involved.

Speaking of Rowan Corbett, he is currently a member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops...he is doing more for bones playing than he realizes by being out in the world and playing bones in all of the venues that he does. Eric Fredenburgh said to me at one point that he was enjoying watching some of the interactions and pointed to Rowan as an example. I said, “Yeah, I love Rowan”, to which he replied, “I love Rowan and I don’t even know him!”

The public concert at the Shepherdstown Opera House on Saturday, August 8th, was absolutely the capstone of the event. Many thanks to Larry Cumbo, Nicola Larsen, Steve Cifala, and Shane Harris. I believe it was a first for a capacity crowd and actually had to turn away about a dozen people due to lack of seating. The estimate was that we had 130 people.

One of the primary concerns of the RBS is to insure the continuation of bones playing traditions. The only way

that happens is by getting young people involved. Peter Johnston learned to play from his grandfather. He then passed this on to his son, Nathaniel, who at 15 has become a formidable player.

Jeremy Brown, once again won the title of the world’s happiest bones player. For the grand finale, all of the bones players assembled on the dance floor, and The Shedhoppers and the Tin Roof Pickers launched into a chorus of “Momma Don’t Allow” (no bones playing ‘round here). We, fittingly, ended the concert with “Country Roads”.

Sunday morning began with a farewell breakfast at the Clarion. For many it was our last opportunity to connect and celebrate our fellowship. What a wonderful site to see so many of our members enjoying a meal together.

In wrapping this up, I need to recognize a few more key contributors:

a. One of these contributors was recognized during the fest – Steve Wixson... Steve is the very heart of the Rhythm Bones Society. Without his efforts I’m not sure that the RBS would exist. As part of the fest, Stephen Brown presented to Steve a gift of ebony bones that had been tooled by Jerry Mescher. What a fitting reward to recognize all that he does!

b. My drummer friend, Jon Kalbaugh, provided the sound system; 12 hours on Friday and over 8 hours on Saturday!

c. The Bones Fest XIX logo and T-shirt were composed by Marek Bennett.

d. Spike Bones provided the television we used during the remembering Walt and Jerry Session. He also pulled the audience in at the Opera House using his patented flamboyant brand of showmanship. Mary Lee Sweet once again filled the role of videographer and I look forward to seeing what she captured.

e. Tim Reilly and I talked about the passage of knowledge and traditions from the “kings to the knights” and how the “knights become the kings”.

Bones Fest is always an invigorating experience. It’s our community that makes it great. Thank you to everyone who participated in Bones Fest XIX. It really was a gift to me to be able to host this event. We all know that there are people that love us but to see it demonstrated so clearly...I’ll say it again, it’s a gift. There’s no other way to describe it. May your bones be with you. *Skeff Flynn*

## Bones Fest XX Continued

not figure on an overwhelmed restaurant. A couple of phone calls to delay things a bit and everything turned out great. The folks who entertained at the senior living center had a small but very appreciative audience. Those of us who went to the day camp at Lime Hollow Nature Center had the opportunity to teach 71 campers, ages 8 to 14, to play the bones. Amazingly a few of them got it right off. Bill Vits has a way with kids and really gets in their face making them pay attention. The kids had all been on an overnight camp-out and were up until 1:30 AM (sounds like a bones jam), and were filthy and tired. With Ben Denny, Jonathan Danforth and Adam Klein on guitar, fiddle and banjo, respectively, the kids were all wide awake. The Dutch Penny Bones (invented by Dutch Kopp) were a big hit. A few of the more greedy campers figured out how to loosen the pennies but most tried to play them.

Our Friday night meal was consumed with great gusto. We had gotten 7 party sub platters from Subway. Janet and I were wondering how we were going to get rid of all that food. Our worries were in vain of course as 43 hungry bones players demolished those platters, plus the 108 cookies that came with them. Evidently bones playing is a high calorie burn!

The Friday night rehearsal show with the live band, Metku, was great entertainment for ourselves and gave us a chance to get the kinks out. Ty Marshall, who is the director of Homer Center for the Arts, sent us a sound tech, Seth Asa, who has some very real skills and made us sound like the professionals that many of our leading bones players are. Speaking of professionals, Adam Klein had only one day available to be with us and wowed us as usual with an a capella voice and bones routine. Moving into the planning of the Saturday night show we realized that a five minute time limit was going to be necessary to get all 24 acts into a 2-hour show.

Back at the London Room in the hotel the serious (OK, maybe not serious, Mitch was there) jamming continued into

the night as it did all 3 nights. These jam sessions are probably the highlight of every Bones Fest as we are not performing for anybody. We are relaxing and enjoying being with good friends and playing the bones.

Saturday morning was another outreach to the public with a beginner's bones playing class. It started with Kenny Wolin and Tim Reilly doing a "Shanty Sing" tying in the old time sailor's life and the bones. They got the audience ready for the serious (really?) teaching done by Steve Brown. Steve Wixson, acting as teacher's helper, had a friend of Janet's playing with 2 hands before the end. Either Steve is a great teacher or she is a natural. Both of those things are probably true. Several attendees bought bones from our vendors both after the class and during and after the evening show.

It is hard to pick "the" highlight of the Saturday show. Rowan Corbett and ilyAMy would certainly be on the list. The vast improvement of Stan Van Hagen, Kenny Wolin's disco routine, Steve Brown and Mitch with their usual antics, Ben Denny being backed by Ron and Marie Bruschi waltzing in the colored lights against the back wall, Bob Goulet and Lynda Bertrand displaying a French Canadian bones duel, Dennis Riedesel's bones light show. All of the acts were wonderful and different and showed off the many talents of our RBS members. I hope without mentioning all 24 I haven't hurt any feelings. I can't leave out of course our "World's happiest bones player", Jeremy Brown, whose Superman act brought down the house. At the end of the show the crowd was on its' feet in a standing ovation.

The last jam session of Bones Fest XX kept us (them) going until after 1:30 AM. I fell in a heap about 12:30. Two ladies who attended the show at Bones Fest XIX drove all the way from West Virginia to the Bones Fest XX show and stayed up until almost midnight at the jam session. They were grinning from ear to ear all evening.

Sunday morning breakfast - a bitter sweet experience. A good-bye to family for another year. If any of you get to Arizona this winter look me up and we will rattle the streets of Tombstone together.  
*Gerry Hines*

## Steve Wixson Continued

combination of a comet and the Tasmanian devil from a Bugs Bunny cartoon -- awe inspiring. It's difficult to think about what the Rhythm Bones Society would be without him: how he's influenced the structure of Bones Fests, how he single-handedly created the Newsletter and keeps it going, how he continually comes up with new ideas like the online museum, and how he never seems to run out of energy. Steve, thank you for not just everything you do, but for all you do to make us better at what we do! *Stephen Brown*

Where would our bones society be without him? From my first Internet contact and my first Bones Fest in Chattanooga, I knew that Steve Wixson loved the bones. Not only the bones, but all the interesting people that play them. He has educated and inspired me; unafraid to always share what we do. A true expert on the subject, Steve never belittles and that has set the tone for our society. When I found out he also sang Barbershop music, this also resonated as my father lived to harmonize. Thank you, Steve, for perpetuating our unique music making and connecting people who are still excited by hitting two bones together! *Bill Vits*

## Time to Renew Membership

Be a part of the next decade of Bones Fests by renewing your membership for 2017. Of course, you do not have to be a member to attend a Bones Fest, but I will use any trick to get members to renew.

Our fiscal year runs from January to December, so it is time for all of us to renew.

Dues support the [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) website, pays for the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter that goes in paper form to members as a membership benefit, and various projects such as the RBS Brochure and the Remember Percy Danforth Project. Newsletters are placed on our website after a period of two years. Thanks, Steve Wixson, Secretary



Bones Fest X Group photograph.. See Rhythm Bones Player, Vol 8, Special Issue, 2006, for naming diagram.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 19, No. 1 2017

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## Executive Director's Column

What an exciting issue we have for you this time! Peadar Mercier was one of my inspirations to start playing the bones, and I have listened to Mel's radio program about him three times. One of my regrets was never getting to meet him, but listening to him continually recharges my batteries. Dave Holt is a true inspiration to traditional musicians and bones players specifically. Through his association with Percy Danforth, and his love of all things traditional he is truly carrying the torch.

If you have never been to the New England Folk Festival it's a smorgasborg of traditional music and dance. The variety of workshops performers and jamming opportunities seems endless. I have been honored to present some of the best rhythm bones players in the country at my annual workshop there

including Percy Danforth, John Burrill, Everett Cowett, Russ Myers, Johnny Muise, Shorty Boulet and many others. This year is intended to be a special one. We have the usual Rhythm Bones playing workshop, and a performance of those attending. In addition, we will have an opportunity to meet and share in the usual good fellowship when rhythm bones players get together. I am calling this a Regional Bones Fest, but encourage all bones players to attend regardless of their location. Please feel free to call or write to me if you have any questions.

The up coming Bones Fest in San Antonio is clearly an opportunity for those of you in the Western part of the country to participate in an event that has rarely (Continued on Page 2)

## Peadar Mercier: Bodhrán and Bones

In 1974, at the age of 60, Peadar Mercier, a part-time traditional musician and member of the Chieftains, left his job as a building supplies store manager with G&T Crampton construction company in Dublin to embark on an international career as Ireland's first professional bodhrán and bones player.

Herbert Peter Mercer was born in Cork, in 1914. His father, a Protestant Congregationalist, came from a Northern family of jewelers, clockmakers and silversmiths. His mother came from a Catholic family in Cork, which had strong connections to the Irish Volunteers. The Mercer family moved to Bray, County Wicklow, in the 1920s, and it was here that Herbert Peter's interest in the Irish language and culture blossomed. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, he wrote poetry and songs, was a renowned debater, and indulged his passion for dancing at Conradh na Gaeilge céilís and at the Arcadia Ballroom in Bray. Immersed in this urban community of language enthusiasts in Bray, and making regular visits to Connemara to improve his Irish, Herbert Peter Mercer went through a process of identity transformation, and became Peadar Mercier.

The bodhrán first came to widespread notice in 1959 when it was played by the character of Cathalawn in John B. Keane's play Sive. Its status as a musical instrument was elevated considerably in the following years, when the Irish composer and

performer Seán Ó Riada took up the instrument as director of his newly formed group Ceoltóirí Cualann.

Peadar's involvement in the Irish language scene led him to take up the bodhrán in his late 40s. At the time, in the late 1950s, the goatskin frame drum was hardly considered to be a musical instrument. There were very few bodhrán players or bodhrán makers, and it was not easy to come by an instrument, and so Peadar made his own and taught himself to play it. Just a few years later, he was introduced to Seán Ó Riada, who invited him to perform with a group of musicians he was (Continued on Page 6)



Peadar Mercier in 1978

## Editorial

It amazes me that stories arrive just as they are needed. After 18 years of editing this newsletter it is getting harder to find new and interesting articles. This issue has two great stories, one about Peader Mercier and the other about David Holt, and the two stories are about as different as night and day. The Mercier story comes from former Board Member, Mel Mercier, Peader's son, and the second from an article in the Burlington, NC newspaper (sent by Mitch Boss) with additional help from David Holt.

As a side note in an email with David, he asked, "Did you ever hear Percy talk about seeing the Wright Bros fly in Washington, DC in 1908. I am reading the book about them and that series of flights was the first time Orville flew publicly in Washington, DC in 1908."

The last San Antonio Bones Fest, BFXV in 2011, was unique (as they all are). I call it the performance Fest as we had almost 9 hours of stage time, and the dinner on the San Antonio riverboat was special. Host Dennis Riedesel has another great Fest planned and I hope you have put it on your calendar. See you there.

There are two short articles on rhythm bones sellers, Hobgoblin and Stoney End. I purchased some Nick Driver rhythm bones from Hobgoblin in 1999.

## Letters to the Editor

Thank you for the last edition of the Rhythm Bones Player, That brings back many happy memories. 20 years of Bones Fests! I can't believe that the years have passed so quickly. The 2006 photo of the group shows my grandson Andrew looking so young - a budding bone player. He went on to teach in China, met a lovely girl. Moved to America and was married last June. All the family went to the wedding in San Gabriel, California It was great, and we all had a fantastic time.

I am still in demand bone playing, not getting any younger, but enjoying entertaining. It is surprising how many people have never heard of the bones, and wonderful to see there faces as they watch a bone player at work.

I do enjoy the newsletter, catching up with all the news and activity going on in the USA. Kind regards to all. *Tony Humphreys* [Tony traveled from England to attend Bones Fest X.]

Kenny Wolin found this rhythm bones reference on Page 233 of Mark Twain's book titled "The Gilded Age."

Harry says, "There was a skeleton hanging in the closet of my father's study when I was a boy, that I used to dress up in old clothes. Oh, I got quite familiar with the human frame."

"You must have," said Philip. "Was that when you learned to play the bones? He is a master of those musical instruments, Ruth; he plays well enough to go on the stage."

## Executive Director's Editorial (Continued)

crossed the Mississippi. Our first foray to San Antonio stands as one of the best Bones Fest in a colorful, scenic area, and this visit should be just as exciting. There are some real bone playing enthusiasts out there on the west Coast and I encourage each and everyone of you to come to San Antonio to connect with us regular attendee's. Mike Ballard, who has regularly made the trek since Bones Fest IV, will only have to travel a third of the country this time! We would love to see all of you bone players from Texas and surrounding states attend what surly will be a Texas size Bones Fest!

Steve Wixson has done another amazing job on this issue of the Bone Player! His expertise in the construction of this newsletter is only exceeded by his vast knowledge and love of rhythm bones playing and rhythm bones players. Thanks Steve! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXI Update

Y'all put on your Cowboy duds if you got 'em, pack your bones, and come on down to San Antonio! We're gonna have a romp-stomping good ol' time cause here's what Dennis is working on! (Go to [rhythmbones.org/nextFest.html](http://rhythmbones.org/nextFest.html) for up-to-date more complete details.)

BONES FEST XXI HOTEL: The historic CROCKETT Hotel located behind

### Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Non-member subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

the Alamo Compound.

See: <http://www.crocketthotel.com>. Rooms are \$125.00 per day; which is a "steal" in San Antonio during summer tourist season when rooms start at \$230.00 per day. HOTEL ROOM RESERVATIONS NOW OPEN.

CASA RIO DINNER CRUISE: A BF XV event is back by popular demand! We will again enjoy the Casa Rio Dinner Cruise afloat on the San Antonio River around the Famous Riverwalk! (Note: The price of the meal is included in your conference fee.)

TRANSPORTATION: Bones Fest Staff will transport to and from airport on Thursday and Sunday!

The previous San Antonio Bones Fest was called the Performance Fest, and I am making this the Vacation Fest with Pre & Post Fest deals such as the Texas Hill Country Tour and the Hogg Plum retreat. There are many other San Antonio attractions available. *Dennis Riedesel*

## Glenn Chaplin

Remembering back 77 years is not easy to the time my father clicked a pair of sticks made from apple wood. I was fascinated and tried to copy what he was doing. My mother finally ordered two pairs of real bones from a catalog made in Brazil out of teak wood.

My grandmother played the piano and I used to keep time with such songs as "Turkey in the Straw" and "Oh Those Golden Slippers." Our local Grange formed a "kitchen band" and I joined the group at age 9. On Nov. 7, 1941, my grandmother and I played together on a radio station WHLD in Niagara Falls, NY. I have a record recording of that performance on a 78 rpm record.

The next big event took place when I was about 12 years old when I auditioned for the Ted Mack Original Hour. There were 3500 people who competed for 7 slots on the show. I was one of the seven. The producers of the show during rehearsal helped me in showmanship by showing how move around instead of just standing there. I was very shy and was scared to death performing before a large audience. It was held at a local night club in Buffalo, NY. I received \$20 for the performance--Wow! That was a lot of money then.

I then played at a number of USO variety shows during WWII. My favorite song was "The 12th Street Rag" by Pee Wee Hunt. I later had the privilege of actually playing with him and his band in person when I was in the military at Ft. Benning, Ga. in 1955.

I never saw anyone play the bones until just recently in 1990. And I have never seen anyone play them like I do. I hold them on each side of the middle finger in the center of the bone so that both ends strike each other. The left hand keeps time to the bass notes and the right hand the treble notes. I use a combination of my wrist and forearm to enable keeping up with music. I have kept up with "The Flight of the Bumble Bee"---but those days are gone.

I still play once or twice a year at our church talent shows. Since being a pastor for 18 years, I usually begin with a reading the scripture of Ezekiel 37 about

the "dry bones." When Ezekiel heard those bones come together, they made a rattling sound. I then tell the folks--This is what they may have sounded like some 3000 years ago.

At nearly 85, the bones have slowed up quite a bit, but they still thrill the folks who have never seen or heard them before. To all those Rhythm Bones folks--Keep Clicking! *Mason Dirickson*

## Jim Diebel

I write to say I have safely received the last three editions of the RBP newsletter which you were kind enough to send me together with By-laws for the society.

Unfortunately I do not information on membership conditions and dues, etc, and sent \$20 having receive the initial information from Scott Miller with the rosewood bones he provided

As a washboard player I play in a jazz band (60 years continuous playing), and have always been interested in jugs, washboards, kazoos, etc.

I was also present when the Harlem Globe Trotters played in London in the 1960's. I have forgotten their warm up sequence to *Sweet Georgia Brown* played by Brother Bones and his Shadows!

When I was a child before the war, bones playing and spoons were very popular, and also in 'Pubs' not that I was allowed in Pubs!

A few months ago my son-in-law was carving ribs of beef for lunch so I asked to save the ribs for me to convert into rhythm bones. He got interested and decided to investigate on the Internet and as a result was able to buy a set as a surprise birthday present via Scott Miller.

So I now use them to do a 'specialty number' on band gigs - perfect for Halloween night!

In the spirit of authenticity, I cut the beef ribs bones to length, boiled them, bleached them in domestic bleach and leave them out in the sun to weather. The final results are very usable - if a bit cumbersome - smaller ribs would have been more comfortable I guess.

In the past I have toured the USA extensively visiting family and also on business, and took in some pretty good Jazz in NY, Washington, Miami, Michigan, Chicago, Arizona, Colorado, LA,

and San Francisco plus Toronto and Vancouver in Canada.

Currently I have elected to remain in UK to avoid the rigors of travel and the risky expense of getting sick while away, but I still getting plenty of action locally.

Until I received your newsletter, I had no idea how extensive the rhythm bones are or how many music styles are embraced.

With good wishes and good luck for the future. In the meantime "keep rattling."



*Jim Diebel*, The Washboard Syncopators, Essex, England [Check out Jim on drums/washboard at <https://www.facebook.com/washboardsyncopators>. Play the video.]

## Bones Calendar

**Fleadh by The Feale All Ireland Bones Competition**, May 1, 2017, Abbeyfeale, Ireland

**Bones Fest XVIII**. August 24-27, 2017, San Antonio, TX, Host is Dennis Riedesel,

**NTCMA Bones Contest**. August 28 - September 3, 2017, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

## David Holt has Ancestral Ties to Alamance County

Rhythm bones are a tangible reminder of four-time Grammy Award-winning storyteller/musician David Holt's ancestral ties to Alamance County.

Holt's great-great-grandfather, John Oscar Holt, is believed to have carved and played a set of wooden rhythm bones, which have remained his family. John Oscar Holt carried the rhythm bones with him when he relocated his family from Alamance County, NC to Texas in 1858.

"We've passed the tradition of playing bones and spoons down from generation to generation," David Holt said in an interview from his home in Fairview, located outside of Asheville.

Holt learned how to play at the age of 9 or 10 from his father, the late William "Joe" Holt, and his son, Zeb, now 40, learned when he was 12.

"Kids love rhythm, so it's been fun for our family," he said. When he looks back on his life, Holt said he believes that the love of music could've been passed down from his Alamance County ancestors.



Far left is Joseph Joplin Holt, David Holt's great-grandfather. His grandfather, William Joseph Holt, is the boy in the white shirt in the middle. That family is shown in West Texas, about 1900

"That sound really opened my ears to music," he said of playing rhythm bones.

Last Friday morning, Holt played harmonica and rhythm bones so this reporter could hear the sound quality.

Playing bones is something he still does on stage although those rhythm bones were collected from cow bones on a cousin's ranch in Texas: "Ribs from a long dead cow skeleton bleached by the sun."

Holt is excited for a chance to revisit Alamance County when he and Josh Goforth perform a fundraiser for the Textile Heritage Museum called "A Two-Man Tornado of Tunes and Tales" at 8 p.m. April 21 in the Haw River Ballroom, 1711 Saxapahaw-Bethlehem Church Road, Saxapahaw.

Jerrie Nall, director of the Textile Heritage Museum, has a timeline featuring David Holt's ancestors.

Edwin Michael "E. M." Holt, pioneer of the textile industry, would've been among David Holt's ancestors along with Hans Michael Holt and Michael Holt II, his great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather and great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, respectively.

"If you look at the photos, the Holts have a very distinctive look. You can look at them and say 'that guy's a Holt,'" he said. "Hopefully, I can connect with some of my family members."

Becoming a musician was something Holt desired to do, but "no one in my direct family was a musician. My grandfather was an engineer and my uncles were doctors. After graduating from the University of California at Santa Barbara, magna cum laude in biology and art, he came to the southeastern mountains to pursue his interest in traditional music and storytelling.

Although Holt



John Oscar Holt, David Holt's great-great-grandfather, left North Carolina and moved to Texas in 1858

grew up in Garland, Texas, and lived in Santa Barbara, CA, for a time, North Carolina "just feels like home. I remember thinking- this is where I need to be," he said.

He founded and directed the Appalachian Music Program at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa. Since 1981, he's been a full time musician/storyteller.

"I grew up in a family of informal storytellers, and there was plenty to tell



William "Joe" Hold, David's father, poses with the carved wooden bones believed to have been passed down by his great-great-grandfather, John Oscar Holt.



about our wild and woolly Texas forefathers. I never thought about telling stories in public until I began to collect mountain music and came across interesting and unusual anecdotes from mountain folks. I began to use these stories in concerts and realized the power storytelling holds," he said.

During the April 21 concert, Holt will play banjo, steel guitar, washboard (given to him by the oldest woman in the world at the time, who was 122 years old). Josh Goforth will flat-pick the fiddle and mandolin. He met Josh while playing a concert at Josh's middle school in Madison County.

"The teacher came up to me and said that she'd like for him to play with me," Holt said. I thought if he had the nerve to play for 800 seventh-and eighth- graders, why not?"

Holt was so taken with his talent that "when I put together a band, I made sure he was part of it."

"My wife and I just love him. He's like a second son to us," he added.

This will be Holt's second visit to the Glencoe Mill Village. He recorded a show for PBS called "David Holt's State Of Music" last April at the mill village. It featured Rhiannon Giddens and Balsam Range, among others.

Season 1 of the show aired last September. Season 2 is set to air this April.

"It's going to be great to reconnect with the Holt tradition and history by being back in Glencoe," he added.

*Charity Apple* Burlington, N. C. Times-News. Reprinted with permission. [Photographs courtesy of David Holt]

## **Was the First Public Rhythm Bones Performance in the US by a German?**

The late Russ Myers told a story about when he was recorded in 1975 by the Library of Congress (LOC) for a project to preserve folk music (Percy Danforth was also recorded). While there they showed him four wooden boxes of rhythm bones and asked him to match up pairs.

They also showed him a Broadside poster advertising a rhythm bones performance by a German in 1740 at

the Bronx Theater. I contacted the LOC and they graciously went through their Broadside, but could not find it. They concluded it must be from a book and they did not have the time to do that kind of a search.

The David Holt story has a nice twist. When told this story he said; "I didn't realize the German connection...that means that rhythm bones could have come over to America with Hans Michael Holt born in Germany in 1689 and came to the US in 1717. He would have been my 6th great grandfather."

It's possible, however likely or unlikely, that these two stories overlap. To prove it requires someone to go to the LOC and do some research. Any volunteers? *Steve Wixson*

## **Irish Kid's Letter to Steve Brown**

We are 13 pupils in Ms. Hughes' class in Rathlee National School, County Sligo, Ireland. Your friend, Junior Davey, is teaching us to play the bodhrán and the rhythm bones. We had never heard of or seen rhythm bones until Junior brought them into us. We watched a video of you playing the bones on "youtube." Junior told us the history of the bones too.

We are going to play the bodhrán and the bones for our families on 15th December. We practise every day with the bones you sent to us. All of us want to buy or own set of bones now. Maybe one day some of us will attend the Annual Bone Fest in America! Go raibh míle maith agat (Thank you very much). Slán agus beannacht.

Amber, Jade, Chloe, Louise, Sinéad, Ryan, Rossá, Matthew, Cian, Ciara, Kyle, Conor and Stephen

## **Hobgoblin**

[Editor's Note. Here and in the next column are two more rhythm bones seller stories. See Volume 17, No.4 for other sellers]

In 1976, Mannie and Pete McClelland envisaged a folk music supermarket, and very humbly Hobgoblin Music Store was opened. We attracted customers from all over the UK and the world and their mail

order service was hugely successful. Our catalogue was very popular.

We started selling rhythm bones back in the late '70s. I don't clearly recall how we got started with that, but we had several suppliers. A man on a local farm used to get us bits of what looked like ribs - with the marrow in them, Nick Driver sold us the fancy carved bits of shin? maybe, and a local woodworker sold us wooden ones. By late 70's we had a regular good quality supplier of wooden bones in various woods in Ron Saunders from Kent. Both Ron and Nick driver also sold us Bodhrans and we used to make our own Bodhrans too from frames we bought from Premier drums. One of our staff members - Heather used to paint the celtic decoration on the rims.

We met Percy Danforth at Sidmouth and there were other bones players about at that time and spoons players too. Not so common now, but we still sell a fair few pairs of bones. *Pete McClelland* Hobgoblin Music, [www.hobgoblin.com](http://www.hobgoblin.com)

## **Stoney End**

Stoney End sells folk instruments of all kinds including our famous harps. Len Maceacheron made rhythm bones and when he retired in 1984 I bought his store. We also handle USA sales for Hobgoblin Music (see above). Contact us at [stoneyend.com](http://stoneyend.com). *Gary Stone*

## **A Youtube Video From Steve Brown**

Here is a link from Steve from Andy Roche's Butcher's Shop in Abbeyfeale. It features Steve's good friend, David Murphy, who has won the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship multiple times. On banjo is his nephew, John Forde, who won the Junion Bone Playing Championship when he was four years old. That year Mel Mercier said that John ran away with the Junior title. Check it out at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3T-cLga3R4g>. The video starts with Andy chopping out some ribs.



Peadar Mercier and Ceoltoiri Culann

directing for a Damer Theatre production in Dublin. This would eventually lead to Peadar playing with Ó Riada's Ceoltoíri Cualann and The Chieftains. Peadar also played the bones with the Chieftains, using them to dramatic effect in the groups arrangements of pieces such as The Morning Dew and The Battle of Aughrim.

Initially, Peadar's bodhrán playing style was very much ahead of its time, with a technique, rhythm and sound that owed more to the loud, outdoor style associated with the annual St Stephen's day

wren procession than the indoor concert stage. It wasn't long, however, before he began to pioneer a new, more refined, modern style of playing the bodhrán. Peadar played with the Chieftains for ten years, recorded four LPs with the group, and performed on stages across Ireland, the UK, Europe and America. Many who heard him play on recordings or who saw him perform live were inspired to take up the bodhrán and the bones, and in that way he set in motion the dramatic developments in bodhrán playing that followed over the next 50 years.

Peadar Mercier had ten children. He taught his sons, Paul and Mel to play the bodhrán and bones, and the instruments have been at the heart of Mel's musical life ever since. When he was a teenager, Mel played bodhrán duets at home with his father and later, throughout the 1980s, father and son took their improvised duet onto the international stage to perform with the influential American composer, John Cage, and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

Peadar Mercier inspired a whole new generation of bodhrán and bones players - including his son Mel, a renowned performer, who, after 25 years of lecturing at University College Cork, was appointed Professor of Music and the first Head of the UCC School of Music and Theatre. In March 2016, Mel was appointed Chair of Performing Arts at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick.

#### Radio Documentary

In 2016, Mel made a radio documentary about his father for the Irish national radio station RTÉ. The documentary is available for download or can be listened to online at:

<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/donone/2016/0826/812103-peadar-mercier/>

#### Mel writes:

"I first approached the RTÉ Documentary on One team with the idea in early January 2015, and 20 months later, on Saturday 10 September, the documentary



Peadar Mercier in 1973



Peadar and Mel Mercier in 1974

was broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1. It was also broadcast across all time zones in Canada on Sunday 11 September.

I wanted to make a documentary that would trace my father's journey as a musician but also capture something of the man himself.

From the outset, I wanted the narrative to emerge from the memories of his family and friends, and to be expressed in their voices. I interviewed almost thirty people for the documentary, including my mother and all of my 9 siblings, some of my father's oldest personal friends and many of his fellow musicians. Their testimonies were at the heart of the documentary.

Another essential element was the sound of the music he played. Fortunately there is so much wonderful music to choose from, and so much of it familiar to me and readily available on recordings by Ceoltoirí Cualann and the Chieftains.

We are also fortunate that my father recorded some programmes for RTÉ and this gave me access to his voice and his thoughts. My father had a lifelong passion for language, which he expressed in his poetry, songs, debating, scripts for various programmes including *An Droichead Beo*, *The Long Note* and *Thought for the Day*, and in his everyday encounters with family, neighbours and friends.

Through his poems and songs and his



The Chieftains in 1974

everyday, always eloquent, speech, my father conversed with the world around him. He had a gentle charisma and charm and he used language and poetry to connect with people. He delighted in writing poems for friends and family, and sometimes people he hardly knew at all - people he met fleetingly after a concert or at a party. He also wrote poems about very ordinary things - the names of the spices on the kitchen wallpaper or the construction materials - nails, hods, etc - which he dispensed from the Crampton's store - elevating them all to the extraordinary.

He was also a great lover of nature throughout his life and he expressed that, too, in his poetry, and through his dedication to the garden. In the years after he left the Chieftains, he seemed to spend more time writing poetry and gardening. Our small suburban garden, in particular, was always a place of reflection, creativity and renewal for him..



The Chieftains in 1974

In the documentary I have woven together my father's voice and his music, and the voices of his family and friends to bring him into more vivid presence, and to celebrate both the ordinary and the extraordinary dimensions of the life of a wonderful man."

Mel when asked about his father personal bones history said:

"We don't know when my father began to play the bones, but I think that he took them up some time after he began playing the bodhrán. He may have heard someone playing the bones in a session or, indeed, he may have heard Ronnie McShane play them in *Ceoltoirí Chualainn* in the early years of that ensemble. But that is all conjecture.

"I remember my father getting cow rib bones from the butcher and as far as I can remember he sawed them himself to short lengths of about 6-8 inches. Then he would scrape off any meat or flesh remaining on them and lay them out in the back yard to dry in the sun, or when there was no sun, he put them into the bottom of the oven to dry.

"He always played them in one hand and occasionally played around with a pair in each hand but only in a light-hearted way, mimicking castanet playing.

"Once when we traveled to Toronto together to play with John Cage in his piece *Roaratorio*, we met Percy Danforth at a post show party and that was probably the first and only time that my father saw a two-handed player. He played with one bone between the thumb and fist finger and the second one between the middle and ring fingers and he generally play repetitive rolling patterns with them, with animal stopping and starting."

## The Chieftains Article

Steve Brown interviewed Paddy Maloney, founder of the Chieftains, and you can find that story online on our website at <http://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPVol1to16.pdf>. Do an Adobe Find (ctrl+F) with the search words "Volume 10, No. 3". Mel said that his father might have learned to play rhythm bones from Ronnie McShane. To read a story about Ronnie, do an Adobe Find using the words "Volume 7, No. 1"



David Holt performing with rhythm bones

## David Holt Plays Rhythm Bones

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_H7DtIh8akk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_H7DtIh8akk) This is a segment from the public TV series *David Holt's State of Music* featuring Rhiannon Giddens on banjo and singing. They talk about the banjo's early history. Rhiannon based the lyrics to the song *Julie* on a slave's memoir.



San Antonio River and downtown Riverwalk at dusk.



Chris Flynn was visiting a museum in the UK and found this World War 1 exhibit

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 19, No. 2 2017

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## Executive Director's Column

Bones Fest XXI is scheduled for August and the exciting news is we are returning to San Antonio! The last fest held there continues to stand out as one of the most enjoyable times, and I am so excited to be returning! San Antonio is one of the best vacation destinations in the country, and Dennis Riedesel has gone out of his way to plan activities which will not only give us all an opportunity to play for people in Texas, but also will allow us to get to know Texas and the fine community of San Antonio and surrounding towns.

This is only the second time a bones fest has been held west of the Missouri River. There are an amaz-

ing number of bones players in the West, and this is a great opportunity for those of you in the Western part of the country to attend and share your bones playing. We hope to bring a number of our regular attendee's who haven't been West before, and make this bones fest one that will truly be remembered for years to come.

I would formally like to reach out to our members in Texas, Arizona, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and especially the far west states of California, Oregon, and Washington to consider coming to San Antonio in August; the Bones will be red hot! *Steve Brown*

## The Rudiments of Rhythm Bones

This article should not be interpreted as a definitive statement from the Rhythm Bones Society as to a standard for rhythm bones playing. Rather it is a discussion article to stimulate Letters to the Editor that will lead to a revised article to post on our website. You are invited to join this discussion.

This is also not an article on how to play rhythm bones. Go to our [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) website for instructional materials.

A definition of rudiment is 'the first principles of a subject.' The subject in this case is rhythm bones, and its basic rudiments are how to hold them and how to play the Tap, Double

and Triplet.

### BRIEF HISTORY

Rhythm bones are one of the oldest musical instruments most likely prehistoric. The first documentation is over 5000 years ago from China, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Later they appear in Greece and Rome, and by Shakespeare's time, in England (he references them in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). They came to the US from Europe and in 1843 were one of four instruments (banjo, fiddle, tambourine and rhythm bones) in a band called the Virginia Minstrels that started the Minstrel era that last for 80 or so years. This was the heyday for rhythm bones as Minstrel troupes took them all over the world. As the minstrel era slowly ended so did the playing of rhythm bones around the world.

In the 1950s, Brother Bones and Mr Goon-Bones

were rhythm bones recording artists. During the last decades of the 20th Century, Percy Danforth through festival performances, workshops and an instructional video that is still sold today, kept rhythm bones alive. The Irish also were important during this time period producing many recordings with rhythm bones. In 1999, the Rhythm Bones Society was formed, and through our website, newsletter and Annual Bones Fests have done much to keep rhythm bones alive.

### THE PLAYER

Rhythm bones are (Continued on Page 4)



Rhythm Bones in the hands of Everett Cowett

## Editorial

This is a different kind of issue with a Page 1 article that is a comprehensive summary of rhythm bones. Steve Brown, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Tim Rielly and others have given workshops on the subject as have others in our *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter. The legend, Percy Danfort, had a list of rudiments and what he called elements. This article tries to pull all of that information and research together in one place. This is an issue to save!

I am ready for San Antonio and Bones Fest XXI. Host, Dennis Riedesel, plans are just about complete and you can go to our website, click the Current Tab and then the Next Fest Tab for details and to register. I am practicing for it.

About the time you read this issue, the July update to our website will reveal a preview of an upgrade to our website. Rhythm Bones Central was originally developed by Martha Cowett, daughter of Ev Cowett who is the father of the Rhythm Bones Society. Jonathan Danforth later became the webmaster making his own upgrades. Now I have made my upgrade with a new homepage and the Online Museum that you may have already seen. You can make the website better by using our Contact Us Page to tell us additional features to add.

By now, most of us have seen member Dom Flemons perform with rhythm bones in the Carolina Chocolate Drops band or at least heard him on one of their videos or CDs. Dom played rhythm bones on maybe 20% of their songs. He is now out on his own performing as the 'American Songster.' I got to see his show recently and while he only played rhythm bone on his opening song, it is a terrific show from a multi-talented performer.

## Letters to the Editor

May 27th I took part in the commencement parade preceding the Bowdoin College graduation ceremony. Part of the parade involves the alumni parading between the graduates (478) who are lined up on both sides of the pathway leading to the Walker Art Building where

the graduation takes place. I thought the graduates would enjoy seeing me play *When the Saints Go Marching In* with my harmonica and rhythm bones as we paraded between them. The smiles, laughs and applause that emanated from the graduates was very gratifying.

Yesterday as I viewed pictures of the Commencement on the Bowdoin website, lo and behold! there was a picture of me playing my harmonica and rhythm bones, a copy of which I'm sending along. *Claude Bonang*



[Joy Watkins, widow of the late member Walt Watkins, presented RBS with a box of Walt's rhythm bones, and asked us to give them to people he knew. Here is the note that came with them.]

Walt never saw a set of bones he didn't like. Think about my great guy when you play! He'd so love to be with you. I so miss him. Best wishes to all "Boners."  
Joy

## 2017 All Ireland Bone Playing Championship

Spring is most definitely here, the snow's gone, the peepers are making their music, and as it has done over the last 14 years, my mind drifts off to West Limerick to the annual Fleadh by the Feale and the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship. Last year I made my debut as a judge of the Senior division, and it gave me a whole new perspective. I concluded that it is much easier on the competitors side of the table, sifting through the competitors and each of their performances is indeed a daunting task, while performing once and heading to the pub for an after contest pint is much more appealing, believe me.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

This year the contest featured at least two firsts. This would be the first time that a woman judged the contest, which includes both Junior and Senior divisions, and it would be the first time that a citizen of Canada would compete.

The adjudicator of the contest is the well known Sligo Singer, bodhran, and rhythm bones player Cathy Jordan. Cathy has performed all over the world with the group Dervish, and her rhythm bone playing is on display in many of the tracks of the groups recordings. She has played rhythm bones for many years, and has a beautiful, purely Irish style of playing the rhythm bones, and is an excellent choice to Judge the contest. She is well familiar with Abbeyfeale, having performed at the Fleadh many times.

On the other hand this would be the first Fleadh by the Feale for Graham Hargrove, a Canadian Citizen, and professional percussionist from Toronto to Canada. Graham is a well rounded

percussionist, with baccalaureate and graduate degree's in music, and multiple years playing and perfecting his many talents playing percussion. He has been playing rhythm bones since 2011, and lists Aaron Plunkett as a major influence. He plays traditional Irish music regularly with the group Dan Stacey and the Black Swans.

The Junior or Children bone playing contest, open to those 18 and younger is held the Sunday of the Fleadh, one day before the Adult Championship.

Although numbers have dwindled, 5 contestants competed for places one through three. In third place a new comer from the Abbeyfeale area, Diarmud Murphy, no relation to Dave Murphy, multiple time winner, Dan Murphy originator of the contest, or Paudriac "Sport" Murphy, came in third, showing remarkable improvement in his playing.

Second place was Jackie Murphy, the only female contestant in either the Childrens or Adult category, equaling her place of last year. Jackie is the daughter of David Murphy, and a fine box player in her own right. First place, once again, went to John Forde, competing in his last children competition, and in very fine style. John has multiple championships since first competing at age 4. He is also a very fine banjo player.

The Championship section had nine registered competitors, although only eight competed. The standard of play was very high, and first place was hotly contested. In third place, Declan Donnohue from Tuam, Co. Galway displayed the fine style he has developed, especially on polka's. In second place Graham Hargrove from Canada, thrilled the crowd with his explosive style, giving good account to two handed players everywhere (You can view his performance at <https://youtu.be/VTRsrcumhsM?t>). In first place once again, Paddy Donovan, winning his eighth championship, with the fluid style he is noted for. As in past championships, all competitors and the judge took to the stage in the conclusion of the contest to ring out the contest in style. I would encourage all bones players to experience the contest, and the hospitality of Abbeyfeale for an unforgettable experience! After all, there is always next year! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Again at NEFFA

The New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) has been the site of rhythm bones players gathering for more than 30 years. Great players of the past and present have attended and lent their hands to teaching and performing bones, including: Percy Danforth, John "Mr. Bones of Boston" Burrill, Johnny Muise, Everett Cowett, Russ Myers, Shorty Boulet, Ernie Duffy, and Sky Bartlett to name a few. This year was no exception as ten players gathered at the 73rd New England Folk Festival to assist with teaching the Bone playing workshop, and to perform. RBS members Jon Danforth, Skeff Flynn, Ari Urlbaum, Tim Riley, Bruno Giles, Adam Klien, Jeremy Brown, joined new to workshop Kyle Forstoff, and Tom Welden in an exuberant workshop and performance Saturday April 22nd at 4pm to an enthusiastic crowd of 40 or so people. Teaching and ably assisting were also Gene Joy, and Eugene Rothman who both had frequently attended the festival in the past.

The workshop ran smoothly, and numerous attendee's were able to pick up the basics relatively quickly. Attendee's included complete beginners and those with moderate amounts of experience. The performance section again reflected that great amount of diversity that exists among our players. Adam once again demonstrated his highly developed vocal style, meshing with his sophisticated rhythm bone playing. Tim Riley blasted out some reels with three fiddle players. Kyle Forstoff demonstrated a keen understanding of the Irish one handed style of bone playing. Ari Urlbaum again demonstrated why he is known as the Spike Jones of bones playing, playing literally everything under the kitchen sink, Gene Joy showed his percussive nature on the bones. Tom Weldon and his wife Anita gave a fine demonstration of his Americana music. Jon Danforth the whistling bones player showed participants how its done, and Skeff Flynn wowed the group with his rendition of "Cornbread and butter beans". After a rousing pass off with all participants, we boned off into the night, to wait for another year to NEFFA and eagerly looking forward to

San Antonio in August! I want to thank all of the participants who made the trip to Mansfield, especially Skeff Flynn who came all the way from West Virginia, Adam Klien who squeezed us in between practice and performance, and Jon Danforth who literally drove right to the festival from his vacation! *Steve Brown*

## Correction and Apology to Glenn Chaplin

There was a serious error in the last newsletter, Vol 19, No. 1. The story titled Mason Dirickson should have read Glenn Chaplin. A few extra copies were printed with this correction, but most received the version with the error. My apologies to Glenn, and below is a bit more about him

"Enclosed is a photo of me with the Bones and the way I hold them (See Page 8). The various pressure that is applied to the finger holding the bottom bone allows it to swing from side to side striking both edges of the top bone giving a rapid clicking to keep up with a fast rhythm score of music." *Glenn Chaplin*

## Ann Hoffman Remembered

We recently learn that Ann Hoffman died on December 30, 2016. She attended Bones Fest IV where a video from her national appearance on the World's Funniest Videos TV show was shown. At the Fest, Ann told us she was part of several musical entertainment groups over the years and enjoyed playing the folk instrument of rhythm bones. And she was a paid rhythm bones player. She enjoyed singing and especially enjoyed accompanying husband Harold as he played guitar. That video along with her performance at Bones Fest IV was the May Video of the Month on our website.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 24-27, 2017, San Antonio, TX, Host is Dennis Riedesel, See Page 8

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 28 - September 3, 2017, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

(Continued from Page 1)

easy to play when compared to other musical instruments, and rhythm bones players range from beginner, intermediate to professional. They can be played softly, loudly, poorly and proficiently. Rhythm bones get a bad name when played poorly and loudly. There are not many players who play well.

### **MUSICOLOGY CLASSIFICATION**

Rhythm bones are classified as Struck or Concussion Ideophones. Wikipedia says Ideophones are musical instruments that create sound primarily by the instrument as a whole vibrating, and most non-drum percussion instruments fall into this category. The vibration is caused by being struck with another object, and with rhythm bones it is with another rhythm bone.

### **MATERIALS MADE FROM**

Historically rhythm bones were made from animal bones and hence bear the name 'bones.' The Rhythm Bones Society gets credit for popularizing the name 'Rhythm Bones' which clarify it as a musical instrument.

The most popular bone is the animal rib bone which has a curved shape that fits nicely between the fingers in the hand. An animal rib cage has bones of different sizes and shapes, and only some parts are selected for playing. Typically, they are cut to 6-7 inches, cleaned and dried (fresh bones are soft and do not produce a good sound).

Cow ribs are the most used animal rib as they are easily obtained from a local butcher shop. Whale bone and ivory, when they were available, were popular bones. Old Ox bones are said to be one of the hardest of bones. Rhythm bones are also made from horse, bison, etc.

Rhythm bones are made from wood as they produce a more consistent sound and are easier to produce in quantity. The sound produced is a result of the hardness of the wood and the shape of the rhythm bone. Hardwoods like ebony produce a crisp and loud sound while softer woods like pine produce a quieter sound. Rhythm bones have been made from many woods, each with a slightly different sound. Soft woods work well in an ensemble group while hardwoods work for solo playing (but see below how to quiet loud bones).

The most popular shape is that of a animal rib bone with thickness, width, curve, and length varied.

A special curve is no curve at all, that is a straight bone. Some of the discussion about how bones produce sound may not apply to straight rhythm bones.

Rhythm bones were sold in stores, and in minstrel and Sears catalogs. We have not found much information on who made these rhythm bones.

Plastic rhythm bones were produced in large quantities starting in the 1950s by Joe Birl who has maybe the only rhythm bones patent. The patent was for a notch at the top of the rhythm bones that helped keep the rhythm bones from slipping out of the hand.

This type of rhythm bones is significant as he made and sold over 200,000 of them. He embossed his trademark 'Rhythm Bones' on the bones, and later gave that to the Rhythm Bones Society to incorporate into our name.

Rhythm bones are also made out of other materials including cow shin bones, and stock aluminum to name just two.

Many two-handed players hold the same kind of rhythm bones in each hand, and want the same sound to come from each hand. To get matched pairs they like to try them out before purchasing. Some players place a mark on each rhythm bones so they can hold them in the same way each time.

Others want different sounds from each hands, and get that by not matching the type of bones in their hand or by having different materials in each hand.

### **WHERE TO OBTAIN THEM**

Rhythm bones can be made or purchased. The best source for animal bones is a sun dried carcass in a field. Fresh bones can be obtained from a butcher, boiled, cleaned, cut to 6" to 7" in length, polished and dried. Scott Miller's online store has a nice booklet on the subject.

They can be made from wood or other materials. For wood, a router or jig is constructed to make the curved shape. They can be curved by bending. Knives and saws are also used to make curved rhythm bones.

Nowadays, rhythm bones are purchased in online stores and a list of them is on our website.

### **HOLDING STYLES**

**Arm Position.** Sound is produced with

arm and wrist movement. The arms are held so that they can move freely. Some hold their hands with rhythm bones directly over their chest. Others hold their hands to the side. Others hold their hand at belt level and use gravity to give more motion to the movable rhythm bone.

**Two Bones - Basic.** The most popular way of holding two rhythm bones is shown in the photograph on Page 1. There is a stationary bone and a moving bone. The stationary bone is placed between the index finger and the middle finger and the middle finger is wrapped over that bone holding it again the fleshy part of the hand. The other bone is placed between the index finger and the ring finger and held loosely enough so that it moves back and forth. The ring finger is placed loosely on the bones to keep it lined up with the stationary bone.

**Two Bones - Celtic.** While not exclusively Celtic, this style places the stationary bone between the thumb and the index finger. This is done by tradition or to achieve a different sound. In addition some players use this style for showmanship and toss the stationary bone into the air, catch it and continue to play. In this style you can also change the pitch of the bone by moving the thumb along the stationary bone.

**Three Bones.** This holding style is used to get a thicker, denser sound, and visual appeal. Start with either the basic or Celtic holding style and add a third bone between the ring and little finger. The little finger is used to keep the third bone aligned with the other two bones.

**Four Bones.** This holding style is used to get a bigger sound and also for visual effect. This uses the Celtic holding style and adds a fourth bone between the ring and little finger. The little finger is used to keep the fourth bones aligned with the other three bones, and alignment is difficult requiring a lot of practice. The other hand can play four bones too.

Member Yirdy Machar taught a workshop on playing four bones in one hand. What he demonstrated is the ring and little finger can be active and not used just for alignment. The little finger can be used to isolate the fourth bone so that only three bones make sound. The ring and little finger together can be used to isolate the third and fourth bones so that only two bones make sound.



**Top and Bottom Striking.** Rhythm bones can also be held in the middle such that both the top and bottom of the bones strike each other. This doubles the rate of click production. It is used by only a few rhythm bones players. See the photograph on Page 8.

**Controlling Loudness.** The loudness of rhythm bones can be controlled by increasing or decreasing the motion of the arm and the snap of the wrist.

The loudness can also be reduced by using the ring finger to cross align the movable bone such that it is stuck on its edge.

#### **Holding Problems.**

For some people, holding the stationary bone firm with the first finger keeps the ring finger from being loose enough for the movable bones to move freely.

Rhythm bones do slip out of hand. This can be controlled by increasing the grip, drying hand between the fingers and applying rosin to the edges of the bones.

#### **Accents.**

The arms move in three dimensions of space which can add accents and nuances to the sound. Barry Patton's triplet roll follows the shape of a figure 8 making the sound of the triplet at the top of the figure 8 sound different than the one at the bottom of the figure 8.

#### **THE RUDIMENTS**

**The Tap.** This is the basic rudiment and is similar to a single drum tap. Starting with the bones vertical, the arm and hand are rotated outward to produce a single click.

**The Double.** This begins with a tap motion, but instead of stopping after a single click, the arm is returned vertical producing a second click. [Note this Rudiment is also called a 'Duplet,' or a 'Double-Tap,' though the word 'Duplet' in classical music has a slightly different usage.]

**The Triplet.** This is the sound that is unique to rhythm bones. The arm motion looks like the Double motion, but there is a slight downward motion as the arm returns to the vertical position producing three equally spaced clicks. [Note it takes practice to play a single triplet. Continuous triplets are easier to play.]

#### **PLAYING STYLES**

**Traditional - one handed.** This style of playing is common with Irish and Celtic players, and typically uses only

the rudiments. Irish players typically play sitting down.

**Traditional - two-handed.** This playing style was used by minstrel players, and is the most common playing style. Mel Mercier is an Irish rhythm bones player and when he learned to play two-handed, he saw it as a different instrument than playing one-handed.

This playing style typically uses the rudiments, and most traditional rhythm bones players play with the same kind of rhythm bones in each hand. They also tend to play the same rhythm in each hand.

**Percussive.** This playing style is based on the Tap. The only instructional video teaching this style is by Dr. Fred Edmunds titled 'Bones Unlimited' and it is on our website (along with Advanced Workshops by Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Tim Reilly and Steve Brown). Fred was also a drummer, and drummers find this style easy to play since most of the drum rudiments can be played in this style.

**Ambidexterity.** With practice, each hand can play a different rhythm pattern, and the combination produces polyrhythms (See Two Hand Independence workshop on our website). A player with such hand independence can play to most any kind of music.

**Combination.** Many players incorporate both playing styles. Traditional players add tap patterns while Percussive players add the Triplet (note you can create a triplet with taps, but it sounds different).

#### **ELEMENTS**

Elements as used in this article are useful rhythm patterns based on the Rudiments. Legend, Percy Danforth, had the list (part of which is shown below) that he used in his instructional video and workshops

**Tap with both hands.** Self explanatory.

**Flam patterns.** The Flam consists of a Tap in each hand with one quieter and slightly before the other creating a fuller sound. Either the right or left hand can start the Flam, and there are numerous variations.

**Triplet roll, one hand.** Continuous sets of Triplets for two or more measures. Most people are taught this initially.

**Triplet roll, two hands.** Self explanatory.

**The seven-beat Triplet roll.** Two Triplet rolls followed by a single Tap. Additional Triplets can be added before the Tap.

**Quadruplet.** A quadruplet fits nice with 2/4 and 4/4 music, and can be made in several ways. Aaron Plunkett combines a Tap and Triplet or Triplet and Tap in one measure to produce a sort of Traditional style quadruplet. With practice the two fuse together nicely.

Quadruplets can also be made by a run of Taps, and professional percussionist Bill Vits can do this so very fast. Alternatively they can be made with a run of Taps with left hand followed by the right hand, with a left hand Duplet followed by a right hand Duplet, etc.

**Choque:** Two handed players can hit two pair of bones together. This movement in castanets is called the 'choque' and for bones players it is taught by Fred Edmund in his instructional video. Kenny Wolin has some interesting variations.

Here are the names of other Percy Elements; running alternate taps, running alternate two-tap, Tap Triplet accentuated pattern, Triplet rolls with accents, syncopated accents and Tap patterns, alternate Triplet pattern, extended triplet pattern, crescendoed rolls and more.

**Other rhythm patterns.** A player can generate a unique rhythm pattern based on the Rudiments to play with specific pieces of music. Depending on the intricacy, it might take many hours of practice before the rhythm pattern can be played naturally.

#### **KINDS OF MUSIC PLAYED TO**

Rhythm bones can be played with most any genre of music from symphonic to folk. Most traditional players play to country, bluegrass, folk, dixieland, etc. Percussive players can play to most any kind of music.

#### **RHYTHM BONES AROUND THE WORLD**

Rhythm bones-like instruments can be found all around the world and a list of them is on our website. The Irish, Germans, Swiss and Italians deserve notice.

**Irish.** The use of bones in traditional Irish music by Ceoltoiri Cuallan and later by the Chieftains helped to keep the bones alive and spread their use to younger groups. The Triplet fits well with jigs and music in 6/8 time,

**Germany.** There is a tradition from the

1500s of playing the Klepperle during the Karneval parade. Children make them and then compete to lead the parade. The shape is different, but they are played the same as rhythm bones.

**Switzerland.** The same instrument is called 'Chlefeldi' and is used to teach music in school. There are Youtube videos of people performing with them.

**Italy.** In the Tuscany area is a pocket of players with an instrument called 'naccere toscane.' It has a different shape but is played the same as rhythm bones.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PLAYERS**

**Timing.** For players who know their rudiments, playing in time with the music separates the best players. The late Russ Myers and Jerry Mescher were known for their great timing.

**Arranging.** It is easy to play along to music using the rudiments as feels appropriate. Good players will practice their songs and arrange the patterns to support the rhythm in the music. Recording artist, Ted Good, spent as many as 40 hours arranging for the songs he recorded.

It is not all about technique - it is about performance. Some very average players can entertain an audience better than a player with the best technique.

### **PHYSICS OF SOUND PRODUCTION**

[Note: This is a very short introduction to this subject which is worthy of much more study.]

**Bar Mechanics.** Rhythm bones players hold the bones at one end, so that each pair strikes each other at the other end. This creates an interesting situation where a nodal position is being forced (by holding) at the very end of the bone. This tends to force the bone to vibrate in a way such that the length is 1/4 the wavelength of the note produced. If the bone was played in say the same way as the Central American "Clave" where the stick is allowed to vibrate freely, it would tend to revert to a natural vibrational mode similar to that of a marimba bar, where the length of the bone would be 1/2 the wavelength of the note produced. So right off the top - we have a situation where the grip used tends to lower the pitch (although there would also tend to be a greater number of high harmonics) and shorten the duration of the note. It looks a little in the pictures like some

players hold the bones so that they touch each other about 1/4 of the length of the bone from the end - In which case - assuming the performers could restrict their hands and fingers as much as possible to the same part of the bone (1/4 from the end) the opposite effect would occur - that is that the note would be higher, purer, and longer in duration. *Jim McCarthy*, Percussion Clinic

### **TUNING**

The sound produced by rhythm bones depends on many factors, type of material, between which fingers they are held, thickness of the fingers, and the position of the bones in the hand. From the brief discussion in the preceding paragraph, the point where rhythm bones contact each other contributes to the sound produced. Changing that point by raising or lowering the position of a rhythm bone in the hand changes the purity of the sound.

The above can be demonstrated with an audio program that provides a frequency analysis. Play different tunings and analyze each to find the purest sound.

This discussion applies to curved rhythm bones since straight bones strike each other at the lower end.

Subjectively, tuning is another variable to making music, and the more complex sound produced by not tuning rhythm bones may be preferred.

### **INSTRUCTION**

To insure rhythm bones continue into the future, all rhythm bones players need to teach others, including children, how to play rhythm bones.

Video instruction is available in the form of DVDs from Percy Danforth and Aaron Plunkett and others, Youtube with many short instructional videos, and as mentioned above the Edmunds video on our website teaches the Rudiments as well as the percussive style.

A more effective teaching method is face to face, and wood rhythm bones are easier to teach. Beginning instruction includes the important how to hold rhythm bones which is easy to teach but some students find it difficult to keep the the ring finger relaxed while keeping the index finger tight on the stationary bone.

There is lots of variation in the way the Tap and the Triplet Roll are taught (usually the Duplet and the more difficult single Triplet are not taught to begin-

ners). One method starts with the student holding one bone high in the hand as if it were a drum stick and then with the bone vertical hits the teacher's hand but watching their wrist to see how it is moving. The bones are placed in playing position and the student is asked to repeat the same motion. This works most of the time.

The Triplet Roll is frequently described as the same back and forth motion used to wash a window. With the student having learned the Tap, the Triplet Roll sometimes is played after a few adjustments by the teacher.

Two members have suggested teaching sort of face to face using Skype or a skype-like conferencing program. Sounds interesting, but no formal report has been received to date.

### **COMPETITION**

**The National Traditional Country Music Association** has an annual seven day music festival with ten stages, over 600 performers, over 100 stage shows, and over 30 contests including guitar, singers, dulcimer, storytelling, harmonica and rhythm bones. The rhythm bones competition began in 1976 making it the longest running such competition in modern times. For the last 20 or so years with a declining interest in rhythm bones the contest now includes both rhythm bones and spoons. One complaint about the judging is that judges are not rhythm bones players. Many Rhythm Bones Society members have won this competition

**All Ireland Bones Playing Competition.** This is part of the annual 'Fleadh by the Feale' festival in Abbeyfeale, Ireland. It was started in 1995 and has senior and a junior (children) contests. The judges are professional rhythm bones players. Steve Brown was the first two-handed player to win the contest. See his article on this year's event on Page 2.

**Other competitions.** There are references to other rhythm bones competition such as one in Seattle in 1927. A society member reported a competition for one or two years in Australia. One would assume that many of the minstrel players were really good and would have wanted to show off their expertise by competing. It will take more research to find these competitions if they existed.

### **HOW TO MAKE MUSIC**

Music is made with Rudiments,

Elements, and Silence. It might be continuous background percussion or short or long solo breaks. The Chieftains effectively used a single triplet tap to ornament a song. The possibilities are endless.

#### **HOW TO PLAY WITH OTHERS**

Playing with others requires some discipline. First become a good rhythm bones player. It is not uncommon in an Irish Session to hear someone say “No Bones” because experience has shown them that there are few good players.

Percy Danforth liked pine rhythm bones because they were quiet and balanced nicely in an ensemble group (Yes, many rhythm bones players play too loudly).

The duo of Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell were headliners and were backed up with a band. They used ebony rhythm bones because they sound great and were loud.

There are many different situations where rhythm bones players can join in a group. In general, a rhythm bones player must be invited to play with an organized band. Before a performance or during a break, introduce yourself and demonstrate what you can do.

You do not need an invitation to join most jam sessions and playing a rhythm instrument may be a real asset keeping the group together. Jam sessions are part of many festivals and in many towns you can find a group of musicians sitting in a circle jamming the night away.

#### **MAJOR PLAYERS**

Frank Brower, as mentioned in the brief history above, was the first minstrel rhythm bones player. He was a dancer and circus performer, and after the Virginia Minstrel group broke up, he continued to perform with the well known banjo player, Joel Sweeney

The minstrel troupes that followed had many minstrel players, and Daddy Rice in his book *Monarchs of Minstrelsy* names many of those troupes and rhythm bones players.

Freeman Davis, known as Brother Bones, was a well known rhythm bones player, and can still be heard regularly as his recording of *Sweet Georgia Brown* is the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. It is played in advertising and during games possibly making it one of the most played record-

ings in history though few realize that its percussion is rhythm bones.

Ted Goon, known as Mr. Goon-Bones, was a rhythm bones recording artist in the 1950s rising to seventh on the jukebox Billboard chart with *Ain't She Sweet*. He also made and sold what he called ‘Goon-Bones.’ There is a large collection of his recordings and memorabilia on the RBS website.

Percy Danforth was a legend in the latter part of the 20th Century. He had one of the first instructional videos and it is still sold today. He popularized rhythm bones by his performances, workshops and attendance at music festivals. He was considered a national treasure and was recorded by the Library of Congress for future historians. There is a large collection of his memorabilia on the RBS website.

Member Russ Myers lived in the later part of the 20th Century and was also recorded by the Library of Congress. His signature lick was two triplets followed by two duplets performed with perfect timing.

Peadar Mercier, father of member Dr. Mel Mercier, was the bodhran and rhythm bones player for the well known Irish band, *The Chieftains*.

Jerry Mescher’s father developed a style called the Mescher Tradition where they played in beat for beat synchrony and together won a place on the Ted Mack’s Original Amateur television show (over the years there were many rhythm bones players on this show).

Jerry is the great example of a Traditional player. The basic style is triplet tap, tap, triplet tap tap, triplet tap in two measures. The measure starts with the first two taps resulting in one measure on the beat and the next off the beat. What is called the offset is the above pattern is played in right hand and a left hand tap is played following every right hand tap. When you look at Jerry by himself, there is more variation and he is faster. In Maple Leaf Rag, he starts with 4 taps, tap, duplet, tap, 3 triplets, two taps, tap, duplet, tap, and a quarter note rest. Later in the song he has two triplets, tap and a rest, repeated and then a run of 8 triplets.

Some modern day “Ambassadors of Rhythm Bones” include Barry Patton with the Byron Berline Band and Dom Flemons formally with the Carolina

Chocolate Drops. Both of the players have taken rhythm bones all over the world.

#### **RHYTHM BONES SOCIETY**

The grandfather of the society is Dr. Fred Edmunds, a drummer, who became fascinated with rhythm bones, made an instructional video titled, “Bones Unlimited,” started a newsletter to help sell his video as well as rhythm bones and in 1997, talked Everett Cowett into holding a Bones Festival in his back yard. By that time his daughter, Martha, has created a website titled, “Rhythm Bones Central” that was the first Internet meeting place for rhythm bones players.

The father of the Society is Everett Cowett who with his 5 rhythm bones playing children organized two Bones Fests in Greensboro, NC. Steve Wixson attended the second event and using his Internet experience contacted other rhythm bones players.

Also in attendance at those two early Bones Fests was Russ Myers who organized a Bones Fest on his back deck where 34 people became the founding members of the Rhythm Bones Society.

At the first meeting of the Board, the Society policies were approved, Martha Cowett’s website became the society’s website, and the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter was adopted.

Since that time a total of 20 Bones Fests have been held in cities in the East and Central states, 18 volumes of the newsletter published and the website enlarged. Membership has varied from about 80 to 115 members per year. In 1999, there were about 100 web pages about rhythm bones, and today there are over 13,000. The society has made an impact.

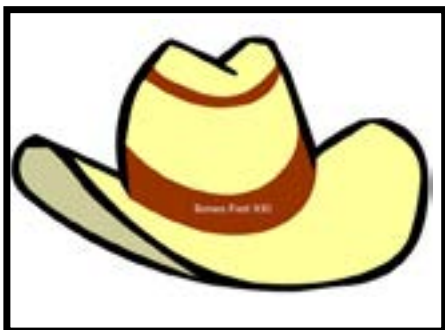
#### **SUMMARY**

Rhythm bones are one of the oldest of musical instruments, yet in the hands of a skilled performer can play the music of today. One purpose of the Rhythm Bones Society is to pass on rhythm bones to the next generation.

There is no ‘School of Rhythm Bones’ that is a correct way to play. One of the great things about the annual Bones Fest is to see what others are playing and then learning a new lick.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

There is a Bibliography on the Rhythm Bones Society’s website for readers who



Bones Fest XXI attendees receive this Cowboy Hat as part of their Registration Fee



See Glenn Chaplin Correction story on Page 3

# Rhythm Bones Festival XXI

## San Antonio, Texas

### August 24-26, 2017

GO TO [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) for Festival Information and Preregistration.

**Bones Fest XXI:** San Antonio Riverwalk Dinner Cruise; Alamo Tour; Riverwalk Attractions; Breakout Sessions; Public Performances; Airport Transportation Provided on Thursday & Sunday; Crockett Hotel--Room Reservations: This direct link will send you to the Crockett Hotel's booking engine with BFXXI pre-populated: <https://reservations.travelclick.com/14878?groupID=1721922; Group Code:RHYTHM>

**Optional Pre-Conference:** Wednesday, August 23, Drive through the Texas Hill-country with these tentative activity choices: Boerne, TX's Mary's Tacos breakfast; Atlatl throwing, Six Shooter & Blackpowder Shooting at a Hill-country Ranch; Dinosaur Tracks; Purgatory Road to the Devil's Backbone; Fischer House Rest Stop; Lunch & Rattle Bones in Luckenbach, TX; Tubing the Guadalupe??; Saddle-up to the bar in the cowboy capital of TX; Castroville Sweets.

**Optional Post-Conference:** San Antonio Vacation/Tourist Attractions; Hogg Plum Ranch Retreat: Sunday evening, August 27, through Thursday morning, August 31, with a public performance in the town's Opera House Wednesday evening; Possible Day Trip: Presidio La Bahia, Goliad Massacre Survivor Isaac Hamilton Monologue. Transportation and lodging is provided; Costs--Chip in for gas and food; Requires Thursday late morning or later flights from the San Antonio airport.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 19, No. 3 2017

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- Website Update*

## Executive Director's Column

If the old adage “ big things come in small packages “ is true, you couldn’t find a better example than Bones Fest XXI. With an impending hurricane, and low attendance, one might think it was a disaster waiting to happen, but when rhythm bones gather, as proven by many Bones Fests, magic happens! Our close nit group bonded and reveled in our association, proving again that all we really need is to be together. Building on the solid foundation of a core group who had been to multiple Bones Fests, add two returning members who had attended their first fest last year, and a new to Bones Fest couple whose expertise on the bones is only exceeded by their sincere enthusiasm and warm personalities and you get a truly fantastic Bones Fest.

Dennis Riedesel did a truly magnificent job of

organizing a shape shifting Fest that required finesse and constant reorganizing in the face of a major hurricane, and he did it with grace and intelligence, not to mention ferrying every attendee to and from the airport in his truck.

Our unofficial award of Most improved Rhythm Bones player was a tie and unanimously went to Bruno Giles and Ron Bruschi, both of whom played great in performances, and clearly are as addicted as the rest of us. Marden and Randy Gordon were truly a delight, selling her distinctive Shooting Star Bones, but just radiating that enthusiasm for rhythm bones, playing, and life that makes a Bones Fest so enjoyable. I’m not going into too much detail here, I’m sure Dennis’ Fest review will do that,

## Bones Fest XXI - The Harvey Fest

I planned on a hot time in Texas but things turned out to be relatively cool. Lots of cool things happened at BFXXI. The temperature, wind and rain as cool even while everyone except me was wondering how they were going to get back home on Sunday or Monday. In regards to Harvey, I wish to declare all who participated in BFXXI “Honorary Texicans” since real Texicans (who are knowledgeable) ride out these monsters of Mother Nature by stocking up on food and beer and throwing one heck of a cool hurricane watch party....which we did!

### COOL THINGS:

I decided to provide cowboy hats instead of the usual event t-shirt in reaction to the anticipated hot and sunny days, My hat maker was forced by the approaching storm to go back to his home near the coast; leaving me to custom block the straw hats. As it turned out, the hats didn’t have to provide shade but served as very cool umbrellas.

With just a few of us in attendance, we were able to interact with each other on a much deeper, longer, and intense level than we would have been able to do had this been a large festival.

The low numbers also gave us an opportunity to utilize a “System Analysis” tool to take a quick, but yet efficient, look at ourselves and develop a hierarchical plan of actions that I and others serving on the board feel would be beneficial to the growth and future development of our society.

The performance gig inside the walls of the Alamo Compound drew a large number of Alamo visitors and gave us the opportunity to demonstrate and teach about our instruments to people from all over the world.

(Continued on Page 6)



This is how close Hurricane Harvey was to Bones Fext XXI

## Editorial

As is my practice while the Fest is fresh in my mind, I write this as I fly home leaving San Antonio on time. While BFXXI was the lowest attended Bones Fest, it was as always a weekend of fun and memories. This was the first Fest for Mardeen and Randy Gordon, and we got to meet the makers of Shooting Star Rhythm Bones. They experienced the solar eclipse as well as the edge of the Category 4 Hurricane Harvey.

In the old movie of the same name, Harvey is an invisible 6' 3½" tall rabbit who is a pooka, a benign but mischievous creature from Celtic mythology who is especially fond of social outcasts (like rhythm bones players). Hurricane Harvey was sort of like that, ever present, but invisible though he caused the loss of three outdoor events. He was close, but never directly seen as shown in the photograph on Page 1. While we were fortunate, there are many in the coastal regions and Houston that were not so fortunate.

I called the last Fest in San Antonio the Performance Fest since we had over 9 hours of stage time, and I call this the Harvey Fest. If you did not attend this year's Fest because it would be too hot, you were wrong. The only hot thing was the rhythm bones playing.

We need a host for Bones Fests XXII, and if you are at all interested, let me know and I will email you a copy of the Bones Fest Host Guide that outlines what it takes to host a Fest.

The article titled "Rudiments of Rhythm Bones" in the last issue of the newsletter posed a question about what to call the rudiment with two clicks. I used the word 'Duplet' noting that it has a different meaning in classical music, and Steve Brown calls it the 'Double Tap.' We talked about it at BFXXI and a better word is 'Double' which I will use editorially in future newsletters.

## Letters to the Editor

Some years ago I saw an ad for open sessions advertised in the DC City Paper at Nanny O'Briens on Connecticut Avenue. The ad indicated a session on Saturdays for more experienced players

and a Sunday session for less experienced players. Both were listed as 'open'.

Figuring I had sat in with a number of luminaries on the local and national scene I headed up to Connecticut Avenue for the Saturday session. I started playing on a tune and was promptly told by the leader this was a 'closed session' and required that the players have a certain level of expertise. Figuring I had played for years at the Ben Bow with Jesse & Terry Winch (Celtic Thunder), and taught Karen Seime Singleton bones at the Ben Bow and sat in with DeDannan at the Birchmere there shouldn't be a problem. Not so, said the leader and was told the Sunday session was open, Saturday was reserved for 'experienced' performers. So I left. Two weeks later I figured I would show up again and see if this 'leader' was still obtuse. As I started to play the so called 'leader was about to bust my chops when Rowan Corbett came in and greeted me. He asked if I would come sit by him so we could trade some licks and compare technique. At that point the 'leader' left me alone and I played until the session ended. I never went back to this session and any session I know he is associated with I make it a point to avoid. This session leader is well known in the DC metro area and, like me, has also played at the White House. *Hank Tanenbaum*

## Executive Director Column Continued

but I do want to thank each and every attendee. This is a Fest that will stand out strongly and most fondly in my memory! You don't have to go any further than the Fest group picture to get the full flavor of it. Yippie yi yo ki yay!

Our thoughts have once again started to focus on next year. As no one has come forward to host, we are coming to you, our membership, for someone to come forward to volunteer. One idea that has been floated is the possibility of a fest committee which would take some of the burden off the host. Please contact me directly to further explore this. In particular we reach out to those of you who have been to a number of Fests, perhaps have entertained the idea of hosting but perhaps are put off by the seeming enormity of the task. A commit-

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

tee could really cut down on the size of the task, and make it more manageable. Talk to one of the previous hosts to get an overall picture of hosting a fest. Remember, these Fests continue because of the individuals that have embraced them. If you have been to multiple Fests and haven't hosted, maybe this is your time! Uncle Bones Needs You! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXII Host Needed

As requested by RBS Board, this is an ad for a host for Bones Fest XXII. Steve Brown described the need at the end of his Editorial just above. If interested, use our Contact Us page to let us know and we will send you our BF Host Guide that shows what the job entails. One of the fun things about hosting a Fest is the planning because you have complete freedom to come up with something really unique and neat.

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 2:05 PM in the Alamo Room of the Crocket Hotel. Those present were Steve Brown, Sharon Mescher, Skeff Flynn, Dennis Riedesel and Steve Wixson with guests Jonathan Danforth and Randy and Mardeen Gordon.

The minutes from the last meeting were approved as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented the 2016 Treasurer's Report and it was approved. A copy with all supporting documentation will be sent to the Executive Director.

Steve Brown called the meeting to order as the Nominating Committee, and all current members were nominated for 2018.

New Business. A motion was made and approved to pay all expenses for BFXXI since the Fest Budget did not cover the low attendance and the Hurricane. The Board gave Dennis a round of thanks for hosting BFXXI.

No one has volunteered to host Bones Fest XXII, and an announcement will be placed in the RBP newsletter.

There was a discussion of the Planning Session that Dennis organized. One item was Networking and Communications and Jonathon will setup a Google Group for members to communicate.

There was a discussion about the website upgrade by Steve Wixson. There was consensus that we need to understand how the website is being used before we can implement a new website, and that we can use Wixson's update with Google Analytics to give us that data.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:05. Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM in the Alamo Room of the Crocket Hotel.

The minutes from the last meeting were approved as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented the 2016 Treasurer's Report. Steve Brown opened

the meeting for the election of Officers and Board members, and Steve Wixson read the slate of nominated members, Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin. The floor was open for other nominations and there being none the motion was made and approved that the nominees be elected by acclamation.

There being no new or old business, the meeting adjourned at 3:14 PM.

Respectively submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## A Reflection on Bones Fest XXI

Is there any threat from Mother Nature that can prevent rhythm bones players from gathering at a festive venue? Based on Bones Fest XXI, Hurricane Harvey couldn't even dampen the excitement and anticipation of rhythm bones friends who attended. And, with Dennis at the helm, we adjusted to a well-planned and full-of-activities schedule for the Fest.

The fact that only fourteen RBS members attended the Fest did not seem to effect the experience. We wowed a huge crowd of tourists in the Alamo Compound. So much fun!

Dennis led us through the history of the Alamo, and the making of the movie, "The Price of Freedom," in which he had a part. I loved the history, but I did enjoy his story about the director's opinion of Dennis's performance during the filming! Even though we had seen this movie in 2011, the Brown family and I watched it again. I wanted to try to find Dennis among all the actors, but I didn't. I did hear rhythm bones, but couldn't even find this person!

I loved visiting and jamming with all of the familiar friends, and meeting and making new friends. Mardeen Gordon's gift of her embroidery of Jerry's and my hands was "icing" on the Fest (see photograph on page 5). She spent a year-and-a-half stitching this magnificent piece of art.

Thank you, Dennis, for hosting another action-packed, marvelous Bones Fest.

## Report on BFXX Sea Shanty Workshop

The emphasis of this workshop was to work on our singing and playing rhythm bones at the same time through authentic sea shanties and fore-castle songs of the 19th century.

Tim Reilly and I broke down the shanties (work songs) into different categories depending on the various heaves and hauls needed to operate various ship-board equipment (i.e. Halyard, capstain, bunting, pumps, etc). These were all sung in a call-and-response manner.

We also performed fore-castle, or recreational songs, accompanied by all of the attendees, ending with a rousing version of Spanish Ladies (as mentioned in Melville's Moby Dick, Chapter 41).

There is a vast repertoire of this aural tradition, but we tried to emphasize rhythm bone friendly pieces, some of which are as follows:

- Fuba-Wuba John (opening warm up song)
- Haul Away Joe
- Johnny Come Down To Hi-Lo ("...I put that jawbone on the fence and I ain't Heard nothing but the jawbone since")
- Reuben Ranzo
- Haul Away For The Windy Weather
- Strike The Bell
- Old Balena

When demonstrating rhythm bones to people who have never seen them before, it's a nice option to have a little ditty to sing as an accompaniment (to the rhythm bones, of course!).

You can discover more shanties (also spelled "chanteys") by a quick YouTube search for Stan Hugill, who was a sea music historian and the last true working Chanteyman. Between Stan and the X-Seamen's Institute, that's about as authentic as it gets.

(Honorable mention to Steve Wixson also discovered a rare album from Bristol by Erik Illott who sings and plays the bones on most of the tracks).

Remember, in the words of Stan Hugill, a strident voice is much preferable over a pretty one!

Cheers Bonesmates.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenny Wolin*





Jonathan Danforth performing at the Alamo Compound



Randy Gordon Performing at Saturday's Show



BFXXI attendees kicked out of the Bar at the Menger Hotel



Steve Brown introducing Bruno Giles at the Alamo Compound



Bones Fest XXI Attendees from the left, Jonathan Danforth, Jim Runner, Randy Gordon, Mardeen Gordeon, Jeremy Brown, Steve Brown





Bones Marketplace



Closeup of the Bones Fest XXI Hat



Jim Runner performing at Alamo Compound



Ron Bruschi performing at Saturday's Show



Dennis Riedesel custom blocking our Fest Hats



Mardeen Gordon embroidered this for Sharon Mescher. Sharon's hand is on the left and her late husband Jerry's is on the right (See Page 3).



Mardeen Gordon teaching Jeremy Brown



Dennis Riedesel's RBS Planning Session



Host Dennis Riedesel, Jennifer Brown, Bruno Giles, Sharon Mescher, Ron Bruschi, Marie Bruschi, Steve Wixson and Skeffington Flynn

Not only are BFXXI participants able to place in their performance bibliography an entry that they performed at the Alamo but they can also include that they performed in Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders bar of renown — "The Menger Bar." And then they were promptly thrown out of the bar. Some people get thrown out of a bar just once for playing bones, but I have now been thrown out of this bar twice!!

The performance concert Saturday evening was an awesome experience of observing all the different bones playing styles in concert with accompaniments of blues guitar, whistling, fiddles, harmonica, banjo, voice, and electronic music sources. In addition, there were just "bare bones" with no musical accompaniment and, I believe, one or two debuts of original works.

I got to provide, for taking Texas selfies, my cowboy reenactment clothing and accouterments which were promptly utilized to turn everyone into the cowboy idiom "drugstore cowboy—all hat but no cows."

For me, the fest was fun. I enjoy a challenge of making an event "come together" and this one was a bit more than what I expected with making changes on the fly as the situation kept developing and then redeveloping. I think the only time I "lost it" was Saturday after the membership meeting when I forgot my revised2 schedule and forgot about the Round Table Discussion on Teaching Bones. However, the impromptu discussion about teaching after the concert took care of that—Way Cool!

Super Cool—I think everyone from the Fest is home safe and sound; some after experiencing flight changes and delays. I heard back from most everyone after they got home.

However, the most super-duper cool thing was to see the embroidery artwork of Mardeen Gordon's (from Shooting Stars Bones fame) that was presented to Sharon Mescher. One of Jerry Mescher's hands holding a set of bones and one of Sharon's hands holding bones in this life-like rendering by thread was a tearjerker!

Special thanks to Marynell and Glen Young who provided live music for the weekend and Dave Williams who joined them on Thursday and at the Alamo. *Dennis Riedesel*

## San Antonio Newspaper Article

Title: "One man's barbecue scraps is another's musical instrument."

Rhythm bones are indeed an instrument for all generations. Dennis Riedesel on Page 8 shows Alamo living historians Scott Jones, center, and Joe Weathersby how to hold them during a public performance by the Rhythm Bones Society. According to the Rhythm Bones Society, the instrument dates back as far as 3000 BC.

Rhythm bones may look like the picked-clean scraps at a barbecue rib buffet, but in the hands of Dennis Riedesel and his fellow members of the Rhythm Bones Society, the obscure percussive instrument is the stuff of music gold.

Take the sweet noise it made recently in San Antonio.

Late last month, Riedesel and several other bones players gathered at the back of the Alamo grounds, clickity-clacking with the front-porch folk music of an acoustic guitarist and a married couple on the fiddle, the wife garbed in an apropos skeleton T-shirt and leggings.

If you've never heard of rhythm bones, it's not surprising as it's hardly mainstream and players are few. Riedesel, a Boerne resident, may be among the only in the area.

The most basic rhythm bones are just that — actual bones, such as beef short ribs, which you can boil clean, dry in the sun or oven, then cut to length and sand smooth. But despite the skeletal name, Riedesel said most rhythm bones are made from some type of hardwood, such as teak, ebony, birch or walnut.

"It usually depends on the loudness and then the tonal quality of the bones," said Riedesel, himself a fan of African blackwood. "How crisp they are and how lively sounding they are versus a dead thump."

Playing the rhythm bones is a lot like playing the spoons or castanets, just with more wrist action, less finger pinching and a completely different rhythm. Bones players hold a pair of the slightly bowed little planks between their fingers like chunky chopsticks, then rotate their forearms and hands so the bones hit together

in single, double and triple beats.

Gus Wanner, whose encyclopedic knowledge of guitars and other instruments has served musicians for more than a decade at Guitar Tex sales and repair shop in San Antonio, said rhythm bones was primarily the instrument of slaves and was culturally appropriated much like the banjo.

"It's a wonderful rhythmic thing, and it is the precursor to playing spoons," Wanner said.

The Rhythm Bones Society website traces the instrument's roots as far back as recorded civilization, noting rhythm bones have been dug up in prehistoric Mesopotamian graves and Egyptian tombs from around 3000 BC. "It has existed for eternity, if you want to say that," Riedesel said.

Rhythm bones likely hit North American shores with early English and Irish settlers, the site said, and would grow to become a cornerstone of minstrel shows in the 19th and early 20th centuries, then later vaudeville and jazz music.

The site also noted the renaissance of folk music in the 1960s has since made rhythm bones an added fixture to zydeco, bluegrass and classic folk music of the Ozarks and Appalachian Mountains.

Riedesel prefers playing the bones to what he considers the authentic Americana folk music of the late 1700s and early 1800s — namely old Irish, Scottish and English precursors to bluegrass. Riedesel got his first taste of bone playing while a re-enactor and wardrobe crew member on the set of the 1988 IMAX film, "Alamo: The Price of Freedom." He noticed another cast member playing the bones in a scene and was intrigued.

Riedesel has his own collection of rhythm bones in various materials and from various animals. He has some made from Texas iron wood, buffalo ribs and even a set he carved from a chunk of mammoth tusk found in the Alaskan permafrost. He also has some custom LED-rigged wood bones that flicker like fireflies, plus a bone-shaped bone tie for those extra formal occasions.

And if you think those bones materials vary, their playing styles are just as colorful and eclectic. Rhythm Bones Society member Skeffington Flynn out of West Virginia plays with both hands at the same time, waving one over the other

like a sort of chattering hand jive. Mardeen Gordon, who was at her first Bones Fest last week with husband Randy from California, prefers a single-handed play with one bone held high and the other held low.

“Everyone else plays different,” said Sharon Mescher, a Rhythm Bones Society member from Iowa. “The diversity is what I like.”

Mescher picked up the bones 11 years ago as another way to connect with her late husband Jerry, a Rhythm Bones Society member who died in 2015 and who had been playing the bones since he was 10.

Being a rare musical instrument, rhythm bones have a way of getting passed down through the generations.

One of the instrument’s most notable players, the late musician Percy Danforth, taught his grandson Jonathan Danforth from Massachusetts, who joined the Rhythm Bones Society a little more than a decade ago after discovering the group at a Massachusetts folk festival.

“The discovery of a community — which is what this really is, almost a family like community — brings a lot of joy into an instrument that I already loved a lot through my own family connection,” Jonathan said.

It’s the kind of connection Rhythm Bones Society Executive Director Steve Brown strives to make with bones enthusiasts and curiosity seekers alike.

“The bones became kind of a major part of my life,” said Brown, who joined the Rhythm Bones Society when it began in 1999 and has headed it since 2004. “It’s a combination of the youthful aspects and historical aspects of it.”

Brown is considered somewhat of a living legend in rhythm bones circles, both domestic and abroad. He was the first American ever to knock out back-to-back wins at the All-Ireland Bones Competition in Abbeyfeale, considered the world championship of bones playing.

Brown said rhythm bones remain unusual and rare enough that most people don’t know they exist, though most people have heard the instrument’s most high-profile player and tune. That player would be Freeman “Brother Bones” Davis. And that tune would be Davis’ 1949 recording of the 1925 jazz standard “Sweet Georgia Brown,” best known as

the famous whistled and bones-backed theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters.

Brown said today the most recognized bones player would probably be Dom Flemons, co-founder and former member of the Grammy Award-winning, African American string band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops. The multi-instrumentalist now tours as “The American Songster,” playing folk instruments that include the banjo, harmonica, and of course the bones.

Nevertheless, rhythm bones remain that extra rare sight and sound, including in San Antonio.

“I don’t think you see it much of anywhere,” said Steve Schnipper, vice-president of entertainment for the San Antonio Blues Society. Schnipper said he’s been around blues music since the mid-1960s. In all that time he’s only seen the bones performed twice.

At least both times were relatively recent. The first was last year at the International Blues Competition in Memphis. The other was a few months later in San Antonio, when the city hosted the annual convention of the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica. Alas, neither instance involved a San Antonio bones performer.

Riedesel said he knows of fewer than 10 bones players in Texas, so he hopes the Rhythm Bones Society’s latest noise out of San Antonio draws more players and enthusiasts, perhaps for some open mic sessions where he can join them for a jam.

Any excuse to open more eyes, ears and especially hands to that ancient instrument whose roots are tied to the very beat of music. *René A. Guzman*. Copyright 2017 San Antonio Express-News, reprinted with permission.

[Editor’s note. To view this article online, see more photographs and watch the video that was taken during our Alamo performance, do an internet search for “expressnews.com rhythm bones riedesel”]

## Rhythm Bones History Rap Song

[Editor’s Note: This was performed with rhythm bones accompaniment at the Bones Fest XXI Saturday Night Show.]

The bones have been around since man began. Along with the drum they made the first rhythm band.

Buried in graves in Mesopotamia and played in the theatre of ancient China. They’ve been used for everything from hunting prey to awakening the spirits on a holy day.

But I like to play them just to hear their sound. So let me show you how I shake my bones around.

The best part is their versatility. How two sticks of wood can be so wild and free. With a flick of the wrist the rhythm can change from a 4/4 time to a 1-2-3-1-2-3-1-2-3-1-2-3.

The Irish adopted the bones and the bodhran to play in the pubs for a dance or a song. And when they arrived on the shores of our country. To keep up their spirits they brought them along.

The next group of migrants to take up the rhythm were brought to our country without their consent. The songs that they sang as they worked the plantations. Brought African rhythms wherever they went.

And when they came North with their newfound freedom. They entertained all with their black minstrel shows. Playing along with the songs and the stories. More often than not you would find Mr Bones.

Popular culture has never embraced them. And yet they’ve been clacking for three thousand years.

The tongs and the bones were requested by Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream by William Shakespeare.

And when Mary Poppins and Bert went a-strolling the cartoon band had the bones rattling ‘round.

And thousands have heard them without realizing in the Globetrotter’s theme song of Sweet Georgia Brown.

They are still played today with some bands you might know of, but it’s up to the boners to keep them alive.

By playing and teaching a new generation this age old tradition continues to thrive. *Mardeen Gordon*





Rhythm bones are indeed an instrument for all generations. Dennis Riedesel, right, shows Alamo living historians Scott Jones, center, and Joe Weathersby how to hold them during a public performance at The Alamo. Photograph by Darren Abate. Copyright 2017 San Antonio Express-News, reprinted with permission.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 19, No. 4 2017

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## Executive Director's Column

Ronnie McShane, bones player with the Chieftains, Ceoltoiri Chullanan and good friend of Sean O'Riada passed away on October 28, 2017 due to complications with Diabetes. Ronnie was a great character, and his bone playing was featured on the Chieftains recordings #5, and Bonneparts Retreat. Ronnie was the first bone player I heard when I purchased Chieftains 5 in 1975, and it sent me on a quest to find the bones, ultimately leading me to Percy Danforth.

But it wasn't until my first trip to Ireland in 2003 to compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, that I met Ronnie in person. By coincidence he was staying at the same bed and breakfast that I was, and when the landlady introduced me to him, it took me totally by surprise.

Ronnie's playing on those records had a major impact on me, though he remained an elusive, almost mysterious character, in an age where finding out information was much more difficult than it is today in the age of the smart phone and vast internet.

On that day in 2003, we spent several hours together, talking and playing the bones, and when I won the contest that year, he was my biggest supporter. Eventually I interviewed Ronnie for the RBS Newsletter, spending an hour on the phone with him on a St. Patricks Day, him in Ireland and me in my cellar, hearing all about his life, growing up in a theater family in Dublin, working as a consierge at a 5 star hotel in London, and touring with the Chieftains

## A Trip to Australia & New Zealand

Bucket List - a movie starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman and a concept. For my wife, Janet, and myself it was a long awaited vacation to Australia and New Zealand. It was a cruise from Sydney to Melbourne and Hobart, Tasmania and then a circle trip to several port cities in New Zealand including Wellington. We arrived a day early to visit with a few rhythm bones oriented Bush Music Club members and had lunch with RBS member John McInnes in Wellington, NZ.

RBS had known about the Bush Music Club in Sydney for years and one of their members, Bob Bolton, had given us a drawing of a person's hands holding a pair of rhythm bones to use as a temporary logo (to see it go to [rhythm-bones.org/documents/RBP-Vol1to16.pdf](http://rhythm-bones.org/documents/RBP-Vol1to16.pdf) and look in the upper left corner). To my great disappointment Bob was unable to join us due to health issues as were several out-of-Sydney members.

After a day visiting the Blue Mountains outside of Sydney, I went to the home of Dale Dengate to meet with a few

BMC members for a light meal and an evening of stories and playing.

In the group as shown in the photograph below was Dale Dengate, Sandra Nixon, BMC's secretary, Wally Bollinger, Sharyn Mattern, BMC President, Ann and Frank Maher.

Their website ([bushmusic.org.au](http://bushmusic.org.au)) describes them as the oldest folk club in Australia and, arguably, one of the oldest folk clubs in the English speaking world. They have been actively promoting Australian folk (Continued on Page 6)



*Bush Music Club of Sydney members, Dale Dengate, Sandra Nixon, Wally Bollinger, Sharyn Mattern, and Ann & Frank Maher*

## Editorial

The front page story is about my trip to Australia and New Zealand where I met with local rhythm bones players. I don't have a sense that I discovered the real presence of rhythm bones down under (Australia a big country), but rhythm bones are alive with the people I visited.

There is a nice update from Nick Driver that provides a bit of insight about his former rhythm bones maker business.

Wow! Look at the note from the Library of Congress on the opposite page. We can all take pride in it especially those who have written articles or made another contribution. Our twentieth year of publication is just around the corner.

My wife's parents lived in the Ozarks, so I was pleased to hear of Steve Green and have him write his story of a lifelong interest in traditional Percussion.

## Letters to the Editor

Bones Fest XXI was everything we hoped it would be, though we didn't really know what to expect. We had heard in advance that the registration numbers were low, and at first we were a little bit disappointed that only twelve RBS members showed up. But we immediately felt so welcome and comfortable with everyone that it seemed almost like a reunion of a family we didn't know we had. It was an intimate gathering of like minded people sharing their love of rhythm bones, with each other and with the dozen or so lucky people who happened upon one of our performances.

I really enjoyed seeing the many different styles of very talented bonists, and everyone's collections of bones made of all sorts of materials. Even better, we got to try playing all of them, and everyone shared their techniques and tips freely.

Jamming with a bunch of rhythm bones players can be a cacophony of clacking, but when everyone has such mastery of dynamics and rhythm, whether we let each other take a solo or played all together, the rhythms flowed and blended with complexity that allowed us all to hear each other's unique style.

It was truly the most fun we have ever had playing rhythm bones. I think we are

hooked. *Mardeen Gordon*

In Sept. of 2016 Ann and I attended Dick and Rose Coffin's Annual Anniversary Lobster Party in Falmouth at which The Don Roy Trio always provides the musical entertainment, and I make my usual guest appearance playing my rhythm bones. Pam Rhodes, who was my lab assistant at the Univ. of Southern Maine during the time that I served as a biology lab instructor after having retired from BHS in 1987, recorded my performance with her iPhone. I'm sending along the two links to it should you wish to view them. <https://youtu.be/kVy6gnt-fk8> and <https://youtu.be/ePIUmNHlIPM>

By the way, Dick's father, Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, was a Pulitzer Prize winning poet and a professor at Bowdoin for many years. Dick and I were childhood friends.

Several years ago Don Roy organized the Fiddle-iceous Orchestra of Maine and will be having four concerts this



October. Don invited me to make a guest appearance playing my rhythm bones with two of the songs that they'll be playing.

The concerts went well. When Don Roy introduced me I mentioned that during intermission I would provide a free lesson to anyone who would like to learn how to play the bones for which many took advantage of the opportunity. However, despite me showing them ex-

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

actly how to hold them, not one of them was able to make them click properly. I guess its harder than it looks how to play them. As a result of the prolonged standing ovation at the conclusion of the last tune on the program, Don Roy had the orchestra and guest performers join together for an encore.

My picture was on the poster advertising the concerts, a copy of which I'm sending along. Warm regards, *Claude Bonang*

Hi. As you know, Nick Driver has made great contributions to maintaining the tradition of bones playing. [see article on next page]. Do you happen to know whether it is still possible to buy the bones he made? I had recently been thinking maybe I should get a couple pairs of them. *Bonnie Dixon* [Let me know via our Contact Us Page if you can help Bonnie. See Bonnie and Nick perform at [rhythmbones.org/video/Nick-Driver&BonnieDixonVideo/](http://rhythmbones.org/video/Nick-Driver&BonnieDixonVideo/)]

**(Executive Director From Page 1)**

in Australia. He was a gracious, lovable character who I will never forget, and it was through his efforts that the bones were elevated to a place in prominence by Sean O’Riada, and later Paddy Moloney. RIP dear friend!

For many years I have longed for a Bones Fest in New Hampshire. This would be a state where bones players Shorty Boulet, and Cecil Rivers lived, where the bones could occasionally be heard at folk festivals and contra dances, and where ethnic music from Canada, Cape Breton, and Ireland have survived for a number of years.

It seems my dream is about to come true, as Jesse and Sky Bartlett, with assistance from Ernie Duffy, are busy organizing Bones Fest XXII in the heart of the White Mountains, Franconia Notch!

I have visited the Notch since a child, and Jennifer and I have made a number of trips their with our kids over the years, and it truly is a magical place. With amazing natural wonders like the Flume, and the Basin, all in the shadow of some of the highest mountains in the Northeast, I always get a thrill from being there. And now the bones will be played in that amazing place!

An even more prospect is the Bones Fest attendee’s staying in adjacent cabins at the Indian Head Motel and Resort, playing and celebrating to our hearts content! The details are included in this newsletter, don’t miss this extraordinary event! *Steve Brown*

## Ronnie McShane Obituary

Ronnie McShane former bones player with the Chieftains and Ceotoiri Chualann passed away October 28th in Dublin, he was 84. Ronnies' playing had a profound impact on me when I first heard his playing on Chieftains 5, and later on Bonneparts Retreat. I met him at the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship in Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick in 2003, and we instantly became good friends. I was able to see him several more times, and interviewed him for the Rhythm Bones Society's Newsletter. He was a great character, and a real gentleman. RIP Ronnie! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXII Preliminary Information

Bones Fest XXII will be in Lincoln, NH on June 7-10, 2018. Lodging will be in the cottages at the Indian Head Resort in Lincoln, NH where room rates for the given weekend would be \$80-\$90/night per cottage, each sleeping up to 4 people. The cottages are individual structures all located right next to each other in a small “village”, allowing us to all be near each other and have a communal lawn area to grill, hang out and play bones! For those who prefer regular hotel rooms, the Indian Head Resort offers these as well at a slightly higher price. For more information about the cottages, visit: <https://indianheadresort.com/indian-head-cottages/>

Registration fees is \$75.

A tentative schedule is as follows:

Thursday:

7:00 PM – Reception at a local bar/eatery with a separate room for us to play (appetizers & finger food included with registration)

Friday:

8:00 AM – Breakfast in conference room at the Indian Head Resort (included with registration)

9:00 AM – Workshops

12:00 PM – Take gondola up to the top of Loon Mountain to eat lunch (included with registration), take a photo shoot, and play on the top of a mountain!

6:00 PM – Dinner on your own in Lincoln OR join us at the cottages where we will be grilling dinner (included with registration)

7:00 PM – Jamming at the Indian Head Resort Conference Room until the last man stands!

Saturday:

9:00 AM – Breakfast at Polly’s Pancake Parlor (included with registration) and jamming/workshop

12:00 PM – Perform at Clark’s Trading Post for regular day guests and do a special performance for and interactions with the Boy Scouts. For more information about Clark’s, please visit: <http://www.clarkstradingpost.com/>

5:00 PM – Dinner on your own in Lincoln

5:30 PM – Doors open at concert ven-

ue for preparations

7:00 PM – Concert!

Sunday: Good-byes ☐

## An Interesting Note From The Library of Congress

The American Folklife Center is proud to be a repository for the *Rhythm Bones Player*. We recently re-cataloged the newsletter with full subject classification.

Todd Harvey

Serials Coordinator

American Folklife Center

Library of Congress

101 Independence Ave., SE

Washington, DC 20540-4610

## Update From Nick Driver

I was reflecting that it was back in 1977 that I launched my impassioned drive to get bones playing back on the map and found Percy doing much the same thing across the pond, we became very close friends and even had a wonderful meeting. The business I set up used a number of outworkers demand was so great, especially from specialist music stores all across the world. On wooden bones alone I would buy massive logs of rosewood from the importers to be converted into planks and then into bones. Cured cows shin bones came from Argentina in large crates to produce the thousands of polished bone bones that I marketed. I did TV shows and radio with my musician friends to promote the bones, did the album recording, wrote articles, advertised extensively and researched and wrote the first tutor, which is still in print. It all now seems so very long ago and then your Society started some twenty or more years later and flourishes and does so much for the instrument which is wonderful. I am aware of how much you and others put in to running things. I hope all goes well for you, especially your health, My best wishes, *Nick*

## A Life Long Affair with Traditional Percussion

In the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas, traditional Old Time music and dance have always been easy to find. My own earliest dance memories are from my paternal granddad's front room in the 1950's, where square dances and polkas were danced with gusto. My memories of the square dances at my grandad's house are shadowy, but more distinct are later reminiscences of aunts telling of how I was under foot all the time.



That part of the country felt that percussion had a place in any good time, and dancers “jigged” in time with the music as they moved through the figures of the square dance. I didn't know it at the time, but what I was seeing and hearing was the local form of the traditional percussive dance they call “flatfooting” back East in the Appalachians. The percussion was not limited to the dancers, though, as a band would often have someone

playing the “bones.”

Folk from “off,” which is anywhere that is not the Ozarks, call them rhythm bones, but around the mountains here, they are just bones. Up until the 1980's, most folk had an elder family member, often “grandad,” who played. Nowadays, I suppose that would be a great grandparent. I think this is where my love of percussion started, sunk its roots in my brain, and has flourished ever since. As a child, playing the bones was beyond me, but there were other ways to keep the beat of the music. Probably around age 6, to my parents chagrin, I discovered the fascinating rhythm possibilities of whacking the furniture with sticks in time to polka music! Ah, the dubious pleasure and pride of having children interested in percussion. I enjoyed those dances and gatherings during my childhood, but somewhere in my later teens I discovered the wider world.

Thinking of those years, I will skip over the late 60's, the 70's, and early 80's, as life style experimentation and mullet haircuts share the attribute of being of most interest at the moment and to one's self. Those years do further this story, however, by virtue of being the backdrop for a return to my interest in Old Time music, dance, and percussion.

When traditional music again entered my awareness in the mid- 80's, I embraced it like a returning prodigal. To my surprise, there were people all over the country who played this kind of music, danced the dances, and sang the ballads. And what was really a trip, others wanted to learn how! Somewhat later I met my wife, who is a gifted singer in the ballad tradition. She formed her own group “Sugar on the floor,” [www.sugarsingers.com](http://www.sugarsingers.com), and together we formed “Ozark Foot Song,” [www.ozarkfootsong.com](http://www.ozarkfootsong.com). Ozark Foot Song relishes everything percussive, and bones are included in a lot of what we do.

As you'll understand by now, for me, percussion exists inextricably entwined with Old Time music and dance, and has as many expressions as there are body parts and simple tools. Seated foot percussion, most identified with the Quebecois musicians and singers, exists in every culture, as seldom will you find a traditional instrumentalist who can play without keeping the beat with at least

one foot. Then, at some point, the down beat becomes a heel strike, and in the manner of the camel's nose in the tent, the toe will tap the offbeat. It's downhill from there, as younger folks, say 80 and below, start experimenting with using both feet to add other rhythms and embellishments. This useful juxtaposition of hands and feet is a wonderful thing and we should not take it for granted. As it turns out, this anthropomorphic arrangement is a marvelous gift from the great architect, as a bones player who has both hands and feet, and I suppose, a chair, has infinite possibilities for their art!

I now make my own bones, which I suppose we all do if there is enough calcium in our diet. For percussion, though, I use various species of wood, having found that the sound can be quite different by design and species. In general, shorter length and harder wood gives the higher the pitch. Of those I've used, ebony is far and away the loudest, and has the most bell-like tone. Next would be white oak, followed by cherry, maple, red oak, and way down the list, pine. One might think, then, that ebony is the go-to wood, but that would be like always playing the loudest snare drum for all venues. In fact, my ebony bones are a bit too loud for front-room jams. When I play with both hands, I currently use longer (10 inch) cherry bones in my left hand, and shorter (6.5 inch) white oak bones in my right. The cherry gives a slightly deeper and hollower sound, which is nice for sounds around the basic beat. The white oak has a crisper sound, feathers well, and is great for triplets and other accents.

For several decades I've taught workshops and performed around this country and out of it, and I've run into some interesting folks. In England in 2015, at the Whitby festival, I met Bert Draycott, world champion spoons player. Now, I haven't been to any spoons competitions, or bones competitions, for that matter, but Bert is top notch. In his 80's when I met him, we shared a concert spot, and after that went to a gathering at a local pub. He was still going strong in the wee hours when I staggered home!

Some years before that, I had followed my nose to Ireland, and found the Willie Clancy Festival in County Clare. Many of the folk luminaries of the Ireland



music scene regularly play there, and the combination of being a Yank, a traditional percussive dancer, and playing the bones got me a concert spot one evening. I was more than a little intimidated to follow several of the musicians from the Chieftains on the program!

It was on the flight back to the US that airport security decided that my bones constituted a risk to airline safety! I was used to explaining that the two well rounded sticks of wood were a percussion instrument, but a very stern man saw through my words to deadly possibilities should they be allowed on an airplane. As my explanation fell on deaf ears, he fixed me with the TSA gimlet gaze, and asked "would you like to voluntarily relinquish these?" By that time I had an audience of his TSA comrades, and a backed up line of irritated travelers, so I ventured a tremulous "yes?" With what I'm sure was a practiced monotone, he said, "that was the correct answer," and let me through.

Concerts, road trips, and plane flights notwithstanding, I have the most fun at the local jam sessions around Fayetteville, AR, the nearest city to my hilltop home. The old time music scene loves to get together for jam sessions, and I'm attracted to them like a moth to a flame. By way of the school of hard knocks, I've learned that less is more when presuming to add percussion, whether flatfoot percussive dance, body percussion, or bones to a musical jam session. The Irish have a genre of jokes that demonstrate the kind of cynical attitude musicians may have about percussion, particularly pertaining to the Irish bodhrun, an open sided drum. To wit, "How does a gentleman play the bodhrun?" Answer – "He doesn't." Ouch, I mean, are our manners that bad?

Jam session etiquette is basically the same as school-yard etiquette from the 2nd grade, a feature it happens to share with national politics. On the grade school playground, the wise child joins a play group, especially if it's a circle, from the outside, and quietly. Playing there quietly, you demonstrate that you understand and respect the existence of the group, and eventually someone will ask something about what you are doing with those sticks. That is your invitation to move closer. Techniques that serve well at jam sessions are feathering your

sound (to spare nearby ears), an absolutely solid down beat, and a discernably different tone to the off-beat. The occasional rattle of double beats or triplets should be there and gone, leaving the musician's ears wanting more. It is a sad bit of cosmic unfairness that most music does not really need much beyond that. Now don't misunderstand, as you can see from my concert video bits of adrenaline fueled tomfoolery, I love syncopated triplets with overhand cast-backs as much as the next fellow. But those are for percussion jams, percussion concerts, and tune/song arrangements with your own music group. When we join musical jams, we are the accompaniment, the point of which is to contribute to the ensemble sound. Percussionists are in the back row. Alas, life is not fair! *Steve Green*

## Playing In a Session Can Be Political

Some years ago I saw an ad for open sessions advertised in the DC City Paper at Nanny O'Briens on Connecticut Avenue. The ad indicated a session on Saturdays for more experienced players and a Sunday session for less experienced players. Both were listed as 'open'. Figuring I had sat in with a number of luminaries on the local and national scene I headed up to Connecticut Avenue for the Saturday session. I started playing on a tune and was promptly told by the leader this was a 'closed session' and required that the players have a certain level of expertise. Figuring I had played for years at the Ben Bow with Jesse & Terry Winch (Celtic Thunder), and taught Karen Seime Singleton bones at the Ben Bow and sat in with DeDannan at the Birchmere there shouldn't be a problem. Not so, said the leader and was told the Sunday session was open, Saturday was reserved for 'experienced' performers. So I left. Two weeks later I figured I would show up again and see if this 'leader' was still obtuse. As I started to play the so called 'leader' was about to bust my chops when Rowan Corbett came in and greeted me. He asked if I would come sit by him so we could trade some licks and compare technique. At that point the 'leader' left me alone and I played until the session ended. I never went back to this session and any session I know he

is associated with I make it a point to avoid. This session leader is well known and, like me, has also played at the White House. *Hank Tenenbaum*

## Report on BFFX Sea Music Workshop

The emphasis of this workshop was to work on our singing and playing the bones at the same time through authentic sea shanties and forecandle songs of the 19th century.

Tim Reilly and I broke down the shanties (work songs) into different categories depending on the various heaves and hauls needed to operate various ship-board equipment (i.e. Halyard, capstain, bunting, pumps, etc). These were all sung in a call-and-response manner.

We also performed forecandle, or recreational songs, accompanied by all of the attendees, ending with a rousing version of Spanish Ladies (as mentioned in Melville's Moby Dick, Chapter 41).

There is a vast repertoire of this aural tradition, but we tried to emphasize bone friendly pieces, some of which are as follows:

- Fuba-Wuba John (opening warm up song)
- Haul Away Joe
- Johnny Come Down To Hi-Lo ("...I put that jawbone on the fence and I ain't Heard nothing but the jawbone since")
- Reuben Ranzo
- Haul Away For The Windy Weather
- Strike The Bell
- Old Balena

When demonstrating the bones to people who have never seen them before, it's a nice option to have a little ditty to sing as an accompaniment (to the bones, of course!).

You can discover more shanties (also spelled "chanteys") by a quick YouTube search for Stan Hugill, who was a sea music historian and the last true working Chanteyman. Between Stan and the X-Seamen's Institute, that's about as authentic as it gets.

(Honorable mention to Steve Wixson also discovered a rare album from Bristol by Erik Illott who sings and plays the bones on most of the tracks).

Remember, in the words of Stan Hugill, a strident voice is much preferable over a pretty one! *Kenny Wolin*

traditions for over 60 years and will continue to do so well into the future.

Sandra Nixon said, "The Bush Music Club was founded in 1954 to collect, publish and popularize Australia's traditional songs, dances, music, yarns, recitations and folklore and to encourage the composition of a new kind of song - one that was traditional in style but contemporary in theme.

"Once upon a time most Australians lived in The Bush, which was anywhere outside the cities and their suburbs. Now most of us live in cities

"In the early 1950s people across Australia started looking for traditional songs and tunes, in reaction to the increasing Americanization of our culture, and some of them founded the Bush Music Club.



Sharyn Mattern and Frank Maher with Bones Fest IX Ballcaps

"American culture came to Australia with the 19th century gold rushes and increased after the Civil War when many Minstrel Shows arrived. The radio and movies brought more American influences and we have a lot more now.

"Here is more on the people in attendance.

"Frank joined the Bush Music Club (est. 24th October 1954) in it's first year. Ann came to Australia from Manchester (UK) in 1960 and they married in 1964. Frank has been singing since he arrived at BMC and played bones, lagerphone and bush bass (tea chest with stick and cord.) He now concentrates on bones which he plays one-handed. Ann has been playing the lagerphone since she joined BMC. Both sang and played on records in the 1960s, Frank is still singing, but Ann no longer sings on her own or leads songs, she just sings along. See a photo of Ann with the lagerphone in 1964 plus lots of different lagerphones. <http://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2015/01/the-lagerphone.html>.

"Wally and his twin George joined the Bush Music Club in the 1970s and have caused confusion ever since because they look very alike (though are not identical). Wally is an expert on percussion - bones and lagerphone. George is an expert on playing and repairing concertinas and accordions. Wally turned up at a concert given by a concertina player and I said hello George!

"George was at another concert where a lagerphone needed playing and after a look of sheer horror when it was handed to him, gingerly moved it a few times, then did a credible job!

"Dale Dengate is an artist, singer, songwriter, retired teacher, and bones player. Dale's late husband John was a brilliant songwriter, poet & performer, famous across Australia - also an artist, singer, guitarist & a retired teacher. Information about Dale & John is at [http://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/talks-from-bmcs-2012-national-folk\\_04.html](http://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/talks-from-bmcs-2012-national-folk_04.html).

"Sharyn Mattern is President of BMC, a concertina player, dancer, choir singer, and now a bones player due to a quick lesson by Steve Wixson on top of all of Wally's unsuccessful attempts in the past.

"Here is some information on folks who could not attend. Ralph & Helen live way outside Sydney, Helen Romeo several hours south, down the coast and Ralph Pride several hours south, but inland. Ralph & Bob Bolton were friends from their teens (if not earlier?) and even shared a pair of bones way back in the 1960s when they were learning (see blog article, Part 2, below).

"Helen plays concertina, bones and spoons, and also teaches bones and spoons to young musicians 8-16 years

"As for me, Sandra, I'm a retired librarian, and was elected as Secretary of Bush Music Club about 20 years ago and am the self-appointed Librarian, Archivist and photographer. I've been taking photos in the folk scene of most of that time, but will never be a professional like Bob.

"I appointed myself Librarian and Archivist when Bob Bolton retired and the Boltons sorted out BMC archives from their collections and I took them on. When Bob stopped attending festivals, I

made sure to photograph all BMC events.

"I love singing, but can't hold a tune on my own so attend every singing session I can. I also run two folk clubs, one in BMC and the other elsewhere."

The meeting had been arranged by Sandra Nixon, and you can read about my visit from their point of view by going to this link - <https://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2017/12/visit-by-steve-wixson-of-rhythm-bones.html>. When you visit this website you will see their blogging has a long and rich history.

Here are a few BMC blogs about rhythm bones.

Bones - Part 1. How to make (1958) & play (2017) the bones. (May 2017). <https://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2017/05/how-to-make-1958-play-2017-bones.html>

Bones - part 2 - Collections of Bob Bolton & Ralph Pride (July 2017). <https://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2017/07/bones-part-2-collections-of-bob-bolton.html>

Bones - Part 3 - Singabout Article in Mulga Wire no. 101, February 1994 (Oct 2017). <https://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com.au/2017/10/bones-part-3-singabout-article-in-mulga.html>.

There was also a short article in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol 16, No 1, 2014 on the BMC and rhythm bones written by Bob Bolton.

Let us hope the Rhythm Bones Society has the staying power of the Bush Music Club making it to the 2060s with maybe Sky Bartlett as our Executive Director.

### **John and Marion McInnes Visit.**

After a morning of on/off bus touring the beautiful city of Wellington, New Zealand, John picked us up downtown and took us to their lovely home about a half hour drive from the city center. Their house is nice and their yard is a botanical garden that isolates them from their neighbors. Plants of all kinds flourish in New Zealand and their backyard.

His wife, Marion, is a retired general practitioner and John considers himself a writer. You can learn more about John at his website - [johnmcinnes.weebly.com](http://johnmcinnes.weebly.com).

Marion has always played the piano. In the 1980s they lived with some other people, and most of them were musicians who played various instruments. John

decided he would like to be a part of that so he began collecting percussion instruments and learned to play them.

Then he said, "I joined a band called 'The Famous Plumerton Bush Band and it was a bush band.

A bush band is a sort of a Celtic band that has gone bush. It's Australian music from the outbacks that are called 'the bush.' They were people in the outback with Celtic background, and they have written quite a bit of music too. This band played mostly Celtic music. We went around Wellington playing dances, cheoli's and that sort of thing.

I went along with some of my percussion gear. Then I discovered someone there had a pair of rhythm bones, actually two pair of ebony bones that they could not play. I think his father has passed



John McInness' rhythm bones with thick end

them down to him. The man said to take the bones and learn how to play them because you are the percussionist. So I did, but I started thinking you obviously hold them in the middle and play both ends.

By the end of the 90s the Internet was coming in so I began to look up bones. and I found Mel Mercier's Bodhran and Bones instructional video (I've still got it). I watched the way he play and learned to play like him. So the way I play is copied exactly off the Mel Mercier video.

It's more flexible that doubled ended and allows me to do more. Sometimes I've pick up a pair in my left hand, but basically I am one handed like most people around here. And Mel only played one handed (Steve pointed out that Mel plays both ways now and considers them two different instruments).

When I play in a band or sometime Marion and I go on our own where we play retirement and rest homes and places like that, I also always play at least one tune with the rhythm bones because people love them even though some people have never seen them before. So that is how I got into bones playing.

You hardly ever see anyone playing rhythm bones here, however, I am too busy to go to folk festivals where I might find more players.

We also have a group who plays in church once a month with fiddle, double bass, piano and my percussion.

One of the reasons I have these instruments is cause some of them are very light. I will often play rhythm bones in a church service and have developed a way of playing that has a light sound that is behind the melody and the bass. That why I have some rhythm bones that are almost paper thin. They are so light but they are making a genuine rhythm bones sound. These were made at my specification and you can see they have a thin end and a thick end (see photograph). I did that cause it gives a range of sound. As you move the bones up and down you can get a great variety of where they are hitting - many different sounds but they are all light.

So they are made to my design, not made by me, but a man from Christ-Church. They are more clackers than ringers."

John has purchased Shooting Star

bones from Lark in the Morning. He also bought some bone bones and lent them to someone who never returned them. He makes animal bones drying them on his tin roof. He sometimes plays three bones in one hand. John will also quiet them by playing them on the edge and will also turn the stationary bones 90 degrees.

When he first learned, he would take them on dog for walks and people said they could be heard all over the neighborhood. John has been called down by some band players because the ring was too loud.

John then gave me a pair of these bones (check out the photo) John, I'll take these to the next Bones Fest. In return, I gave John one of the left over Bones Fest IX ballcaps. *Steve Wixson*

## Civil War Comes To Hillsborough Middle School

An era gone by was recreated at the Hillsborough Middle School Wednesday December 20 by the Hardtacks, a musical ensemble specializing in mid 19th century music from the Civil War and Antebellum periods. Of course what discourse on music of this era would be complete without playing the bones! During the day, classes would rotate in to the Computer Lab where they would be treated with songs and music which represented the music and instruments of this time period. All done with the fiddle, banjo and bones providing the authentic music of the day. Students particularly liked the banjo and the bones, and could sign up for a hands on bone playing workshop during their free period from 11:45-12:35. And sign up they did, when 30 or so students arrived at the workshop all taking their turn at the bones. A truly enthusiastic group, soon a number of students were producing taps and rattles, and playing along with the music. As the day progressed it was clear, the bones had made a real impression on the young students. A concert was held in the evening where the students and their parents could listen and try their hands at the various instruments provided. It's always exciting to see the young folks get involved in the bones, with many looking to try their hand at them in the future! *Steve Brown*



Steve Green and Ozark Foot Song (see story on Page 4)



Marion and John McInnes playing together in their music/percussion room (see story on Page 6)

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 20, No. 1 2018

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## Executive Director's Column

As we look out across the history of rhythm bones playing in the last century, we see certain individuals who are steeped in their culture and whose rhythm bones playing is infinitely connected to a specific culture and it's music. Sport Murphy of Abbeyfeale comes to mind for Irish music, Brother Bones in the big band and dance music of the 40's, Richard Thomas in the blues, and Cecil Hiatt in the country music of Oklahoma. Johnny Muise is one of those standard bearers representing the music of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. John's connection to the music and place is cemented, and as they say, you can take the man out of Cape Breton but you can't take Cape

Breton out of the man. Documenting John's contribution to rhythm bones playing is a long time ambition for me, and I hope you enjoy reading about it as much as I enjoyed going down that trail with his daughters Rose Marie Christensen, and Janine Randall.

It must be Spring, so the calendar says, but the two feet of snow on my lawn says otherwise. The New England Folk Festival is but a month away, and several RBS members are joining me at the Rhythm Bones Playing Workshop which always turns into a mini Bones Fest if you will. The festival (Continued on Page 3)

## Johnny Muise

When I learned to play rhythm bones over 40 years ago, I began a search for other bones players around Boston. The two names I heard when I began my search were, John Burrill aka Mr. Bones of Boston (see Rhythm Bones Player Vol. 3, No.1) and Johnny Muise.

Initially I had a very hard time locating Johnny as no one seemed to know where he lived or how to get in touch with him. Quite by accident I took a record out of the local library, an Anthology of New England Fiddling, and on track 14, I struck gold. It was a set of jigs by Boston Fiddler Joe Cormier and it featured Johnny Muise on 'Clappers.'

His playing had a huge effect on me, but contacting him remained elusive. Finally I had a lead, that he lived in Roslindale, a section of Boston, and looking in the phone book I got a number. I had several long phone conversations with John and even got him out to the New England Folk Festival, but never got a chance to really hear and document his bone playing story. It has taken me a number of years to finally start putting what I know of John down on paper. This article is the result of my limited experience with Johnny and an extensive interview with his daughter Rose Marie Christensen, and an extensive interview and messages with his daughter Janine Randall.

The roll of rhythm bones or 'Clappers' in Cape Breton music remains somewhat elusive. The fact that Johnny played so well and impacted so many of the musicians around him indicates to me that there

is more there to be discovered.

Johnny's history is intertwined with the culture and music of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, which has produced a fiddle style unique and strongly influenced by Scottish music.

Cape Breton Island extends above the Northern tip of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Somewhat isolated and inhabited by not only people of Scottish decent but people of Irish as well as French (Continued on Page 4)



Johnny Muise and his rhythm bones

## Editorial

Bones Fest XXII is just around the corner, and 37 people have already registered. Sky and Jessye Bartlett have selected an exciting location in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and more details about the program and how to register can be found on our website (click the 'Current' Tab, then 'Next Fest'). See also the update on Page 7.

*Rhythm Bones Player*, Volume 20, now begins and there is lots of white space to fill. This is my occasional plea for articles, ideas for articles, etc., and after 19 years of publication it is getting difficult to find material. However, rhythm bones are one of the oldest musical instruments, and there are plenty of stories waiting to be told. Tell one!

A good example is the Page 1 story about Johnny Muise by Steve Brown who did a lot of research and personal interviews before writing it. He also contribute his Editorial on Page 1 and the Ronnie McShane tribute on Page 7. Thanks, Steve

At Bones Fest XX we presented a 'Meritorious Service Award' to Mary Lee Sweet for her years of videoing our Bones Fests. We also presented the first 'Community Enrichments Award' to Mitch Boss for being such a good example of a rhythm bones player. Both of these members are profiled in this newsletter.

We told the story of shanty-man Eric Hlott in a previous newsletter and put one of his recordings on our website. Well it turns out that the producer of the album with that track found out about it and contacted us. He tells us more about this unique rhythm bones player.

## Letters to the Editor

I made a few pairs of rhythm bones early this year for a lady in LA, and lo and behold as a thank you gift she sent me a set of Joe Birl bones in their original packing!

They now occupy a proud place in the corner of my attic office where I display memorabilia from my life.

I was amazed at how small Joe's bones are compared to mine. You can see the

very first pair I made in 1979 – they are about the same length as his but chunkier.

Over the years I have slimmed down my rib bones and added to their length – although as anyone who makes real bones will know – it all depends on the bone!

Joe was a fantastic influence and I wish I had had the opportunity to meet him. *Tom Connolly*



My father, Rhythm Bones Player Darrell Flanery, passed away Sept 4, 2014. He was so proud of playing The Bones, which he sort of worked out on his own. Unfortunately by the time he learned of this group, he was too frail to travel, he died at age 99. His memory is still on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADmjFTiUq8w> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bu-So3RSFsg>.

He played them almost to the end. Thank you for keeping this group active, and the tradition alive! *Mike Flanery*

[Another Percy Danforth Tribute] Though not a face to face meeting with Percy, he was how I got started playing bones. It was at the great New England Folk Festival that I first saw Percy in one of the corridors rattling his pair of rhythm bones and where I stopped to listen and remark to myself, 'My father used to do that.'

My father was from Barbados where he said all the kids rattled those sticks and where, then in Cambridge where I grew up, he'd even rattle a couple of flat stones at the beach. At home I cut a couple of sticks and went at it and have to admit it took awhile to become quite proficient. I played fiddle and banjo with the Roaring Jelly contra-dance band at the time and got a chance to include rhythm bones with their playing jigs and reels. I also liked attending Steve

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

Brown's workshops at NEFFA to sit up back and enhance his teaching showing people around me how to do it.

At 85, I still get a chance now and then to play along at jazz gatherings and with the Moody Street String Band.

Making rhythm bones is an addiction I find and I've dozens made of various materials. *Norman Nichols*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXII.** June 7-10, 2018. Lincoln, NH. Sky and Jessye Bartlett are hosts. To register, go to <http://rhythmbones.org/nextfest.html>

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 27 - September 2, 2018, LeMars, IA. Rhythm Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

(Continued from Page 1)

itself is a cornucopia of music and dance, and a great place to wander, listen and participate. We would love to see you there.

Well one of my favorite places in the world is Franconia Notch. I have visited there since a child, and spent numerous times camping with my own family, hiking the mountains, and enjoying the scenery.

One of my favorite events in the world is Bones Fest! I've attended 16 out of the 20 Bones Fests held, and they never fail to amaze and delight.

Now we all have a chance to combine these two favorites of mine because Bones Fest XXII is coming to Franconia Notch! Bones Fest XXII has moved to June for this year, and rhythm bones players from around the country are taking over the Indian Head Motel and Conference Center located in the heart of Franconia Notch, surrounded by the White Mountains, a truly magical place.

We have had furious activity registering for Bones Fest XXII, and have easily exceeded last years total attendance with almost three more months to go!

Jessye , Sky, and Ernie are doing an amazing job organizing the fest with some great activities and performance opportunities (See Page 7).

By now you probably know about my pancake addiction and the prospect of going to Polly's Pancake Parlor in Sugar Hill is tantalizing, and having you rhythm bones players with me is the icing on the cake!

I believe this is the last news letter before the fest so make your reservations: register on line at [www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com), Jeremy would love to see you!

*Steve Brown*

## Profile of Mary Lee Sweet

I'm Mary Lee Sweet and I am a Bones Player!

I never even heard of rhythm bones until I was in my mid-50s. Then my husband Frank and I began to combine storytelling, Civil War reenacting and music performances in our spare time. He was playing the guitar, but switched to banjo, which was better suited to our

19th century venues. I needed some kind of instrument, but strings didn't agree with me. With that in mind, I went to the Red Dragon Music Sutler's tent at the Civil War Olustee Battle Reenactment in Florida. There were drums, bugles and some wooden sticks about 7 inches long. I asked what they were, and the owner said they were "bones." He gave a brief demonstration. Looked good to me. How hard could it be?

For a year or so, I worked at trying to make some kind of rhythm with those sticks. I could keep a steady beat, but nothing more. They frequently flew out of my hands and across the room. I was a struggling, one-handed rhythm bones player when by chance I found the Rhythm Bones Society website. There was to be a "Bones Fest" in Greensboro, North Carolina. I made arrangements, and in July Frank and I were in a hotel practicing our music when there was a knock on the door. I opened the door and a man I did not know said, "I hear a rhythm bones player in this room." It was Don DeCamp, and he had called me a "bones player!"

I was born in North Carolina, but grew up in Virginia. My daddy was a cotton mill man. He liked wrestling and country music. During the music season, we would go to Richmond every Saturday night to see the Old Dominion Barn Dance show with Sunshine Sue. Some of the people there were Chet Atkins, Earl Scruggs and the Carter Sisters. During wrestling season, we would go to Richmond every Saturday night to see the wrestling matches. While the country music got people to smile, tap their feet and sing along, the wrestling crowd was totally different. People became scary! They cheered, they booed and they shouted things like rip his head off, gouge his eyes, break his arm! No smiles there! But it soon became apparent that everything was fake. It was all drama to keep the audiences on the edges of their seats. Probably the best was Gorgeous George. Everyone hated him. The boos were deafening! He had dyed golden hair, a fancy cape and a valet dressed in a tuxedo who would spray the ring with perfume before George entered, because "all those hard working farmers were dirty!" I learned that both the musicians

and the wrestlers had the same goal and that was to entertain!

My experience with music was eclectic. I played the clarinet in concert and in the marching band. I danced to the popular music of the 50s and 60s. In 1958 my family moved to Tehran, Iran, where I finished high school. The music there was totally different and exotic. Of course there was the sound of the prayers being chanted five times a day.

In 1961 I returned to the states, went to college in Cortland, New York, married a Cornell engineering student, and became a teacher and a mother of three. Frank played the guitar and we attended hootenannies at Cornell when we were in college. Then we moved to Madrid, Spain. The flamenco music there combined guitar, dance and song. Next we went to Brazil, where the samba music filled the air.

In the mid 1970s we returned to United States, first to South Carolina and then to Florida where we live now. Music was something only on the radio or television while we worked and raised our family. But after the kids grew up and moved on, we came back to performing. He plays banjo and I play rhythm bones. We do 19th century songs and stories from the pages of history, and it really is all about entertaining the audiences! [www.backintyme.com](http://www.backintyme.com)



Mary Lee Sweet by Gail Carsen Photography

(Continued from Page 1)  
extraction.

Cape Breton fiddle music though strongly Scottish also has elements of French and Irish influences, but retains its own character. Music has long been a past time of people of this region, and both fiddle music and step dancing have been common place.

Johnny Muise was born during a trip to Boston in 1923 when his parents briefly came to Boston to work in the Waltham Watch Factory. A few months later he was taken home to Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia where he spent his childhood until the age of 15.

There were strong Scottish connections, both through the language, as his Grandparents and his mother were Gaelic speakers, and in the traditional music, central to the area, and played often in homes. Soon he was learning step dancing and participating in Saturday night ceilidhs. John excelled as a step dancer and became well known in the area.

Although rhythm bones seem to be a bit of an aberration in Cape Breton music, there is some documentation that indicates that they have been played. One of the first groups to make records, the Inverness Serenaders, had a rhythm bones player, Hugh Long, and began recording in 1934. There is also mention in an Anthology of the Cape Breton Magazine, of a rhythm bones player John "Wild Archie" McLennan playing in Cape Breton, but he states he never saw another rhythm bone player and began playing on his own. Rhythm bone playing today in Cape Breton music would be relatively rare.

Johnny told me he first saw rhythm bones being played by a workman repairing a slate roof. The workman picked up two pieces of slate and played them like bones. His daughter Rose felt certain that he had learned to play from an Uncle, and his daughter Janine reported that his Uncle Alex Walker played rhythm bones. John was very percussive, having been a step dancer, and would take knitting needles and play them on the strings of a fiddle, much like the "fiddle sticks" played in Cajun music.

Conditions in Cape Breton at that time were severe. Work was limited, and making a living very hard. Johnny managed to join the Canadian Army at the age

of 15 by forging his Mothers signature. This was in 1938, and the world was on the brink of war. So as Johnny went off to war the rhythm bones came too. He and the other soldiers entertained themselves by playing music, and of course that meant rhythm bones. He served in the tank corps, and always had rhythm bones in the tank at the ready. One of his tasks was to get the mail located some distance from the tank. One day upon returning he found that the tank had been blown apart, and his bones with it! Johnny excelled in the Army, served during the Battle of the Bulge and achieved the rank of Sargent.

Johnny returned from the war just at age 20, and he had a decision to make. As his actual birth happened in the US, he could claim citizenship, but only if he did it before age 21. Opportunities for work were much higher in the US, and John made the decision to move to Boston where he was able to work as a brick layer.

Boston had a strong and active Cape Breton community. There was a strong Dance hall scene in Boston as well as a Cape Breton 'nightclub' named 'Joe MacPherson's.' It was here that John's life, as well as his musical life would change forever. It was here that he met his future wife, Mary Edmonds. Mary's Aunt, Betty Maillet, was a well-known piano player who had recorded and was a member of the Inverness Serenaders. Mary herself had learned piano and became an accomplished player. They were married in 1951.

Little is known of John's rhythm bone playing during this time, but as he and Mary's family grew they established their home in the Boston area and that included getting a piano for the home.

As is the case with immigrants from all countries, gatherings in homes and other locations is one way to stay in touch with the culture, and of course for the Cape Bretoners this means music. With the strong connection with Mary's Aunt, musicians visiting the Boston area from Cape Breton soon realized the Muise home was the place to gather for music and dance. With Mary at the piano and John on rhythm bones, nearly every musician traveling through Boston made an appearance in the Muise home.

John and Mary became good friends

with a number of musicians in the Boston area including Bill Lamey, Ron Gonnella (from Scotland) and Johnny Wilmot (Cape Breton) on fiddles, Jimmy Kelly on Banjo, and Eddie Irwin, and Mary of course on piano. Soon it became the place to gather and play music of Cape Breton to get in touch with that feeling of home. And Johnny on the 'clappers' was a central figure.

As his reputation as the best rhythm bones player in the music grew, opportunities for recording occasionally presented themselves. One of the best known of the Boston Cape Breton Fiddlers, Joe Cormier, who John often played with, asked him to record with him several times.

An examination of Johnny's playing on these recordings reveals several things. First is that he was immersed in the music. Throughout his youth it's apparent that he fully integrated that music from his listening and step dancing. Secondly his rhythm bone playing is a perfect marriage between the instrument and the music. His phrasing, pauses between sections of the tunes, and familiarity with the tune types shows his dedication to the music and respect for the music he literally grew up with. His playing displays an expertise that other musicians could truly appreciate and respect.

As the Muise home became a central figure in the Boston area for Cape Breton music, many of the sessions at the house were recorded by the family. In 2012 over 200 hours of recordings were donated to the Burns Library at Boston College. Many of these recordings feature some of the best musicians from Cape Breton, and the Boston area. Several examples of Johnny playing 'clappers' are included, and can be accessed on line.

The impact of the Muise family has been clearly documented by two tunes written in their honor by noted musicians. Frank Ferrell, noted fiddler, wrote Gacie's Birthday March in honor of Mary Muise, and Boston born Cape Breton Fiddler Jerry Holland wrote Johnny Muise's Reel for John. This tune has been recorded by the noted Irish accordion player, Sharon Shannon and Cape Breton fiddler Kinnon Beaton.

Over his lifetime Johnny played with so many musicians, it prompted his daughter to respond to the question,



“Who hasn’t he played with?” Noted players Buddy McMaster, Jerry Holland, Jerry Robichaud, JP Cormier, and Irish fiddler Brendan Mullvihill. Young phenomenon Ashley MacIssac always asked Johnny to join him on stage when he could. Young group ‘Beolach’ was one of his favorites.

Johnny Muise passed away in 2005, and his wife Mary in 2015, but their legacy has clearly been carried on by their family. Janine Randall, their eldest daughter, has become one of the most respected pianists in the traditional music communities both in Boston and Nova Scotia. She is the founder of the Ceilidh Trail School of Celtic Music where she taught piano for a number of years, and where John would spend his summers, playing rhythm bones at any invitation. John’s daughter, Rose Marie, is an accomplished rhythm bone player herself, and is keeping her father’s tradition alive.

Along with John, she attended the New England Folk Festival in 1999, and participated in the Rhythm Bone Workshop along with noted players Russ Myers, Everett Cowett, and several others. John’s Grandson Connor McGoff also plays rhythm bones.

Although it remains unclear the place rhythm bones hold, if any, in Cape Breton music, one thing is clear to me, Johnny Muise was a corner stone in the playing of rhythm bones in this music. As we discover more about how rhythm bones contributed to various musical genre’s, Johnny’s contribution remains on a par with the great players of our time, if not fully recognized. And who knows, maybe in the future we might see more people playing the ‘Clappers’ in Cape Breton music, and know that Johnny Muise helped to blaze that trail.  
*Steve Brown*

## Profile of Mitchell Boss

Mitchell Boss was born and grew up in Grand Rapids Michigan. He went into the Navy right out of High school and served in the Naval Air Force as an electronics technician during the Korean conflict. Getting out of the service in 1954, he married Annette in 1955; they had gone to high school together. He

graduated from the Kendall School of Design, now the Design Department of Farris University, and they moved South in 1958.

Mitch designed furniture for a lot of companies in the US until all the furniture business went over seas, and he ended up designing for companies importing out of Honduras, the Philippines, China, Indonesia and Vietnam. With Annette running the office they designed furniture for 50 years.

His dad showed him how to play rhythm bones only on spoons held like bones. Over the years Mitch has collected over forty sets of rhythm bones made from one thing or another. He has one set made of teak brought back from India and even a set from auto window glass (nice tingling).

Lately if he gets a chance to play, he is using one pair of Steve Browns’ rhythm bones made of shin bone and one pair of plastic rhythm bones that he got from Joe Birl. He likes rhythm bones that have a distinct sound in each hand.

Mitch says, “Beginners need all the help they can get, and I have been a beginner for seventy-four years now. No matter how long you play, every time you pick up your rhythm bones and hear that first note, you start all over again.”

“At Bones Fest XX hosted by Gerry

and Janet Hines in Homer, NY, I was given a beautiful plaque denoting how much I was welcome in the Rhythm Bones Society’s family. I hope some welcome token can be given each year to express how much we care for our members.

“Since Annette and I have retired and now live in a Retirement Community, I have only played for some community events and the band (Banjo, Piano & Sax) that I played with has succumbed to life changes and has disbanded.

“Playing with others is what music is all about. If you are lucky enough to get with a group that is how you pick up a sense of timing and togetherness that makes playing feel so good.

“Annette and I love Bones Fests, and we pouted for a week after medical problems made us miss Bones Fest XXI. You really learn how much Bones Fest means to you when you miss one.

“You know, when you get into your eighties, a lot of things can happen. That is why we rented a cabin in Lincoln, NH for Sky and Jesse’s Bones Fest XXII already in January for their June Fest! See you all there! Hope all is well with you and yours.”

[Note: To get a sense of Mitch’s humor, look at RBP, Volume 18, No 3, Page 7 for his thank you note after receiving the “Community Inspiration Award.”]



Mitch Boss performing at Bones Fest XX. (Photograph by Art Sands)

## Erik Ilott Some Memories

[Editor's Note. To fully appreciate this story, read a previous article by Pete Hayselden and listen to two recordings of Erik's rhythm bones playing on our website. To find the article, go to [rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPVol1to16.pdf](http://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPVol1to16.pdf), and search using "Ilott" pressing enter until you get to Vol 13, No 1. There is a photograph of Erik playing with four rhythm bones in one hand and three in the other. To listen to the 'Shipshape' recording go to [rhythmbones.org/Erik-IlottShipshapeSong.html](http://rhythmbones.org/Erik-IlottShipshapeSong.html). He plays in a quite different style than we are used to hearing, but the overall recording is quite captivating. Roger Digby has also given us permission to add a track from the 'Of Land and Sea' cassette that shows more of his style. Go to [rhythmbones.org/ErikIlottLand&Sea.html](http://rhythmbones.org/ErikIlottLand&Sea.html).]

It's very easy to recall my first meeting with Erik Ilott because it was truly extraordinary.



In the Autumn of 1972 I was studying for a PGSE at Bristol University and was placed for Teaching Practice in a local school. I had been interested in 'Folk Music' for some years, but had not yet acquired a critical ear nor developed the understanding, which I now find crucial, of the difference between 'Folk Music' and 'Traditional Music', the latter now being a major interest of mine. Nor at that time had I started playing the Anglo Concertina, the instrument with which I am nowadays associated.

On my first day at the school I thought it would be sensible to spend a bit of

time in the school library seeing what was available in my subject area. On entering the library I found it deserted and began to find my way around. I then heard some clicking noises and following the sound, I found Erik sitting at the librarian's desk and playing the bones. He was very apologetic and explained that he was writing a book about playing the bones (I don't think it ever materialised) and was taking advantage of the library being empty to write a few sentences. I was sufficiently interested to ask more and from that developed a musical and personal friendship that lasted till his death.

Erik was an unlikely librarian - to put it mildly! The story was that the school had been short of a PE teacher, and as Erik, who lived very close to the school, had a reputation as a competitive cyclist, he was asked to fill the gap. Later he was replaced when a qualified PE teacher was found. Erik accepted this, but then someone pointed out to him that the employment legislation did not allow him to be dismissed in this way and the school was obliged to take him back. At that time there was a vacancy for the school librarian so Erik took on that role.

I learnt a lot from Erik about sea-songs and performance and he encouraged me to go out to Folk Clubs with him. The term 'Folk Music' in England covers an absurdly wide range of music and some clubs preferred to specialise. In Bristol there was a club operating somewhere every night; a Ballad and Blues club and a University Folk club, also the excellent Troubadour, and so on. One such club was The Bristol Folk Tradition which took a very hard line, insisting that every song must be traditional and performed in what they perceived as traditional style. This revivalist orthodoxy was not uncommon in those days and was soon to be strongly challenged when recordings started to be made and commercially issued of traditional singers who were still alive and singing in their local communities - real traditional music and, indeed, unaware

of any 'orthodoxy'. Erik didn't fit into the Bristol club's ethos and it was some years before the club realised that they had in Erik something close to a real traditional singer. By this time the club was also taking a gentler line. Erik, however, flourished in the other Bristol clubs and also further afield at Folk festivals and music weekends. He was shrewd enough to see what the audiences wanted and versatile enough to tailor his repertory to that end, even dressing the part on most occasions. In this respect he was close to the priority of the traditional singer, aware of the need to sing the right song at the right time to contribute to a social evening.

Erik was also a natural showman and played the 'Jolly Jack Tar' role to perfection. He felt that the concertina was a part of that image and he had a 30 button Wheatstone 'Linota' Anglo Concertina in the key of Bb. He was not a good concertina player!! in fact he only knew a very few song accompaniments (and often made mistakes - not that that troubled him in the least!). He also played 5 string banjo in a basic rhythmic style and could get an accompaniment out of an autoharp. His playing of the banjo-ukelele was more proficient, but it was his playing of rhythm bones which always made the strongest impact. Partly this was the novelty, partly it was the spectacle, as Erik maximised the visual effect; mostly, though, it was because he played them very well, with a full



handful of four bones in the right hand and three in the left. I'm not sure whether there was a reason for this or whether he had just seven bones and thought he might as well use them all. This rhythmic adjunct to his unaccompanied singing of sea shanties was his speciality and it is this for which he was best known and is now best remembered.

He did, however, have many other sorts of songs; many were songs of the sea and some of them local to Bristol. By the time I knew Erik, Bristol docks had moved to Avonmouth, because the stretch of the Avon up to Bristol was tidal and too winding for the larger ships that were becoming the norm. Bristol, however, remained a proud naval town. In the 1940s the BBC had made recordings of Stan Slade, 'The Bristol Shantyman'. Slade had been a shantyman in the days of sail and Erik learned a number of his songs. He also had songs from the rural communities outside Bristol. In fact, he sometimes did a 'Country Bumpkin' music hall routine.

In 1973 Erik and I had the idea of producing an LP which Erik would sell on gigs. The result was 'Shipshape and Bristol Fashion' which we produced and manufactured ourselves, pressing the 99 copies that were then free from tax. The LP was studio recorded in just one day and was very hit and miss. We were very lucky to have the help of Ray Andrews, an outstanding English finger-style banjo player (one of very very few!). Erik often took Ray out with him on gigs and his spectacular banjo playing was often the solid base behind Erik's singing when he chose to lay aside the rhythm bones.

Bill Leader's excellent Leader label had just started issuing LPs of real traditional singers which also included an extensive booklet about the artist and the musical context. Erik was very enthused by these LPs and wrote and produced a detailed booklet to go with the LP.

The LP sold quickly and was never reissued. Erik also privately made a cassette, 'Of Land and Sea', which also featured the singing of his wife Kate. As far as I know this has also never been reissued. He also had tracks on various compilations and was involved in 'Sounds of The Sea', a give-away from Ribena!

A few years ago, a friend alerted me

to the fact that a track from the LP was being used on the Rhythm Bones Society website. I followed this up and found that the site said that efforts to gain permission to use the track had been fruitless! This is hardly surprising as it all happened a long time ago, but I did eventually make contact and the result was the request to write a few lines about my experience of knowing and working with Erik - a request to which I have finally responded after a long long period of procrastinating! *Roger Digby UK*

## Ronnie McShane Tribute

Peadar O'Riada, son of Sean O'Riada Composer, musician, visionary who started the group Ceoltoi Cullannann which had a profound effect on traditional Irish music. Ronnie knew Sean in Dublin when he worked at the Abbey Theater, and later moved with him to West Cork, Cuill Adoh. Ronnie's bone playing can be heard through the recordings Sean O'Riada made, and was used during the filming of "Playboy of the Western World." Peadar was a good friend of Ronnie's, and as he says, "he was like an Uncle to us." Peadar is himself an accomplished musician, and at one point recorded an album with Ronnie. He was reached by telephone to comment on the recent passing of Ronnie McShane.

"Ronnie started out as the props manager at the Abbey Theater and my father was putting a group together to play for Brian McMahon's play "The Honey Spike." They wanted to have bones in it and Ronnie went down to the butcher shop and got some bones and put them up on the roof of the house to weather them. And that's how he got the really nice hollow sound to them.

"He had a very sharp beat, very clean, like my father's bodhran playing, on the beat, on the pulse. Looking back they were so definite, with the beat of the music, where as today a lot of bodhran and bones players are too complicated, ornamental, getting away from the pulse really at the expense of the music.

"If you listen to the first Ceoltoi Cullannann recording, you can hear the crispness that they bring into it between Ronnie's bone playing and my fathers

bodhran playing. If you compare it to stuff now a days, bodhrans in particular they have evolved into tonal change, greatly exaggerated. But Ronnie and my father were always on the pulse.

"That is where Ronnie sat, he used to play the banjo, and toward the end of his life, quite a lot in sessions. He was a good guy, he was my fathers PA (publicity assistant) for a while when we moved to Cuill Adoh, but my father couldn't afford to pay him and the time came when he had to immigrate and get work in England.

"He became a concierge, a doorman, and worked his way up until he became the president of the Golden Key Association, he was the first Irishman ever to do that. He returned home when he retired, and was asked to adjudicate the All Ireland Bone Playing Competition twice.

"Ronnie was an original of the species, I don't know of any other bones player before him. I have to say that Ronnie was like an Uncle to us he was a really good guy. We were very fond of him. We did do a recording together, bodhran and tin whistle but it's out of print now." *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXII Update

Were getting close! Another Bones Fest will soon be upon us. Thank you to all of you who have already registered! This is likely to be a pretty busy fest, and there will be some interesting locations that we will visit. For those of you on the fence about coming, I encourage you to check out the Cannon Mountain location and the Clark's Trading post location online. As with all Bones Fests, this one will be different, but as with all Bones Fests, we are trying to create a scenario that allows for a lot of bones playing combined with some great scenery and public education about the bones. A few things I'll mention: Bring warm clothes-it could very well be 75 degrees, it may very well be 45. If nothing else it will likely be cold and windy on the top of Cannon Mountain, not that we intend to be up there too long. Don't forget that we will be interacting with the Boy Scouts and that these are the kinds of moments

(Continued on Page 8)

(Continued From Page 7)

that the Rhythm Bones Society was formed for--to perpetuate the craft--, and that some patience will no doubt be required. Fortunately, in my experience, this is where all of you individual members who make up the Rhythm Bones Society truly excel! Just a heads up- please know that our Saturday night performance will likely be pretty tightly packed, but that there will be space to step back from the crowd to take a breather if you're not the crowd type. Drinks will be available for purchase at the Saturday night show. The Cabins that we have reserved at the hotel form a kind of ring with a court yard, set back into the woods, and we are hoping that this setting will work well as a communal space for folks to gather, play and generally enjoy as our own fest-related space. As we have mentioned in the reservation info, there are hotel rooms available, but I personally think the cabins are very cool.

So for to everyone who has registered, thank you. And to anyone who cannot make it, know that you will be missed! *Sky and Jessye Bartlett*



June 7-10, 2018  
Lincoln, New Hampshire

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 20, No. 2 2018

*In This Issue:*

*Highlights From  
Bones Fest XXII*

*Columns:*

*Executive Director  
Column*

*Editorial*

## Executive Director's Column

Bones Fest XXII.... in a word, Spectacular! Spectacular scenery in the heart of the White mountains, spectacular performances by all rhythm bones players, and spectacular friendships, some renewed, and some made for the first time.

Bones Fest XXII came to New Hampshire for the first time, and what a time it was. With people converging from as far as Cork, Republic of Ireland, and San Antonio, Texas, it had the making of an earth shattering Fest and it truly was! Sponsored by veteran Bones Fest attendees Jessye and Sky Bartlett, who had met at a Bones Fest, and with the assistance of Ernie Duffy produced a Bones Fest that will be

long remembered by all attendees.

Nestled in the heart of Franconia Notch, a truly magical place, some of the magic of the notch rubbed off on our Fest as each event brought us closer together, and endeared Bones Fest to the many people who attended, and the residents of Lincoln and Woodstock respectively. Although starting in the murky fog well known to Notch residents, it was not long that the sun appeared, and bright blue skies graced us the entire weekend.

Some of my personal highlights, Jamming  
(Continued on Page 2)

## Highlights From Bones Fest XXII

What a weekend! I am so glad to be able to say that Bones Fest XXII was a success, due in no small part to the flexibility, patience and good energy that folks brought to the Fest. I am grateful to you all, without exception. So what did I like about the Fest? For starts, meeting some new people! I got to spend a fair amount of time on Thursday night with Bruce, Pascal, Tom and Bríd. There were several other new people, or new to me people, but it took me a little longer to find them. And, of course, I loved seeing old friends. Sharon was the first person we met up with, and what a perfect person to have be the first! She helped us set up the registration table at the hotel and stayed to greet people with us. From then on I don't remember the order of who we saw, just that it really is kind of surreal to see friends you've known for so many years and have seen in so many locations walk through the doors of a venue in your own neck of the woods. Pascal came in early on, and within a short time, it was decided that he would stay at our house as he had not booked a room. That was a fun added element of the Fest for Jessye and me. I will note that he is an excellent guest.

I got to the Thursday night reception at the Common Man restaurant a little later than at least half the crowd. It was a great way to start...being reminded that I, as the host, did not need to be present for the RBS crowd to have a good time. By the time I arrived, pizza was being served and the laughter and merriment had already begun. We had booked Ryan and Brennish Tomson as our musicians on Steve

Brown's recommendation, and while we had reviewed a couple of youtube videos, we didn't really know what we were going to get. What a great surprise! I cannot say enough wonderful  
(Continued on Page 2)



Bones Fest XXII hosts Jessye and Sky Bartlett

## Editorial

I am sitting at the airport with Dennis Riedesel reminiscing about Bones Fest XXII, and calling it the “Mountain Fest” (I called Dennis’ BFXV in San Antonio the Performance Fest as we had nine hours of stage time at the Alamo Compound and the Texas Folklife Festival).

Kudos to Sky and Jessye Bartlett on another terrific Fest. Each venue was unique and welcomed us warmly. There were many first timers who learned or improved. Sky’s highlights article begins on Page 1.

I really liked my Saturday performance. I wanted to play to something slow and quickly settled on Jay Ungar’s ‘Ashokan Farewell.’ Farewell got me thinking about rhythm bones players who have passed such the as the father of RBS, Everett Cowett, and I named as many as I could think of on the spot prior to the song. I followed that up noting how the young Sky and Jessye are picking up leadership roles such that RBS should continue after us old guys say ‘farewell.’



## Executive Director’s Column Continued

at the Common Man on Thursday, the communal breakfast at Polly’s Pancake Parlor on Friday, exploring the misty top of Cannon Mountain, playing in the bear ring at Clark Trading Post and the tremendous welcome given to us by the Clarks, One of the greatest Saturday night performances at One Love Brewery including Sky Bartlett showing us why he is the future of rhythm bone playing!

When I attended my first Bones Fest in 2000, the over whelming feeling was of attending a family reunion of a family I didn’t know I had, and true to form, Bones Fest XXII epitomized that feeling for every Bones Fest attendee. To quote first time Bones Fest attendee Pascal

Huynh from Montreal, “I had a blast, met great characters, was moved by the inclusion and friendliness of everyone!” Well put Pascal, and my exact feeling after every Bones Fest.

Look forward to some great highlights, video, pictures which we hope will capture even a little bit that we experienced! Thanks to Jessye and Sky for all their hard work which makes this Bones Fest so memorable! And to all of the attendee’s, so great to see the old ones and meet the new ones!

The Board is now in the interesting position of having a number of proposals for next year, and even one for the following year! We have a few things in the works, and we hope to share them with you in the coming months! As we work out the details, consider attending a bone playing event in the next year. I guarantee you won’t be disappointed!

*Steve Brown*

## BFXII Highlights Continued

things about them both. Excellent music, a balance of genres, always on point, they were easy to work with and I’d say they really “got” Bones Fest in that intangible sort of way. I really enjoyed jamming with everyone—I am always amazed at how the RBS crowd loosens up right away; there is no slow warm-up phase, just full-speed right at the start.

Friday morning I got to sit with the Ireland contingency at the pancake house and learned a little about them, though I instantly felt as though I had known them my whole life. Something about rhythm bones does that, I think. The tram ride and top of Cannon Mountain was what it was: foggy, cold, etc. But you can’t dampen the spirit of a rhythm bones player, so there was nothing to regret there. I apologize to those of you who had trouble finding the Loon Mountain venue on property—a detail we missed. Of course no one complained at all, but I apologize just the same. I was very pleased with the way the afternoon went. Tom was the only official workshop, focused on the making of real bone bones. I have not attempted this myself, nor seen it done, so I enjoyed hearing about the process. Our open workshop, or interactive workshop or whatever you call it) seemed to go

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

over well. I think it is much more important that we all experience a Fest the way we want. I really appreciated the honesty of the folks that I did ask about doing a work shop: every one of them said, in so many words, “I am viewing this as a vacation and do not want to.” That is what a good Fest needs: people being honest about what they do and do not want. That allowed us to move forward with what people did want—a chance to keep it interactive amongst all members. The rest of the afternoon was standard Bones Fest stuff: jamming, pass offs and the like. One fun twist was Zip’s request for a dance. Thank you to all who participated in that and helped us to fulfill his wish! (Though I wonder if Jessye might have put Zip up to it...)

When I got back to the Indian Head Resort I got the pleasure of having dinner with Skeff. We talked mostly about hosting Bones Fests (his was the last one

(Continued on Page 7)



# Photographs From Bones Fest XXII



Bones Fest XXII Group Photograph on Cannon Mountain. From the left on knees are Brannish Thomson, Quinn Sweet, Pascal Huynh, Jonathan Danforth, Emmett Danforth, Steve Brown, Bill Vits, Tim Reilly and Jessye Bartlett. Standing in back are Richard Corsa and Zip Kellogg. The remaining from the left are Tami Swartz, Adam Klein, Ryan Thomson, Frank R. Sweet, Miles Sweet, Marcia Rotondo, Sky Bartlett, Tom Connolly, Brid Connolly, Dick Lilly, Kathryn Lilly, Stan Von Hagen, Kathy Mckee, Jean Von Hagen, Bobby Mckee, Melissa Danforth, Bruno Giles, Jennifer Brown, Blue Hammond, Jeremy Brown, Gerry Hines, Janet Hines, Ernie Duffy, Marie Bruschi, Ron Bruschi, Jim Runner, Sharon Mescher, Frank W. Sweet, Mary Lee Sweet, Patricia Joy, Donald Joy, Bruce Strong and John Archibald. Not shown are photographers Art Sands and Steve Wixson, Doug Danforth, Melissa Danforth, Dennis Riedesel (off fly fishing), Rebecca Shannon, Alexis Truslow, and Parker Waite.



Indian Head Resort - the Fest hotel



Our accommodations



Thursday reception at Common Man Restaurant



Breakfast at Polly's Pancake Parlor



Tram to Cannon Mountain and group photograph



Jamming on the Observation Tower



Richard Corsa and Pascal Huynh at Adam Klein's bones market place



Steve Brown's bones market place with Jeremy Brown



Blue Hammond at Skeff Flynn's bones market place





Sky Bartlett's Open Workshop



Tom Connolly from Ireland on his rhythm bones



Ryan and Brannish Thomson (in center)



Friday night jam session at Indian Head Resort



Saturday breakfast outdoors



Steve Brown opens 1st session in the Bear Ring



Ernie Duffy and Sky Bartlett duo



Sweet Family with Mescher, Danforth & Connolly



The bear in the Ring



Sky Bartlett starts Music Merit Badge session



Ernie Duffy helps scouts make rhythm bones



Gerry Hines helps scouts make rhythm bones



Jessye Bartlett presents some music theory



Pascal Huynh helps scouts play rhythm bones



Steve Wixson coaches a scout





Clark Trading Post staff photograph of Steve Brown and scouts



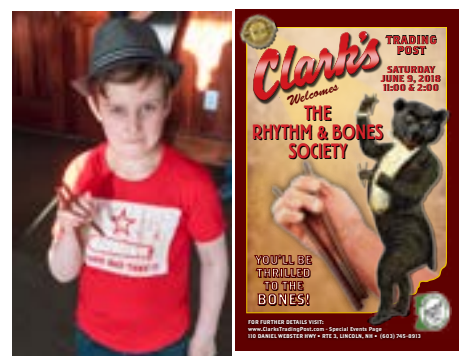
Saturday public performance audience (rest of One Love Brewery could hear)



Skeff Flynn leads off 2nd session in Bear Ring



Gerry Hines in the Bear Ring



Emmett Danforth

Advertising Poster



Dennis Riedesel skit with help from Steve Brown



Bruno Giles on Saturday night



Donald Joy on Saturday night



Dennis Riedesel skipped out on Friday to go fly fishing in beautiful White Mountain rivers



Sky Bartlett dances and plays rhythm bones  
Photograph by Art Sands



John Archibald and Marcia Rotondo





Adam Klein and wife Tami Swartz's operatic performance assisted by Bill Vits, Tim Reilly and Ryan Thomson



Jamming with One Love Brewery entertainer, Ben Cook, are Skeff Flynn, Ernie Duffy, Dennis Reidesel, Art and Linda Sands



Jim Runner



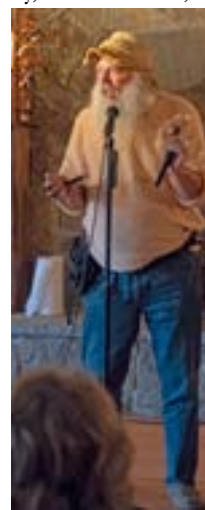
Tom Connolly



Parker Waite



Ron Bruschi



Blue Hammond



Stan Von Hagen



Jeremy Brown



Steve Wixson



Ernie Duffy on the right is 'passing off,' something created by the late Walt Watkins, to Steve Brown who after a solo break passes to the next person in a circle, Bill Vits who passes to Skeff Flynn who passes to Gerry Hines and this continues until the song is finished.

(Continued from Page 2)

I had been to). It was the perfect way to decompress after the more scheduled part of the day. But really any time spent with Skeff is a treat. After dinner it was more jamming, pass offs and the like at the Indian Head with Ryan and Brennish showing no signs of fatigue or annoyance, the latter being perhaps the more impressive.

Saturday was a slightly earlier start for Gerry and Janet Hines and me than the rest of the crowd. We got to Clark's Trading Post at 9:20 AM to be briefed on Boy Scout paperwork. Gerry and I had completed an online course this winter to be able to sign off on the Boy Scout's music merit badges. We were told the online course would take 20 minutes, but it turns out it was more like 3 hours! So a BIG BIG thank you to Gerry for not only dealing with that, but also for giving up half of his Saturday at Bones Fest for the Boy Scouts and the perpetuation of the bones tradition. Before, between, and after all of our performances and presentations, Gerry was reviewing prerequisite work done by the boys, and there was quite a pile. Hopefully we get some new players out of it! And, of course, a thank-you to Steve Wixson for covering intellectual property rights for the Boy Scouts—I felt bad even asking him to do that.

And a thank-you to Steve Brown for being our ring master in the bear ring. We put that on him last minute, but really, who else has the presence that Steve does? He looks, sounds and IS the part. A crowd cannot help but love him.

Some highlights from the Clark's performances for me were: watching John Archibald and Steve Brown play together (I thought they sounded great); certainly Johnathan's whistling, as well as Gerry's harmonica routine (both of which bring a smile to my face every time and remind me of both those guys' talents beyond the bones). I thought Mary Lee Sweet did an excellent job of selecting her group and getting family to participate in Backintyme's performance. The extended Sweet family was a blast! And not half bad with rhythm bones. I will say I missed the hoop dress. It was great to be hosted by a venue whose founding father had been a rhythm bones player. I look forward to a potential article written by Steve Brown about the rhythm bones that he played in the closing

pass off, the ones owned by the Clark family.

From Clarks I went straight to One Love Brewery where I began setting up sound equipment. I was soon joined by Ernie, which was a much needed addition—not only for the physical help, but it was great to have a chance to catch up with him and discuss how the weekend was going. Ernie is a good problem-solver when it comes to an event or project. He rearranged the entire layout upstairs to accommodate our crowd. I could not be happier with how our public performance went. In discussing it with my family afterward, they all let me know that they were very impressed. What they noted the most was the diversity of styles. To have them all say that they were thoroughly entertained and anxious to see what each new performer would bring was all I needed for confirmation. If it had been otherwise, they would not have held back. Adam Klein and Tami Swartz certainly stole the show with both of their performances. I think the crowd was awestruck. Thank goodness Bruno Giles was on after their first performance—I cannot think of a better way to follow a big, loud and intense act like Adam and Tami's than with his sleek, high-quality routine. I really enjoyed the quickness between the two acts that allowed for a visible contrast; two acts so different, yet both so entertaining. Great acts all around, from Ron Bruschi to Sharon Mescher, from Ernie Duffy to Stan Von Hagen. And what a pleasure to get to see Don Joy play! His smile alone is enough to elicit applause, let alone his energetic, performance-style rhythm bones playing. It's not often we get a dancing Dog AND dancing Irishman in one evening, but we did, and were all the better off for it. I got great feedback for Dennis's jokes, but he shouldn't be too excited...I myself was getting great feedback from the microphone all night. Getting to play with Ernie was special for me, as we don't play out as often as we used to, and to get to play near home with all of our friends and family and Bones family in one room humbled us with a fresh realization of how much we have to be thankful for. I thank everyone

for indulging me with my Canned Heat routine. It is a favorite with the locals, as are most cheap thrills and camouflage pajamas. I got to have a lot of fun sharing MC duties with Steve Brown. I think it would have been even less seamless without him, if that is possible. I really did enjoy myself, though, for as haphazard as the set list was, the flow and variation seemed to work well. Steve Wixson did a great job reminding us of those who have gone before us to the great Bones Fest in the sky and what a joy each and every one of them was. Our hearts are with Tim; he played beautifully in honor of his brother. Not an easy thing. I was very glad he could make it. Tim goes way back in my rhythm bones career. I'm not entirely sure I comprehended everything offered by Blue, our newly appointed spiritual liaison, but I have no doubt we were heard by whoever is listening. Steve Brown's impromptu assembly of a pass off was spot on and just what we needed as we brought it in for a finish. I want to thank everyone for keeping their acts to a reasonable length—I really thank you for that. I think it's imperative to a good public performance, given that we all want to play.

There is much more a person could say, so many acts I haven't mentioned, people I haven't mentioned, meaningful conversations, the list goes on. What rhythm bones have offered me continues to grow. Rhythm bones have brought me to different places; I have made money playing them; they have brought me long enduring friendships; they have brought me a wife. They have allowed me to connect with music in a way I believe so many people wish they could: instead of as a passive listener, I can be an active participant. And in connecting with the music I can find depth of experience, one that goes beyond four sticks and a shaking wrist. As I sit back and view Bones Fest XXII from the other side, I find myself thinking that rhythm bones have offered me yet another stunningly beautiful experience in which I received so much more than I gave. So I say thank you to the RBS and to all who attended, not only for your support in hosting BFXII, but also for continuing to shape my life in the most positive of ways. *Sky Bartlett*





Grand Finale in the One Love Brewery

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 20, No. 3 2018

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*How I Got To Play Bones In An Opera*

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*Remembering Yirdy Machar*

*Johnny Bones - The Life Of A Busker*

*A Set Of Presentation Minstrel Bones*

*NEFFA Report*

*Thaddeus 'Tad' Goodson*

*More On Sweet Georgia Brown, Brother Bones Arrangement*

*Minutes Of The Board Meeting*

*Minutes Of The General Membership Meeting*

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*Executive Director*

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*Bones Calendar*

## Executive Director's Column

My good friend and fellow Bone player, Yirdy Machar, has passed! He was a true spirit, please see our tribute to him starting on page 3.

More than 10 years ago I visited the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Ma. to view an exposition of Banjo's including a number of Banjo's from a friends collection, Jim Bollman. Walking around the exhibit, it was clear there was a real connection to rhythm bones, as many of the original photographs featured rhythm bones players along side Banjo players and other musicians. But I was unprepared for what I saw when I turned a corner. There in a glass case were four what appeared to be

ebony rhythm bones, but what I learned later was rosewood, in a glass case mounted on the wall. Each one of the rhythm bones had silver caps on each end, and were decorated by musicians and other figures. On one was the inscription, "To Charles H. Atkinson from the Niagra Firemans Association." I soon learned that the rhythm bones were on loan from the Yale University Musical Instrument Collection. Thinking that I might try to reproduce them, I wrote the Curator of the Collection asking among other things, the dimensions, and any idea of who Charles H. Atkinson (Continued on Page 7)

## How I Got To Play Bones In An Opera

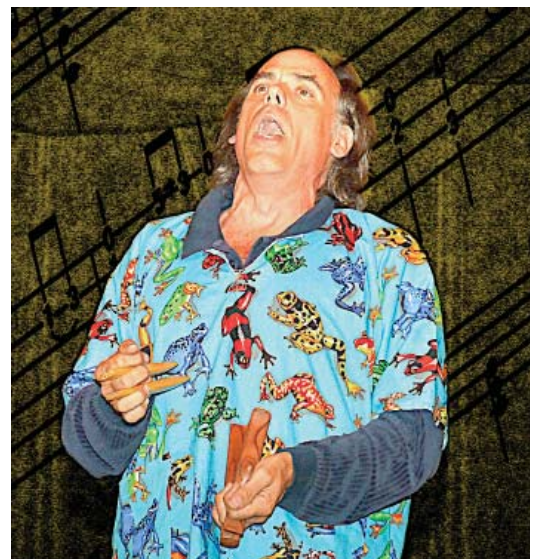
Most of you folks know me as the Bones Playing Opera singer, or the Opera Singing Bones Player. The only opera I know of that officially includes rhythm bones at all is my own piece, LEITHIAN, where one of the orchestra percussionists must play rhythm bones. However, in 1997 I got to work my bones playing into another opera, SUSANNAH by Carlisle Floyd, at the Central City Opera House in Colorado. This is the tale of how that came to be.

In 1996 I was hired to sing the Duke of Mantua in RIGOLETTO -- this is the opera that features the aria I sang while playing rhythm bones at the Shepherdstown Bones Fest (see photograph in right column). While hiking in the mountains above town with my best friend and fellow tenor Richard Troxell, we chanced upon a cow skeleton. I took the ribs back to town, and in the toolshop of the opera company's maintenance guy, used a vice, saw, files and sandpaper to fashion several pair of very nice rhythm bones. I then played two pair of them at one of the traditional after-opera gatherings in the bar adjacent to the opera house, called by the opera company "Après Opéra" -- but by one of the locals, a very literate fan of baseball and beer named Lew Cady (whose wife was the opera fan), "Post Op".

I did this because one of the veteran accompanists had complained that this gathering used to be a fun time for the stars to let their hair down and sing something NOT operatic, but that in recent years it had become a sing-off for the apprentices, all eager to try out some ballbuster aria or other on the public.

I decided to do something more appearances. At one I sang the famous aria from Wagner's Die Walküre, "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond," with the regular piano accompaniment plus my rhythm bones, since that's one of the few opera arias with a steady beat. (Wagner was many things, but he understood the power of repetitive rhythm and persistent percussion.)

My successful performances as the Duke, coupled with the full beard I showed up with -- I had hiked the Grand (Continued on Page 4)



Adam Klein sings and plays rhythm bones to a song from opera RIGOLETTO at Bones Fest XIX. Photo by Art Sands

## Editorial

I join with others in this issue in remembering Yirdy Machar. I met him at the bones competition in Iowa and he came to Bones Fest IX staying at my house including a few days after the Fest. I have a ball cap that he calligraphed with my name, and I save it for special occasions. There was a Video of the Month in September remembering Yirdy, and you can view it at <http://rhythmbones.org/video/YirdyMacharTributeVideo.mp4>.

Bones Fest V was the first Fest Adam Klein attended, and we were wowed by his operatic voice and rhythm bones playing accompanied by Constance Cook. Over the years he attended several Fests and this year with his wife, Tami Swartz, an opera singer herself. His story of playing rhythm bones in an opera begins on Page 1.

I first contacted the Harlem Globe-trotters about the *Sweet Georgia Brown* record in 2000. A man by the name of Governor Vaughn sent me Page 1 of a history of the recording. I forgot about it until lately, and when I contacted them again they sent me a full copy. The story of how it became their theme song is on Page 6.

The minutes from the Board and General Membership Meetings are a reconstruction from the memories of the Board. After BFXXII, I transcribed my notes of these meetings and emailed them to the Board for review. When I went to insert them into this newsletter, I could not find that email and the Board had to reconstruct. This fact will be noted at the meetings at BFXXIII.

## Minutes Of The General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Steve Brown, on June 9, 2018, about 3 PM, outside the Governor's Pavilion in Lincoln, NH with all members present except Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin. The Minutes of the previous Board meeting were approved as printed in the newsletter. The Treasurer's Report was read and approved.

The Board sitting as the Nominating Committee nominated the existing members to run for the coming year.

Skeff Flynn had more RBS Brochures printed and the motion was made and approved to reimburse him for that expenditure.

There was extensive discussion about Bones Fest XXIII. We received a proposal from Randy Seppala to hold a 'Blues' Bones Fest in Clarksdale, MS and a proposal for a Bones Fest held at the same time as the Abbeyfeale Fleadh and Bones Competition in Ireland. We noted that we really would like a Fest in Ireland, but unfortunately, the dates for both proposals are on the same weekend. We will contact Randy about changing the date and poll the members at the General Membership Meeting to see how many might attend each Fest.

The meeting was adjourned at about 4:30 PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve

## Minutes Of The Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Steve Brown, on June 9, 2018, about 4:30 PM, in the Governor's Pavilion in Lincoln, NH. The minutes of the last meeting were read and approved as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented the Treasurer's Report noting we have a bank balance of just over \$7,000. Steve Wixson presented the slate of officers from the Nominating Committee, and Steve Brown opened the floor for nominations. Being none the motion was made and approved to elect the following by acclamation, Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Members At Large, Skeffington Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin.

Steve Brown led a discussion about BFXXIII and a straw vote was taken to see how many might attend in Clarksdale and Ireland. There was strong support for both Fests.

The meeting was adjourned at about 4:25 PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Yirdy Machar Obituary

Member Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar, aged 71, passed away Monday, July 9, 2018. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and lived in many different countries before settling down in Denmark some 35 years ago. He was divorced and the father of two children and was a grandfather and a great grandfather too.

Since 1991 he lived in a wooden cottage under a large oak tree at the edge of a forest near Kattogat on the island of Zealand together with his soulmate Mette whom he met back in 1985.

As Yirdy's father was a Naval Officer and travelled a lot his schooling took place in many different countries. He was however fortunate enough to spend some time in Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland, where he because of his then bad hand writing received special tuition from Tom

Gourdie who was a prominent Scottish calligrapher, artist and teacher.

Yirdy left home at an early age and joined the UK Armed Forces. He served in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, and also at The Royal Air Force Station located in Leuchars, Fife, Scotland, where he was a member of the Mountain Rescue Team.

After moving to Denmark Yirdy worked as a pub bartender in Copenhagen for some time until he got stabbed. Following that he devoted himself to the music and the calligraphy.

Yirdy was a passionate rhythm bones and spoons player and loved entertaining audiences with his playing music, his singing and his story telling as well as giving workshops on rhythm bones and spoons and other instruments.

Even in his last days he felt like entertaining. He would crack jokes on the staff at the hospital and on several occasions he captivated the staff with his rhythm bones playing.

Yirdy was a gentleman with a capital G, a man of independent mind, an honest man. He also taught the fine art of Calligraphy.

He learned playing rhythm bones from his family and played a variety of other instruments over the years including pipe band side drum, tenor drum and bass drum, bodhran, harmonica, concertina, diatonic accordion - or button box as he preferred to call it - tin whistle, acoustic bass guitar and mandolin.

A versatile musician who performed with many different bands as well as at myriad venues including pubs, clubs, concerts, cabarets, old-time music halls, radio & television broadcasts, variety shows, folk nights, and festivals around the world as well as in Denmark.

Always carrying his favorite rhythm bones and spoons with him in his rucksack. He mastered two handed playing and would play anything from two to four bones in each hand and for that matter all sorts of spoons.

He used a variety of rhythm bones from various makers, Paddy Sport Murphy, Steve Brown, Nick Driver and Victor Smith (a Shetlander living in Denmark) of Flatbush Stringed Instruments. Victor Smith was the one who made the lovely pair of Brazilian Rosewood Spoons for Yirdy.

He won the 'World Bones Champi-

onship in Iowa in 2002, and competed in the All Ireland Bones Contest a couple of times. He attended Bones Fest XIX and won the hearts of attendees. There are also couple of YouTube videos featuring Yirdy.

His fine playing stays with us in the form of two CDs - 'Mac Bones and the B Band' and 'BoneZone - In Session' - where Yirdy plays rhythm bones or spoons on most of the tracks.

Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar will live on in our memories and hearts. *Mette Warming*

## Remembering Yirdy Machar

Like so many other RBS members who knew him, I met Yirdy in 2005 at Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Yirdy was a person you could hardly forget. For starters, there was Yirdy's distinctive physique. He looked like Santa. Yirdy himself admitted that he has "doubled as Father Christmas." In addition to his majestic appearance, Yirdy had an incredibly soothing voice. Listening to Yirdy speak was mesmerizing. He reminded me of a professor I had many years ago whose voice was so soothing we could listen to him talk all day long. And if you thought Yirdy's speaking voice was marvelous, his singing voice was even more phenomenal. Women seemed to melt at the sound of it. Well, my significant other always went gaga when I played Yirdy's *Mac Bones and the B Band* CD. And then there was Yirdy's cheeky sense of humor. He was lots of fun to be with. Yirdy was one of those folks who attracted people like a magnet. You couldn't help but be taken in by the guy.

RBS members at that Bones Fest might best remember Yirdy for the workshop he gave on his "Full House" method for rattling eight bones. Or maybe it was Yirdy demonstrating the fine art of calligraphy. Or maybe it was Yirdy's outstanding performance at the public stage show. But no matter why you remembered him, everyone's life was brightened at Bones Fest IX by Yirdy's infectious congeniality. It's no wonder that Yirdy was such a big hit that year.

Personally, what endeared me most to Yirdy were some life experiences we

had in common. Like, we were about the same age (less than a year apart). And we both attended a handful of elementary schools (5 for me, 4 or 5 for Yirdy depending how you count them). We both left home and joined the military at a young age (me at 17, Yirdy even younger). Years later when much older, we both won the NTCMA (National Traditional Country Music Association) Bones Contest (Yirdy in 2002, me in 2004). And we both regularly rattled eight bones (distinctly different grip styles, but 8 bones nonetheless). I felt a special bond with Yirdy because of the life experiences we had in common. I'm sure a great many other folks had their own special connection with Yirdy.

Yirdy was larger than life and a legendary bones player. We will dearly miss him. *Scott Miller*

In 2002 I flew to Avoca, Iowa to compete in the National Traditional Country Music Association's World Bones and Spoons Championship. It was a sudden decision for me and I hadn't really made any accommodations. I arrived Friday afternoon, and met a fellow competitor, Yirdy Machar, a Scotsman living in Denmark, who had traveled all the way from Denmark to compete. Yirdy was renting a motel room with two beds, and quickly offered to share. The next morning as we were preparing for our competition, I pulled out the whistle and played some jigs. "Would you accompany me?" he asked, "But of course!" I replied. It was a magical week end, hanging with Yirdy, and the other rhythm bones players. At the end of the week end we all five rhythm bones players pledged to go to Abbeyfeale and compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, a pledge only Yirdy and I were to keep. I would meet him again several times over the years, sharing another room with him in 2004, and bunking at Steve Wixson's house in 2005. He was a true spirit, generous, open, supportive, and a great friend. He came in first that first year in Avoca, and beat me soundly. I returned the favor in 2003, and 2004. But we were joyous competitors, always supporting the other. RIP Yirdy! Slainte Mhath, As Aye. Yirdy MacBones. *Steve Brown*



(Continued from Page 1)

Canyon with a friend prior to the start of the opera gig, and hadn't shaved in weeks -- earned me a return contract for the 1997 season, as Sam in SUSANNAH. Artistic Director John Moriarty said he would never have thought of me for the role had I not arrived in Central with that beard, which the director of RIGOLETTO asked me to keep for the role of the Duke; but Sam is a bit of a mountain man so the beard worked to get me the part, although by 1997 I was clean shaven again; no one minded.

Well, there's this one little song at the end of the first act of SUSANNAH, known as the Jaybird Song. For those of you who don't know this opera, it's an American piece by the aforementioned Floyd, who also wrote an opera based on Steinbeck's OF MICE AND MEN, and several others besides. The plot, based on the biblical tale of Susannah and the Elders, takes place in the fictitious village of New Hope Valley, Tennessee, a close-knit, closed-minded community of mostly hypocrites. The three good people are Susannah Polk and her brother Sam, and a simple-minded neighbor named Little Bat. Before everything goes south, back home late one evening Susannah begs Sam to sing her favorite song: the Jaybird Song. "Jaybird sittin' on a hick'ry limb, he winked at me and I winked at him, I picked up a brickbat and hit him on the chin.... Looky here, little boy, don'tcha do that agin!"

So we come to the first blocking rehearsal for this scene. (In stage-ese, a blocking rehearsal is where the director and singers figure out where to be and go on stage during the scene. In opera, sometimes this is the limit as far as characterization is expected to be developed, but I've generally been luckier than that, with directors who hope the singers will be real people up there. This was always the case in Central City.) Moriarty, also the principal conductor of the company, remembered my numbers with rhythm bones at Post Op the year before, and stepped way outside his purview by suggesting to the stage director that when I sing Jaybird I also play rhythm bones. Michael Ehrman, however, a congenial chap, took the suggestion easily, and so for the first time possibly in the history of this opera, or maybe any opera, Sam

Polk played rhythm bones while singing Jaybird with his sister Susannah on a balmy summer evening, one day afore the elders done spied Susannah a-bathin' in a stream they was a-scoutin' out for a place for Preacher Blitch to baptize people - didn't matter hit was the Polks' own property, didn't matter hit was where Susannah had always done her bathin'. Let's just say that the ending of the opera bears no resemblance at all to the ending of Footloose.

So, folks, there you have it: for eight or ten performances, at 8,500 feet above sea level, in 1997, in Central City, Colorado, I played rhythm bones, freshly made from a cow's remains at 9000 feet, in an opera. The next time I did Sam was in 2014, with Utopia Opera in New York City. I got to be the dialect coach but was not asked to play rhythm bones. Thankee kindly for your attention. *Adam C J Klein*

## Profile of Adam Klein

ADAM C J KLEIN was born in Port Jefferson, Long Island in 1960 and grew up split between nearby Setauket and world-away New York City. He is a self-taught traditional music singer/player/songwriter and an opera singer/composer with a Master's degree from Indiana University School of Music, Bloomington.

By age 12 he was lining up different sized terracotta plant pots to play like xylophones, and at 17 he taught himself jaw harp, built his first dulcimer and started playing spoons after seeing a player at the Carter Family Memorial Music Center in Hiltons, Virginia; so when at age 18, having recently found a cow skeleton in Frederick, Maryland, he first saw bones being played, by Jeff Warner, accompanying Jeff Davis playing *The Falls of Richmond* on the banjo, he fashioned a pair from the ribs and figured out some rudimentary technique.

After meeting Percy Danforth at the Croton Clearwater Revival folk festival in 1981, it was all over: he then began making bones from wood, more or less after Percy's design. When he returned to Croton the following summer to show Percy his creations, Percy wasn't there, but people wanting bones were there and he sold out the dozen or so pair he'd brought with him. He's bade rhythm

bones off and on ever since.

Meeting Steve Brown at his table at NEFFA in 2001 or so, he noticed some more artistic shapes, which prompted a flurry of radical design experiments with the ultimate purpose of increasing the tonal range and varying the volume of the instrument beyond what one pair can be made to do.

He has now settled on two main designs: Tree Ribs which more closely imitate the changing curve of a rib: and Klave Klackers which give a recognizable musical tone rather than the traditional click, for play in ensembles such as bateria, the Brazilian samba percussion tradition, and Latin music in general, where the clave is the main timekeeper.

Being a singer, he uses rhythm bones primarily as a song's accompanying instrument, but will happily jam on rhythm bones with players of other instruments, from dulcimer to Cajun band to African drumming ensemble. The one kind of music he won't jam to is the prerecorded kind: music for him is a community activity.

His playing style, nurtured by Percy Danforth and developed with fellow player Art Scholtz in the early 80s, has grown more eclectic due to contact with RBS members such as Steve Brown, Jim Runner, the Meschers, Tim Reilly, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Skeffington Flynn and Jonathan Danforth, who along with all RBS members demonstrate to the world the astounding variety achievable by just banging two sticks together, and who we hope in time will pull rhythm bones out of their long obscurity back into the public consciousness where they can take their rightful place beside the other amazing human inventions known as musical instruments.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXIII.** May 2-5, 2019, in Clarksdale, MS. Host is Randy Seppala. See details on Page 8 and on our website.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August - September, 2019 (dates not posted yet), LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.



# Johnny Bones the Life of a Busker

I have told parts of this story several times at Bones Fests. I was walking down the street in Tombstone and heard the clatter of rhythm bones across the street. There was Johnny Bones the first rhythm bones player I had heard since my grandfather died in 1967. He told me about the Rhythm Bones Society and on-line lessons and off I went. Little did I know that chance meeting would change my life. After practicing all summer back in NY, I returned to Arizona and started playing the rhythm bones with the minstrels. In doing so I learned a lot about busking and a very unusual individual.

Most of the rhythm bones players I have met over the years are lovers of music and playing the bones. Many play other instruments and the rhythm bones are just part of their repertoire. Very few are musicians who make their entire living playing rhythm bones. Johnny Bones has made his living entirely from busking while playing rhythm bones for almost 11 years.

Starting life in Toledo, Ohio he worked various occupations: roofing, restaurants, a minstrel show performer on banjo and actually played hard rock guitar for a while. He confesses to being a stunt junky and loved performing in gunfight shows near Phoenix, AZ. Diving out of windows, falling off roofs, being thrown over hitching rails were part of the fun. However, that is a young man's game and will take a toll on the body after a while.

His first exposure to rhythm bones was a Percy Danforth video. He said he watched it long enough to see how to hold them and get a few clicks then turned off the video because he wanted to develop his own style, which is not unusual as you who have attended a few Bones Fests can attest. Most of us have our own style of play. He continues to wish for a set of Danforth bones. The ones he uses in Tombstone are hand made by him from buffalo ribs.

He has made a study of the old time minstrel shows which usually had a Mr. Bones and a Mr. Tambo or tambourine player. The clothing style of these old time bones men led to the crazy and

colorful costumes that Johnny wears to attract attention on the streets of Tombstone, Arizona. He can be seen and heard 6 or 7 days a week on Allen Street. He is usually alone except on Monday when he is joined by the rest of the Silver King Minstrels consisting of Joe Andrews on banjo, Burt Webster on guitar and vocals, and me on harmonica and rhythm bones. When he is alone he has a boom box hidden inside an old carpet bag sitting on an antique chair. It is fun for me to watch various people's reactions to him and his costumes. Most people really get a laugh out of it and want their pictures taken with him. After 11 years he has become an institution on Allen Street and returning visitors will go out of their way to look for him. A large poster picture of him and a British tourist was at one time on display in Heathrow Airport in England.

Busking is a meager living at best but the people he comes in contact with can make it worthwhile. He tells of a young man with cerebral palsy being pushed past him in a wheel chair. His head was down and he was unreactive until he heard the rhythm bones and music. His head came up and he got excited and clapped and tried to sing and dance. After the song his parents wheeled him on and unfortunately he retracted back into his former state. His mother told Johnny that was the first time in two years he had reacted to anything. Another time a couple walking with the woman's mother came by. The mother was a stroke victim and very downcast. She saw Johnny and stared and looked him up and down and smiled a big grin. Passing by she turned back and grinned again. The daughter came back and told Johnny her mother had not smiled in a very long time. Being a crazy looking bones player can have its rewards.

There can also be frustrations. In 2012 a new city administration was determined to get rid of buskers and particularly Johnny Bones. They passed an ordinance that was unconstitutional forbidding busking without a permit. Johnny contacted the ACLU and got them involved. The city was forced to back down as the ordinance was deemed a restriction of free speech. Johnny had weathered another storm. He has persevered through 100 degree days, high winds (from

weather and politicians), and other buskers trying to take his spot and seems content to do so for the foreseeable future.

Tombstone now seems comfortable with having Johnny around. He is often in parades for special events. The Silver King Minstrels open the music for Wild West Days. We played at the annual Christmas Charity Ball in Schieffelin Hall built in 1881 with 1800s music and costumes. Rhythm Bones and Johnny are here to stay. *Gerry Hines*

## NEEFA Report

Although it's looked little like spring around here over the last month, one sure sign of spring was seen last week end as the 74th New England Folk Festival was held in Mansfield, MA much to the delight of people interested in Folk Music and Dance. And in the heart of it was rhythm bones, as usual. Rhythm bones players and would be rhythm bones players descended upon the festival as more than 60 people participated in the Rhythm Bones Workshop.

Rhythm Bones Society members Bruno Giles, Ari Urlbaum, Skeff Flynn, Ron Bruschi, Tim Riley, Constance Cook, and Adam Klien, as well as long time rhythm bone player Tom Weldon provided teaching support as I attempted to describe the basic elements of playing rhythm bones.

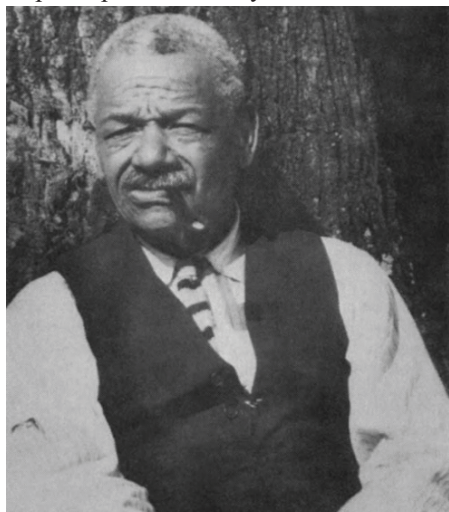
The audience was a mixture of local attendee's and some from as far away as Denmark. Jessye Bartlett, co-host of Bones Fest XXII, attended to encourage all attendee's to come to Franconia Notch in June for Bones Fest XXII.

At the completion of the rattle section, it seemed that more than 50% of the attendee's completed the task! Each of the Rhythm Bones Instructors then demonstrated their own style in individual performances and several pass offs. Regular attendee Jeremy Brown displayed his two handed style, while delighting the attendees, and then attempting to hug each one. Many a happy face left the workshop, some of whom cemented their rhythm bone playing by purchasing their own pair of rhythm bones, before going off into the world to demonstrate a new found skill.

And as they filed out of the workshop a voice was heard to exclaim, "See you in New Hampshire for Bones Fest XXII!" *Steve Brown*

## Thaddeus ‘Tad’ Goodson

Thaddeus “Tad” Goodson (1869-1957) was an African American rhythm bones player who lived in Richland County, South Carolina near the capital of Columbia. Some of the songs he played were recorded by Charles Seeger for the WPA in 1939 which I had digitally transferred by the American Folklife Center and have uploaded to YouTube (<https://bit.ly/2OV0XLt>). He is immortalized in the book *Tales of the Congaree* which collects his fables, folklore and songs from the 1920’s. His family still has his cherished rhythm bones and sixty one years after his death, he has inspired me to pick up the bones myself. Thanks Tad!



Here are the songs that feature rhythm bones on those recordings. Please note the “n” word is found in some of these songs. I’m planning on getting a show together to showcase these songs, hence me playing rhythm bones, so some lyrics will need to be changed. *Hardy Childers*

*That Girl I Love:*

<https://youtu.be/g9Kepzpwna8>

*Roll Down the Line:*

<https://youtu.be/V8p14IYyqlE>

*Slide On, Tramps:*

<https://youtu.be/YYuXXmN4DJk>,

*Bile Dem Cabbage Down:*

<https://youtu.be/FVMFcYw1JR4>,

*My True Love Treat Me So Cold:*

<https://youtu.be/HGTzfGpk6-A>,

*Ridin’ on a Humpbacked Mule:*

[https://youtu.be/\\_aMNPQErQOE](https://youtu.be/_aMNPQErQOE), and

*I’m the Leader of High Society (Since*

*I Got Mine):*

<https://youtu.be/DrSTRhp2mrc>.

## More on Sweet Georgia Brown, Brother Bones Arrangement

There is a story about Brother Bones, that is Freeman Davis, in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol 4, No 3, with information about his life and his recording of *Sweet Georgia Brown* which due to its adoption as the theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters (HGT) basketball team is one of the most played songs in the history of recorded music. From the point of view of rhythm bones players, it is a shame that most listeners do not realize that rhythm bones are the percussion instrument in that recording.

*Sweet Georgia Brown* is a jazz standard and pop tune written in 1925 by Ben Bernie and Maceo Pinkard and Kenneth Casey. The song was reasonably popular when it was written and recorded by several popular singers.

According to Wikipedia, “reportedly Ben Bernie came up with the concept for the song’s lyrics – although he is not the accredited lyricist – after meeting Dr. George Thaddeus Brown in New York City. Dr. Brown, a longtime member of the State House of Representatives for Georgia, told Bernie about Dr. Brown’s daughter, Georgia Brown, and how subsequent to the baby girl’s birth on August 11, 1911, the Georgia General Assembly had issued a declaration that she was to be named Georgia after the state, an anecdote which would be directly referenced by the song’s lyric: “Georgia claimed her – Georgia named her.”

“The tune was first recorded on March 19, 1925, by band leader Ben Bernie, resulting in a five-week number one for Ben Bernie and his Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra.”

The president of Tempo Records discovered Freeman when he was playing in a downtown Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles. The recording was made with Freeman whistling and playing rhythm bones, and it quickly reached the airwaves.

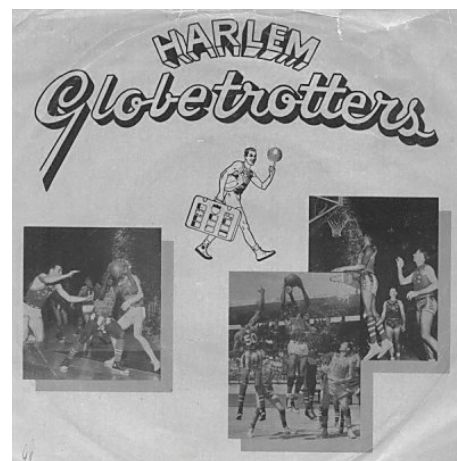
The connection to HGT came about this way. Albert Van Court was a HGT fan and also involved in the west coast

jazz recordings. A friend introduced Van Court to Abe Saperstein, the HGT founder, owner and first coach, who was always looking for ideas to promote their games. Many props, music, etc were tried and disposed of. Van Court suggested *Sweet Georgia Brown* was in the image of the HGT, and the use of music to advertise and promote the games and during warm up with the ‘Magic Circle’ was the perfect choice. An arrangement was made and the record was sold as a concession item. This was in the 1948-49 season and has continued every since.

In the fall of 1950, Columbia Pictures started shooting the first HGT movie, *The Story of the Harlem Globetrotters*. The producer, Buddy Adler, wanted very much to use the Brother Bones’ recording, but the royalty was too high for the movies’ budget. Van Court suggested the recording in a full length movie might be important and a deal was made where 5 cents of every record sold would be paid until the fee was met. The music was in the movie, and the use of it as a HGT theme song was firmly set.

Van Court held the exclusive distributorship of the record from Tempo Records, and distributed it only to the HGT organization. Abe Saperstein agreed to continue to use the record as the theme song for five years, but of course it has continued since then. *Steve Wixson*

[Thanks again to the HGT organization for more history about this record.]



The front cover of the Harlem Globetrotter’s version of the *Sweet Georgia Brown* record



## A Set of Presentation Minstrel Bones

Among the instruments currently in storage at the Yale University Collection of Musical Instruments is a set of presentation minstrel bones dating from the mid 19th century (See photograph on Page 8). This set, which comprises two pairs, is made from a dense, reddish-brown tropical hardwood (possibly rosewood). Each bone is tipped with silver mounts that are engraved variously with floral patterns, blackface minstrels, and fireman's regalia.

Two of the bones bear mounts that are inscribed: Presented to C. H. Atkinson by the Niagara Fire Association, New Britain Ct, June 9th, 1860. Engraved on the tip is a minstrel playing two pairs of bones, the word CHAMPION inscribed on his belt. On the tip of the other is a minstrel playing the banjo.

One guesses that this elegant set of bones was presented to C. H. Atkinson by his fellow firemen—perhaps as a prize for being the winner of a bones competition, or as an award for being an exemplary player, or as a gift on the occasion of his moving away from New Britain to new and different climes.

Whether Atkinson used them subsequently in performance is unknown. But, given their exceptionally fine condition (virtually no pitting or scarring), it is probable that they were valued more as a keepsake than as a musical instrument.

Charles H. Atkinson was born about 1837 in Maine. In 1860, he was employed as a machinist in New Britain, CT, where he lived with his wife Mary A. (age 22), son Charles F. (age 3), and infant daughter Sally.

By 1870, he had moved to Lowell, MA, where he was working as a “showman.” Ten years later, he and

his family were boarding on Pemberton Square, Boston, Charles H. earning his way as an actor and Charles F. working as a professor of elocution.

Atkinson's unusual set of bones was given to Yale in 1963 by G. Lauder Greenway of Greenwich, CT, who had purchased them from James Robinson, Inc., Old English Silver & Porcelains, 12 East 57th St., New York, date of purchase unknown. *Susan E. Thompson*, Curator, Yale University Collection of Musical Instruments, New Haven, CT. email address: [susan.thompson@yale.edu](mailto:susan.thompson@yale.edu)

[This article extracted from an article that appeared in the Newsletter of the American Musical Instrument Society, Vol 34, No 1, Page 8, in the spring of 2005: <https://amis.org/publications/newsletter/2001/34.1-2005.pdf>. That article has additional photographs not include here.]



Detail of a minstrel playing two pairs of bones, the word CHAMPION on his belt. Figure measures 18.5 mm in height. Photograph by Susan E. Thompson



Detail of a minstrel playing the banjo. Figure measures 18.2 mm in height. Photograph by Susan E. Thompson

## Executive Director Editorial (Cont)

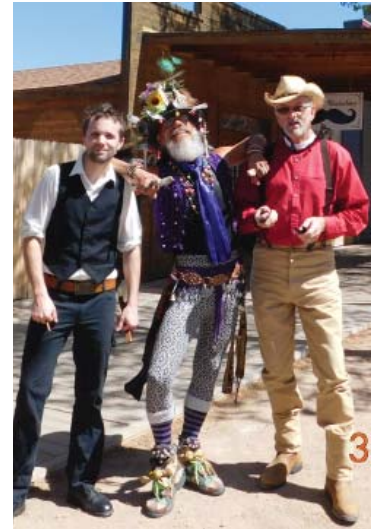
could be. She replied with the full specifications, but regarding Atkinson, only that he might have been a “benefactor of the Association.” While perusing Beth Lenz Dissertation, “The Bones in the United States,” I came across an entry, Appendix B, entitled “Biographical Sketches of Nineteenth Century Bones Players” reprinted from Daddy Rice’s book *Monarchs of Minstrelsy* which included “Chuck Atkinson” also called “Master Charles.” With my investigative juices flowing I wondered if this is the same person for whom the presentation rhythm bones were intended? A visit to the Brookline, MA library produced a copy of the February 9, 1909 edition of the “Brookline TAB,” and the obituary of “Charles H. Atkinson” purported to be the oldest living Minstrel before his death. Though I visited his grave, no additional information was available, and it wasn’t until I stumbled upon the article included in this issue that the trail of the Atkinson Bones began to heat up once more. I hope you enjoy it!

I have just returned from a very enjoyable trip to Quebec City. I have some good leads on rhythm bones players and participated in a very enjoyable evening of music at our Hotel, L’Auberge Du Mont in Valcartier, Qc. I met some of the local musicians, and learned how much Irish music has influenced French Canadian music. Look for an article in the near future!

Though eight months away, the promise of the Blues Bones Fest in Clarksdale, MS. is truly intriguing. At the edge of the Mississippi, near the cross roads where Robert Johnson bargained with the devil, it will give us a whole new perspective on rhythm bones and the blues! Just let that percolate for a while and do show up in Clarksdale! *Steve Brown*



Set of presentation bones crafted from tropical hardwood and tipped with silver. Average length, 169 mm; average width, 30 mm. Yale Acc. No. 1000.1963. (see story on Page 7) Photo by Christopher Gardner



Photograph on left is a closeup of Johnny Bones. The photograph on the right shows Johnny with Sky Bartlett on left and Gerry Hines on right (See story on Page 5)



Bones Fest XXIII will be in the birthplace of the 'Blues' in Clarksdale, Mississippi on May 2-5, 2019 hosted by Randy Seppala. Preliminary details are on our website and more details in the next newsletter

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 20, No. 4 2018

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*Tim Reilly*

*Parker Waite*

*Nick Driver Obituary*

*Steve Brown Remembers Nick*

*Bones Fest XXIII Update*

*Columns:*

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*Editorial*

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## Executive Director's Column

A friend of mine recently wrote saying, "this has been a bad year for losses" and again we are faced with another. Nicholas Driver, 3rd generation rhythm bone maker and player has passed away at a relatively early age. Nick took over the Driver rhythm bone making business from his father, wrote a Bone and Bodhran Tutor, and recorded the first long playing album featuring rhythm bone playing. His bones were known around the bone playing community for the high quality of tone they produced.

In 2001 he came to Bones Fest in Phillipston, MA, and charmed us with his grace, and great knowledge of bones and bone making. You will find

other remembrances in this issue. Rest in peace Nicholas Driver!

The All Ireland Bone Playing Championship celebrates it's 25 Anniversary in Abbeyfeale, West Limerick, Ireland on the first week end in May this year. They have reached out to previous winners, including champions, and are hoping to assemble the largest collection of rhythm bone players at that contest. Having competed, and judged this contest I can attest to the extraordinary hospitality, and high degree of musicianship displayed there. Some of Ireland's finest players of (Continued on Page 3)

## Tim Reilly

I was born in East Lyme, CT, in August 1963. I liked drums when I was younger and started taking drum lessons in 7th grade, probably because of the Bicentennial. My teacher, Rob Impellesterri, was a star drummer in the high school band and he realized I was a very enthusiastic student. I went from basic rudiments to book studies and reading drum music, which is very different from reading tonal music. I was learning to read classical percussion charts and also drum set parts, so I was very saturated with my lessons. This was in 2-3 years of study, an hour every week. Then when I was in high school I was in the marching band during fall and spring and concert band in winter. This gave me an appreciation for reading music arrangement and memorization. That was the awesome thing about East Lyme High School's band in the 1970s-1980s: everything was practiced, memorized, and produced a state champion and East Coast championship marching band. I took that enthusiasm with me to community college by trying to write parts, going to see my younger brother and watching the drum line, visiting our old drum instructor, Gary Ribchinsky, and trying to stay connected to it. I gradually drifted away about 1985 while I was attending Central Connecticut State University, and I didn't play much at all for a couple of years.

I got a job at Mystic Seaport Museum in fall 1987 and I heard rhythm bones first in spring 1988, played by Rick Spencer, a staff musician there. I decided I wanted to really try to play that instrument and see

what I could do with it. A few movement lessons and I had learned the basic hand swing, the triplet (roll), and the taps. I started one-handed, right hand, and quickly developed the analogy of being on a drum set and using my right hand to hit the ride cymbal, usually on a drummer's right-hand side. I found I could play different rhythmic patterns in just one hand as well as the rudiments.

Then the trick was to learn the other hand. At the Sea Music Festival held at Mystic Seaport, I saw a female rhythm bones player, Cindy Peloquin, playing (Continued on Page 4)



Tim Reilly being interviewed at Bones Fest IX

## Editorial

I am sad to announce the passing of rhythm bones maker and legend, Nicholas Driver. There was a story about him in 2001 in Volume 3, No 2 issue of our newsletter, and if you do an online newsletter search for 'Driver' you will find that story and lots of other of his contributions. For a live performance go to the list of audio and video on our website and click on Nick Driver.

Nick came from three generations of rhythm bones makers and was sad that his sons were not interested in them. His wife tells me his great nephew is a musician and the whale bones of Nick's great grand father have been passed to a new generation.

This is a different issue. Over the years we have recognized many rhythm bones players, some historic and some living. However within the ranks of our members are rhythm bones players with skills that likely match or exceed those other players, and they need to be recognized. So in each of future issue will be a profile of one of our members starting with Tim Reilly and Parker Waite (the only active member who attended Bones Fest I). Since they are alive they can tell us their story first hand instead of second hand by others. The next newsletter will feature Spike Bones who has entertained us for almost 20 years. This will be a fun ride!

Go to our website and you find that registration is open for Bones Fest XXIII hosted by Randy Seppala. Check out the announcement with his Fest graphic on the opposite page.

## Letters to the Editor

My Dad played the rattle bones quite well. When I was a kid he showed me how they were held and played, but I never did play along with him. He passed away in 1988, and I retired in 2011. In 2014, I ran across a box that was his; in it were a couple sets of his old bones.

I decided that I should learn to play them and started practicing. At first I could only play along with one or two songs before my wrist and arms became tired. I burned a CD of appropriate music and started playing one pair while driving

to and from work. I felt that I was doing pretty well when I had a severe right shoulder injury and subsequent surgery four months later that took away the ability to play right handed.

The enjoyment of rattling out a beat to the music was strong enough to keep me playing left handed and trying to regain the ability to play with the right as well. Now two and a half years after the surgery I can manage a few songs right handed before getting tired, but can play left handed for hours and enjoy an almost daily session.



I am fully self taught and have looked for other bones players in my area to learn from, but have not found even one other bones player. I purchased a couple of new sets of bones online and I have made a few sets myself. I enjoy the different sounds from different woods and playing two different wood sets that play in what I call the same key so they compliment each other. *Dennis Marks*

I got started by being self taught. I have bones on two bungy cords. They are elk, deer and buffalo all a different sound. I'm on youtube you can see it youtube.com/watch?v=GgR7WfdCc\_Q. Been playing for 30 years. Play street music at the 7 mile fair. A large flea market on week-ends. I can play with both hands also with a harmonica. I used to cross country drive a team of ponys in a covered wagon. Slept in it. My rattle bones got me a lot of free meals. These trips lasted 3-4 weeks. I still wagon train and if you listen you'll hear good Wisconsin music and the rhythm of the rattle bones. *Punka. a.k.a. Larry Fish*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Nicholas Driver Obituary

Nicholas Zeger Driver was born in Norbury, South London, England in February 1946 and died in December 2018. Under the nom de plume of China Hamilton he was an established artist and one of the leading fine art erotic photographic printers of the twentieth century.

Nick was an accomplished bones and bodhran player, having learnt to play the bones at the age of eight from his father, Aubrey Driver, who himself had played and made bones since 1920, with he learning from his father. Nick played on his Great-Grandfather's whalebone set of four and carried on and expanded the tradition of making bones from cows' shin in the 1970's, along with rosewood sets. He has made and sold many thousands of bone sets (and bodhrans) across the world and had (Continued on Page 6)

(Continued from Page 1) traditional Irish music reside there. Some of the very best bone players in Ireland come to compete in the contest, and the judges have included: Mel Mercier, Johnny Ringo McDonagh, Cathy Jordan, and Junior Davey to name a few. I have many fond memories of visiting Abbeyfeale, not all of them at late night pub sessions. If you are interested in attending, I would suggest going to the web site, [www.fleadh-bythefeale.com](http://www.fleadh-bythefeale.com) and making contact.

What has come to be known as the Blues Bones Fest will be held in Clarksdale, Mississippi May 4-6 in the heart of Blues country. Famous as the site where Robert Johnson Allegedly made his famous deal with the devil at the cross roads, and the home of Muddy Waters aka McKinley Morganfield. Blues clubs and players abound, and it will be our opportunity to emersh ourselves in the blues, and the other music which would abound at a Bones Fest. Randy Seppula is our host and promises some good times and good music! Hope to see you there! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXIII Update

I will be the Rhythm Bones Society's host in 2019 for Bones Fest XXIII and I am very excited about it. I need to thank the Shack Up Inn right up front for being the actual host for what will be a bone rattlin' event. Guitar camps, harmonica camps, singer songwriter camps, music festivals, celebrations, parties, weddings all happen here because it's an ideal venue for what ever people have happening. Bill and Guy and their friendly helpful staff coupled with the unique ambiance of the Shack Up Inn create a memorable experience for any occasion. The Shack Up Inn provides a great performance stage a professional sound tech an in-house bar, gift shop and lots of nooks and crannies for jams and workshops. One of my goals is to bring the rhythm bones back into the blues here in the Delta. Though we are focusing on the blues all other genres of music are certainly welcome.

Also, thanks to Hambone Gallery on Friday evening and Ground Zero Blues Club on Saturday evening for hosting

public bones performances, demonstrations, workshops and opportunities to learn to play and purchase rhythm bones.

There is a lot to do and see around Clarksdale and the Delta, especially at that time of year and I would recommend spending a few extra days at the Shack Up Inn and doing some day trips to Blues Trail Sights and nearby museums. Sunday has music going on all day starting with blues breakfast at Blueberry Café, Sunday ramble at Levon's and blues at the famous Red's Lounge on Sunday night. There is live music every day of the week in Clarksdale. I will have two

of my bands from Michigan on hand to provide back-up music; "Harp, Hart and Bones" doing old-time Mississippi Delta Blues; and "UP Gumbo" playing music from "Nolans", (New Orleans) and Louisiana and the Delta, as well as other special guests to be announced.

Rooms and shacks are available at Shack Up Inn for very reasonable rates (about \$100.0 per night with a two-night minimum). Get registered and "get youse a shack," get ready to "Shake em on Down" Clarksdale Mississippi Delta style. *Randy 'DaBonesMan' Seppala*



May 2, 3, 4, & 5, 2019

Based at "Shack Up Inn"

On the Historic Hopson Plantation

Highway 49 South - 3 miles south of the Crossroads Marker

Reserve a room or a shack: [shackup@shackupinn.com](mailto:shackup@shackupinn.com)

(662) 624-8329

Information available at [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

\$85.00 Registration Fee

Hosted by Randy "DaBones Man" Seppala - [dabonesman@gmail.com](mailto:dabonesman@gmail.com)

(Continued from Page 1)  
with a band called Wickford Express and she was playing two-handed, and playing real bone rhythm bones! I was very curious and enthusiastic about this, so during the weekend I got a tutorial on the second hand while the Festival was going on. Then I had to make myself some rhythm bones I could play I had a co-worker make a set; they were smaller—about 5 1/2” long. I used those for a while and practiced in either hand, but then I made two wooden sets, one out of maple (still have these) and a set out of cherry. They were made from dead fall and firewood. I gave the cherry (left hand) pair away to a co-worker who was going to Japan for a year. He was learning the instrument. He was going to train as a chanteyman at Mystic Seaport, something I had done from 1990-1993. I learned a few songs with rhythm bones accompaniment and thought I was getting pretty good. Well....

In 1993 I left Mystic Seaport and Mystic and the U.S. and joined a ship, the *Picton Castle*, that was going across the Atlantic to become a sailing ship. She was a powered cargo vessel and was in England. So I flew to England and joined the ship's crew. This was a big moment in my life and in my life as a rhythm bones player, because I was away from the instrument being a crew member, not a “musician,” and I had a lot of time to think about it. I wrote some notes about what I learned about the instrument and its connection to sailing ships and sailors. This started me on the road to researching the instrument and appreciating it a lot more than I had. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Yes!

The trip took us from Ipswich, England, in March 1994, down the south coast to Falmouth. From there to Spain, La Corunna, where we put in from a storm (WOW!!). From there, in April, we went to the island of Madeira, owned by Portugal, off the African coast. From the end of April into May we made our Atlantic crossing, Madeira to Bermuda, in 15-16 days. We stayed in Bermuda another two weeks getting ready to go to Long Island. I thought we would go to Mystic, but U.S. Customs was in Bridgeport, CT. I joined in Sept. 1993 and left that ship in June 1994. I then went to Maine on a recommendation

to join the crew of the schooner *Mary Day of Camden*. She was known as a music boat. Gordon Bok had been her mate years before and I had met him in 1991 at a Sea Music Festival. That was a happy ship and we had concerts every Thursday. I played rhythm bones again that summer.

I got back to Mystic in the fall of 1994 and started working on my rhythm bones scholarship. I taught a formal class at the 1996 Sea Music Festival (SMF). By that time, I was working in the shipyard at Mystic Seaport as a rigger. I was collecting a lot of research and getting rhythm bones and faxes and email letters dropped in my mailbox at work. I was also beginning to make a lot rhythm bones for people. In 1999, I heard about the Rhythm Bones Society and the annual meeting of rhythm bones players. That year I had gone to Texas to see a girlfriend at a museum and was trying to get to Brightwood, VA, on the trip home to meet bones players. It didn't happen, I'm sorry to say. But that got me very fired up about joining RBS and learning more. My first Bones Fest was at Red Apple Farm in MA in 2001. I had sent a videotape the year before that a co-worker had made of me playing so I could be included in the list of rhythm bones players. I wrote my article, “The Bones at Sea,” for the newsletter in 2002 after separating my shoulder in a fall while on the way to Bones Fest VII. That was another breakthrough moment in my career, because I had written all about my research in a particular area and I had done the work of collecting it. I found my niche at last!! When I got to meet everyone at Bones Fest V and Bones Fest VIII, it just confirmed that I had a huge, related family who loved this instrument, and really liked the historical research I had done. It made me feel wonderful because I had gone out nationally to look for my place alongside other bones players. So that added a lot more fuel to an already raging fire. Then I met Kenny Wohlin though Jonathan Danforth, whom I had met at Bones Fest V. The three of us became a small band of brother bones players I think because we are close in age and have a great respect for the instrument and each other. I would go to NEFFA (New England Folk Festival Association) in Massachusetts when I

could and also Bones Fest when I could, which strengthened our bond. I continued in the shipyard at Mystic Seaport and also continued to make and play rhythm bones.

In 2008 I stepped down from rigging and became an interpreter (docent) at the museum and I was playing in a folk band called *Barnacle*. When I played in front of people I was always struck by their astonishment at seeing this instrument played. I really like that! That becomes the catalyst to talk about the rhythm bones and the organization and to lead people to the website. This continued for about eight years and then I heard plans that the whaleship *Charles W. Morgan* was going to be sailed, and I really wanted to be a part of this voyage. I was picked to be a part of the Seaport crew and I chose a project for myself: I would make a set of rhythm bones on board the ship while at sea. The bone I used had been given to me by a co-worker in 1990. I had kept it the whole time. He had passed away in 2002, and I sought to honor him by using this bone and crafting on the *Morgan*. I have two sets of old, solid bones of different sizes and thicknesses, but made from the same original bone, consisting of four sistered pieces. These are a memento of the voyage and a tribute to my departed friend.

Over the years, I have gotten to teach many people to play rhythm bones, including one student I've worked with for several years now. I have also taught large groups at festivals, and in 2013 I taught a large group of elementary school music students. I have had some adventures playing rhythm bones and have played in places like St. Lucia in the Caribbean, Madeira, Ireland, England, Denmark, and Bermuda, as well as on the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers. There always seems to be water involved. For a long time I played a set of rhythm bones I was given in 1996 that I matched together. They are 8” long and have two wider bones (ribs) on the left and two skinnier bones on the right. Mateo, the castanet master, noticed this configuration mirrored the pitching of his instrument, so I was aping the sound of castanets without knowing I was doing it.

I play on a drum pad with sticks (thick, practice style) all the time, and this builds my rhythm bone playing chops.



In the 1990s, while researching, I discovered that a 19th century player used to do military impressions on rhythm bones as part of a solo, so it stands to reason he could have been playing snare drum rudiments (Dan Emmett would have known these, too, since he did a stint and taught music in the army). So I think the rudimental niche, accompanying people, and as a historian of the instrument, particularly the maritime aspect, is how I contribute to the RBS.

One Christmas when I was young, I got a scrimshaw kit from my father. I was always drawing things and doodling away when I was a child, and my parents noticed this and tried to foster it. I did the scrimshaw, which consisted of a big, plastic, simulated whale's tooth that had a transfer design on it, and then other things took my interest. It was only when I became a staff member at Mystic Seaport that my interest in scrimshaw returned. I started with a cleaned beef bone on which I scrimshawed a picture of my father's ship, the U.S. Coast Guard Training Ship Eagle, and the ports of call he made on his cruises. Then I thought about splitting a larger bone to make a set of bone bones for myself. I had seen a "Mr. Bones" (John Burrill) playing bones on the streets of Nantucket Island in 1986, while I was crew on a cruise ship, and I thought how neat it would be to have bones, play them, and then scrimshaw them; it would be some interesting decoration, and they would play music! I got that idea into my head firmly and have never looked back. I thought of the scrimshaw as my little niche where I could do music and art at the same time. I have made and illustrated pairs of bones for over 100 people already. My base work will always have my monogram scrimshawed on them, usually on the inside of the "anvil" bone. I have found out that the more design on the bone, the more chance for it to wear off, so occasionally I have to do re-inking and re-coloring jobs for my customers. I was especially commissioned to make a pair of bones for Sgt. Patrick B. Reilly, U.S. Army, in 2003/4, to commemorate his birthday (Dec. 27). I also added some touches of my own: a ship flying flags representing his birthday numbers (12/27/64) in full color. These were solid bone, a little wider than most so I could

get more drawing on them (see photograph on Page 8).

I feel lucky to be able to do this work, and it makes me happy to see the faces of the people I've done work for when they receive their "whaling present." I have also done two sets of scrimshawed bones to honor the sailing of the historic whaleship Charles W. Morgan in 2014. I find it very rewarding drawing the designs and executing the work. At this writing, I've scrimshawed ships, human portraits, balloons, banjos, and unicorns. Lately I've gotten into 3-dimensional relief carving as a means of expression. I've done shamrocks and rope so far.

I am currently making a set or two of rhythm bones for a holiday order and also compiling research on the music of the Irish diaspora. One of my pet projects is the observation of Christmas with bones playing in the John Canoe Festival of the antebellum South, the Mummies in Philadelphia, and the Belsnickels around the New York area. I am also working on a project involving scrimshaw (bone carving) and musical instruments during the whaling epoch in America.

I like exploring different types of music when I play rhythm bones. At different festivals, I've done vocals (sea songs), classical, Irish, and contemporary music for my showpieces. This demonstrates my willingness to receive new signals and be willing and able to experiment. The time I spent in Barnacle working every week was invaluable for exposing me to new music and allowing me to express new ideas on how to play with support and enthusiasm. This year, I even got to march while playing rhythm bones in the Mystic Irish Parade, with a bunch of pirates! I suppose I could have used a drum.... At this writing, there are three rib bones on my counter patiently waiting to be turned into instruments. I recently created a 21-bone "xylabone" for a Halloween show at the museum, but other than that I haven't made a lot of bones this year.

I have very spiritual leanings to this instrument. I've noticed the way that it makes people dance and makes people (especially children) happy. I'm glad that I can participate in that exchange. I am deeply grateful for my extended RBS family that I get to see almost every year, and for the lessons that you've taught

me. I hope I can continue playing for a few years more, or at the very least instructing and encouraging new and practiced players to develop. This is a lesson I was taught at a young age. I have tried to be a good ambassador for this instrument. Thank you all. *Tim Reilly*

#### Discography

Ric Spencer. The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter. (1992)  
 Sherri Mortimer. From Mystic. (1992)  
 Don Sineti. Iron Men and Wooden Ships. (1996)  
 Alchemy. Village Dances. (1997)  
 Compass Rose. Shipmates. (2000)  
 Brown Jenkyn. At Deep River. (2001)  
 Musician Showcase. Live at the Voodoo Grille. (2007)  
 Barnacle. Many Ports, One Sea. (2010)  
 Mystic Seaport. Sea Music Festival #22, 24, and 38.  
 Nicholas Zeger Driver of Suffolk, England, UK (see obituary in this newsletter)



Tim Reilly and whale bone ribs

Tim's comment upon learning of Nicholas Driver's passing, "It was an honor and privilege to meet him and I was hoping to see him again. I met Nick the same Bones Fest that I met Jonathan Danforth. Very sorry to hear this."

(Continued from Page 2) the pleasure of meeting and playing with the late Percy Danforth. Both men did much to encourage the re-birth of the art during a time when it was in decline.

He was a polymath, having a particular passion for precision engineering. He rebuilt and raced historic racing cars and motorcycles; was a boiler inspector for steam locomotives; a Master Clocksmith; and played traditional Irish Music, cutting the first ever album of traditional bones playing ("Bare Bones") and also wrote the first tutor for the Irish bodhran and the bones. He was a Buddhist and held qualifications in Herbal Medicine and was well known for his poems and erotic short stories many of which have been published.

Nick's Great-Grandfather's whalebone set of four has now passed onto his nephew, Luke Heydon-Driver, who will continue the family tradition of "playing the bones." *Anita Hamilton*

## Steve Brown Remembers Nicholas Driver

In 1978 I was a fledgling rhythm bones player. In my arsenal of bones I had multiple pairs of Danforth bones which I played with gusto. But the idea of bone bones was both mysterious, and elusive.

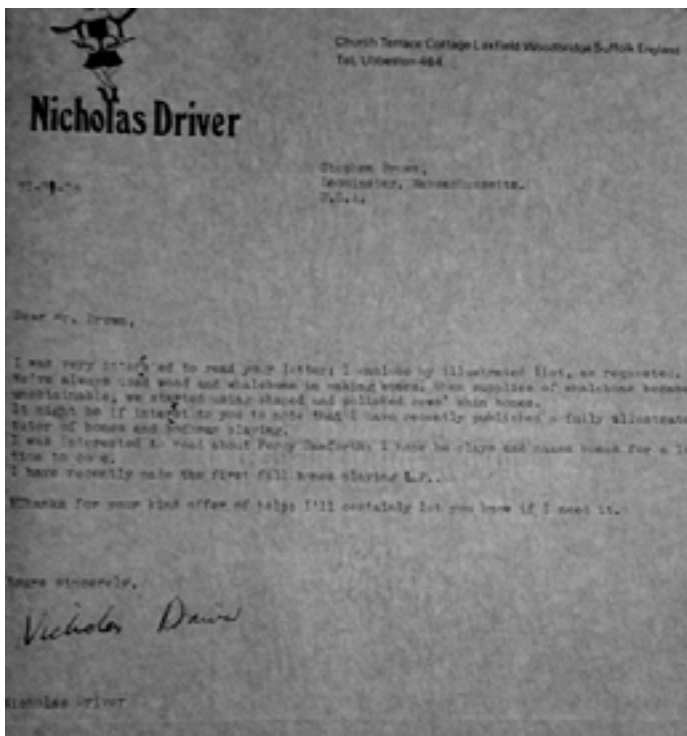
In an issue of Sing Out Magazine in the fall of 1978, I saw an ad for real bone bones which were made all the way in England. I dashed out a letter to connect with the owner, and soon I received a letter from Nicholas Driver (reprinted to the right), and soon I received in the mail still considered to be one of the best sets of rhythm bones I own, along with his Bones and Bodhran Tutor, and his recently released at the time record of bone playing. I

was fascinated to read about Nick and his rhythm bones playing family history! His father Aubrey who was still playing and performing his "party trick" of throwing one bone in the air and catching it, while not missing a beat! And of course his grandfather, who started the rhythm bone making business which sold bones across the globe in the 40's and 50's. But it wasn't until 2001 that I had an opportunity to meet Nick in person at Bones Fest V here in Massachusetts. He warmly greeted me when he arrived and gave to me another set of Driver bones! Nick's presence at Bones Fest V was unmistakable, always with a crowd around him, delving into the details of making and playing rhythm bones. When he departed at the end of the week end, I felt I had found a new brother. Though he would close his bone making business, he remained an Icon in the bone making and playing world. I am so glad to have known him, rest in peace Nicholas Driver! *Steve Brown*

[Transcript of the letter below.]

Dear Mr. Brown,

I was very interested to read your letter. I enclose my illustrated list, as requested. We've always used wood and whalebone in making bones. When supplies of whalebone became unavailable, we started using shaped and polished cow's shin bone.



It might be of interest to you to note that I have recently published a fairly illustrated tutor of bone and bodhran playing.

I was interested to read about Percy Danforth. I hope he plays and makes bones for a long time to come.

I have recently made the first full bones playing L.P.

Thanks for your kind offer to help. I'll certainly let you know if I need it.

Yours Sincerely, Nicholas Driver.

## Parker Waite

I was born 1944 in Charleston, SC, grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia. I went to Denison University in Ohio with a stint as a game warden in Alaska in-between. I was in the Navy. I have lived in Hawaii, California, Montana, Alaska (again), and now Maine since 1976.

My father had started playing minstrel style ebony bones as a young man. Unfortunately I don't remember "his story with the instrument" (which is why Steve Wixson's tireless work documenting "us" is so valuable to all of us now).

Dad loved big band music, having played clarinet in his younger years. My two brothers and I started doing a regular family jam with Dad when I was 10 or so.

At some point in the 1950's Dad came home from work with a few sets of Joe Bir's bones. And these were added to our mix. So Joe Bir's name became fondly fixed in my brain as did the shape of his bones. And I have riffed on that shape since with some of the bones I continue to make.

I/we never encountered another bones player until some time late in the 1980's. And since those early years I have continued to play almost daily now. And entirely within my family (except for Bones Fest!) which now includes nieces and nephews who also play. My nephew Carter Waite came to Bone Fest XVII, 2013 in Leominster, MA where he bought a set of Adam Klein's gorgeous wooden bones. Carter carries them with him to this day and plays. I was astounded to watch him play a triplet in under a 1/2 hour the first time he picked up a set of rhythm bones!

My facility with them has been a much more arduous process. But now I

feel very comfortable with them and my "mash potato" style of playing. I seem to hold them predominantly between thumb and index finger and middle finger and fourth finger. The grip is always changing and the bones float around depending on the ring, tone, or pitch required. I like two handed playing so I can bounce back and forth. I kind of think of it as "taking the dogs out for a walk".

Back in the early 1980's I was living on Isle au Haut, a small island, part of Acadia National Park, here in the Penobscot Bay of central coastal Maine. I was a commercial diver, lobsterman, and ran the local electric power company at the time. During one of our dives my partner came across the carcass of a large whale about 50' down. Over time that day he sent up 2 large ribs and a couple of vertebrae.

As I hauled each rib aboard, the weight of it would heel the 36' lobster boat gunwales to the water's edge. When the ribs broke the water I saw the prospect of dozens of sets of rhythm bones before me. But I never did anything with them.

Then in 2006 at Bones Fest V I met Tim Reilly (see Page 1) and thought he would appreciate a rib. But I didn't get it to him until 2018 at Bones Fest XXII. Tim I hope there is material there you can work with. It is certainly aged!

Later in the 1980's another commercial diver, Carter Newell, was helping me collect data for a salmon aquaculture project I was trying to launch with another friend. It turned out Carter was also a great fiddle and rhythm bones player to my enormous surprise. Another bones player existed out there! Carter told me about Andy's Front Hall in Voorheesville, N.Y. And in their catalog they listed Dr. Fred Edmunds Tutorial on rhythm bones playing which I bought. That led to a correspondence with Fred. I think in 1996 Fred wrote and told me about Ev Cowett and his idea for a bones player get-together at his place in Greensboro, N.C. I told Fred I'd be there! And for me things haven't been quite the same since that 19-21 September 1997 weekend with Ev and Val, Dan, Tom, Martha, Russ and all the others there with me.

We all stayed at a motel. I would visit Fred in his room. He had lung cancer and at that point was mostly bed ridden. I remember a bible on his bed and a bottle

of bourbon beneath the covers. And I remember the incredible inclusive gathering on Ev and Val's deck with music of all genres blasting out from speakers as we all powered through whatever was playing together! It was a glorious get-together for me. And now all these years later I think I've been to Bones Fest I, III, V, VI, VII, X, XIII, XVII, XXII. And every single one was spectacular for me. But none more so than XXII hosted by Sky and Jessye with Ernie's help.

Another rhythm bones member I was in correspondence with early on was Nick Driver (see obituary on Page 2). Then I met him at Bones Fest V in 2001 where we jammed together. Prior to that I had purchased a set of his rhythm bone bones. Unfortunately over time I lost contact with Nick. I remember he had a wicked good sense of humor. I think Bones Fest V was also Donnie Decamp's first. Wow, what a delightful force of human nature he was. And now years later there is Sky Bartlett's huge presence in our group. I'm grateful for the on line video clips I can bring up that capture the sound and actions of these players. I also enjoy rewatching Gil Hibben's you tube clip. Also one of Ari Erlbaum titled "Exploding Stegosaurus Rhythm Bones" which I'm sure most of you have also seen.

Years ago I started making bones in all different configurations out of wood, bone, plastic and metal. I have worked with many species of wood. At the moment I'm making 2 pair for Tom Connelly out of rosewood from Brazil and teak. I like the range of sounds emanating from some rosewood boards. But there are many species of trees that also have melodic qualities. I've experimented with polyester resin Ivory look-a-likes which have a strong sound.

Back in 1993 I was out in Ontario, Oregon helping the Billings Montana Conceptual Sculptor Patrick Zentz assemble his "Snake River System" on location. I was cutting lengths of Aircraft Aluminum bar stock #6061 into tone bars for the piece. When they dropped and rattled on the floor I realized they'd make great rhythm bones. Scott Miller started offering that style on his "Bone Dry Musical Instrument Co." website.

I think that over the years the level

of playing quality has gone up by leaps (or clicks). We have some very talented musicians in our group. It is a sheer joy to hear them perform!

And we also have some incredible people in our midst which includes Jeremy Brown. I feel better just being in Jeremy's presence.

And thank you to all who attend, I'm grateful to get the chance to meet you!

Sincerely, *Parker Waite*



"Parker's rosewood bones that play themselves!"

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXIII.** May 2-5, 2019, Clarksdale, MS, Randy Seppala is host. See Page 3 for more information.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August - September 2019 (dates not yet set), LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.



Parker Waite playing his rhythm bones. See Page 7 for a close up of those rhythm bones.



A good example of Tim Reilly's scrimshaw art. See Page 5, left column, for how he does it.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 21, No. 1 2019

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## Executive Director's Column

It was placed high on the wall, but not too high, at the end of the room, between other paintings, but not in competition with them, for the others neither commanded the attention or the respect that The Bones Player does, at least for me.

The first thing that strikes you is the size, some 3 feet across and 4 feet down, that familiar figure, and yet not familiar so large portrait of this unknown bone player. His eyes seem to follow you, and reach out to you, as if to acknowledge your presence, and assure you that you two have a connection. His clothes, clearly of a by gone era, and yet so fashionable, and complementary, making one wish they

could be duplicated, and would they look so good if you were the one wearing them?

And then there's the hands, holding those pure white bones, with the fingers just like Percy showed me, low those 40 something years ago, and yet a fraction of the time when the bones player played, when the bones player learned, when he was in his time.

Then a thousand questions enter your head, Who was he? Where did he learn? What kind of music did he play? Did the people of his generation feel the same reverence for him as we who play his instrument (Continued on Page 3)

## Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer

One of the most entertaining members of the Rhythm Bones Society is Darryl Muhrer. Here he described himself in a recent biography in a Bones Fest program booklet.

"My first performance was as Dr. Spike in June 1978, and inspired by Percy Danforth from whom I learned to play rhythm bones, I soon changed my stage name to Spike Bones. I gather my performance 'vits' and pieces from the period 1840-1940, an era I call pre-TV entertainment. I have developed a lot of my character and material as a street performer in Chicago and New Orleans. Although I have played with a lot of Irish, Old-Time, Folk and Jazz bands, I consider myself as much a dancer as a musician. A nineteen year old membership with RBS has provided me with great inspiration, friendships, and rhythm bones insight into the art and history of rhythm bones."

Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer was born in Columbia, MO on December 15, 1943, and went to high school and college there. He earned a Master's Degree in Education from Northwestern University, and later studied educational technology and video production. He served in the Army, taught broadcasting at Northeast Missouri State University and led classes in creativity and organizational change for the Department of Energy. He has been an artist in residence and substitute teacher with the Chicago Public Schools. He has two sons and three grandkids. He returned to Columbia in 2010 to look after him mom, Madaline, who passed in 2015. She loved

attending Bones Fests.

While in Chicago, Spike put on a show in Lincoln Park Zoo performing on weekends near the lion house. For over 20 yeas he did his 'Bones Show' accompanied by a pianist at 240 schools across the Midwest. For a long time he wanted to convert this show to a theater piece, and he described that effort later in this article.

Spike says, "Something I learned from Bones Fests as well as the fabulous musicians I play the rhythm bones with every Sunday in Columbia, Missouri is....I'm not a musician. I am a performing artist (Continued on Page 4)



Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer inspired RBS member Art Sands to edit Spike into this creative photograph.

## Editorial

This issue on Page 1 continues member profiles with Darryl ‘Spike Bones’ Muhrer. Spike first entertained us at Bones Fest III when our society was organized with Spike a Founding Member. He will be at the Blues Bones Fest to continue that tradition.

At Bones Fest XXII last year, we heard about a New Hampshire rhythm bones player named Cecil Rivers who claimed a record as the fastest rhythm bones player at 18.9 beats per second or 1134 beats per minute, the 18.9 being calculated as 1134/60. The record has been claimed a Guinness World Record, but this could not be proven. However, this might suggest that some sort of a competition existed that RBS needs to know about. So if you are in the Boston or New Hampshire area, there is an opportunity for some research.

Also at last year’s Bones Fest was Tom Connolly from Ireland who brings us a story of Steve Throp from the UK whose grandfather entertained troops in the trenches during World War I. Thanks, Tom for a touching story.

I am practicing daily for the Blues Bones Fest (see Page 3 for an update), and finally called to reserve my Shack Up Inn room. I have a few ‘Blues’ CDs that I practice with, and I hope I learn enough at the Blues Bones Fest to feel comfortable playing with live blues musicians.

## Letters to the Editor

Enjoyed reading “A Set of Presentation Minstrel Bones” in the newsletter. The Yale University article identifies them as “possibly rosewood,” but the wood appears to be padauk (aka vermilion). See for yourself--

Padauk (aka vermilion) Google search [https://www.google.com/search?q=padauk&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewj5vL-WHp83eAhVMRKwKHb9UAXYQ\\_AUIEigB&biw=1210&bih=1285&dpr=2](https://www.google.com/search?q=padauk&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewj5vL-WHp83eAhVMRKwKHb9UAXYQ_AUIEigB&biw=1210&bih=1285&dpr=2)

*Scott Miller.* For reference--<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B015TJ3CDS/>

Many thanks for keeping this lapsed & former member on the email list.

It occurs to me that you might be interested in my personal connection with Percy Danforth. Years ago I lived in Ann Arbor MI and knew absolutely zilch about The Bones or Percy D., but as it happened our daughter was taking piano lessons from Fran (Mrs. Percy) Danforth. One evening I caught a performance of the Gemini (a couple of local lads, identical twins, who entertained and performed on quite a number of folk instruments, including The Bones, and in the course of the show they got old Percy up on stage to hold forth; quite a show and I was vastly impressed. My wife mentioned that Percy was Fran’s husband.

I took over the weekly transportation detail and while our daughter pounded away upstairs I introduced myself to Percy downstairs, asked all the right questions, and he taught me how to manage the bones. Over the ensuing weeks & months Percy & I became good friends and remained so until he left us in 1991, I think it was.

Did you know that, in addition to his solo shows and appearances with other musicians, he used to perform with the University of Michigan’s Percussion Ensemble? Wife Fran, herself a professional teacher of music and composer, always seemed a little embarrassed by Percy’s musical exploits until his collaboration with the Percussion Ensemble which in her eyes evidently conferred a measure of dignity and legitimacy, and she quit rolling her eyes when the subject of ‘The Bones’ arose.

Anyhow, I thought that you and maybe others might be interested in this tenuous connection to one of the more illustrious figures in our field of interest. I still have a set of hickory bones (now a little shopworn) that he signed and gave to me. Best regards, *Robert Lindy*

David “Doctor Hamfat” Marin – I have been a harmonica player for 50 years and during that time I also played washboard. I partnered many years with Jimmie Stagger and accompanied or partnered with musicians ranging from Honeyboy Edwards to Lazy Lester to Bo Diddley to Bukka White to Buddy Guy and dozens more famous or unknown good national

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

acts and bad bar bands than I can recall or you would recognize. About 30 years ago I was given a pair of maple bones and after long effort I learned to play a triplet. My friend of over 30 years, the great orchestral percussionist, Bill Vits, has been my inspiration in recent years to get more serious about hand drums and bones. I am a wood carver/sculptor and make bones out of anything that “has a set of them” in it. I also have some “real ones” from Steve Brown and Sandor Slo-movitz. I prefer to play Irish style - one handed - most of the time, occasionally with a harp in a rack. *David Marin*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXIII, the Blues Fest.,  
May 2-5, 2019, Clarksdale, MS, Randy Seppala, host.**

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** October 3-4-5-6, 2019, Fremont, Nebraska. Bones

(Continued from Page 1)

today? Just being in front of him is returning to an old friend, and I greet him, the way he greets me, with silent knowing that there is meaning there, that there is magic there, and hoping just a little bit will some how seep into your hands and your bones, and all those things you think represent his playing will also be true of your playing.

I returned to The Bone Player, as I sometimes do, making the pilgrimage up to the second floor of the American Wing, after giving my representation of rhythm bones to the 50 something people in the audience in the Instrument Collect at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. It was like walking down to the cabin of an old friend, saying, "I just happened to be in the area, and I wanted to say Hello."

Though many images of The Bone Player circulate on the Internet, in books, and other medium, there is nothing like standing before the portrait painted some 161 years ago by William Sidney Mount, and a pilgrimage I would highly recommend. [Check out Steve playing in front of the painting at <https://youtu.be/MIBnfpZ4bs>.]

Well the snow is starting to recede and I'm making my way to the number of St. Patricks Day gigs, meaning spring is opening it's eye's, and yawning a bit, starting it's yearly wake up. the New England Folk Festival is literally around the corner, which means The Blues Bones Fest in Clarksdale, Ms will soon be here.

Located in the heart of blues history, Clarksdale is not only the former home of blues greats Howling' Wolf and Muddy Waters, but it is the location reported to have been the meeting place between Robert Johnson and the devil which legend has it gained Johnson his uncanny ability to play guitar.

I have loved the blues since first playing in a high school blues band, and the music does seep into your bones! We will be in the heart of it, staying at the Shack Up Inn, playing in the Juke Joints, and getting to know the people of Clarksdale!

I implore you don't miss this one, and who knows perhaps a number of us will gather at midnight down by the cross roads to see if just a little of Robert Johnson's magic just might rub off on our bones! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXIII Update

BONES FEST XXIII is just around the corner, only 6 weeks away; we have over 30 bones players and future bones players registered and anticipate more will get on board. When I spoke with Bill Talbot, owner of Shack Up Inn, last week there were only 10 rooms/shacks left in the block he set aside for us, so if you want to stay at the Shack Up for the full Mississippi blues experience get a reservation soon. There are also other motels and hotels available in town, I would suggest a new one called Traveler's Hotel. It looks like we have several beginners and newer bones players coming in and that is a great situation in that rhythm bones was once more prevalent in the blues and reintroducing the bones back into the blues is one of the goals of Bones Fest XXIII. Of course all genres of music and styles of bones playing are welcome as always.

Thursday evening May 2nd will be a hospitality and greeting session at Shack Up Chapel with hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar from 5 to 8, with blues music and bones jamming going on. Friday and Saturday breakfast will be served from 7:30 to 9:00, and lunch from 12:00 to 1:30 by Ms. Sasha Montry, our fabulous local caterer, cost included in registration fee. Evening meals will be on your own

at local cuisines. However, on Friday a local vendor, Mr. Bobby Cook will be at the Shack Up doing a crawfish boil from 4:30 to 7:00, before night jams at 8:00 at Stan Street's Hambone Art & Music Gallery, featuring The Hopeless Case Bar on 2nd Street in Clarksdale. We will have music happening and space for teaching bones in back and working on our individual performances for our public show at Ground Zero blues Club on Saturday evening. Ground Zero features "Southern Soul Food" so if you want to chow down on the real thing before the show it is exceptional. I had a pulled pork plater with meat hot out of cooker last week "WOW"! The climax of every Bones Fest is the "individual bones playing performances" which will take place on the famous stage of Ground Zero Blues Club, where every blues man wants to play. We will have the stage from 7:00 to 9:00 for our performances followed by one of my very favorite blues bands the fantastic "Organgrinders" – "Come and party with the Monkey". Enjoy amazing music, food, Southern hospitality and fellowship at Bones Fest XXIII.

If you are selling bones try to keep yourself mobile as we will be moving around in the evenings. Workshops and day time activities are still in planning stages. Many local musicians have expressed interest in the festival and will be at Shack Up and be available for jam sessions. *Randy Seppala*



**May 2, 3, 4, & 5, 2019**  
**Based at "Shack Up Inn"**

**On the Historic Hopson Plantation**

**Highway 49 South – 3 miles south of the Crossroads Marker**

**Reserve a room or a shack: [shackup@shackupinn.com](mailto:shackup@shackupinn.com)**

**(662) 624-8329**

**Information available at [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)**

**\$85.00 Registration Fee**

**Hosted by Randy "DaBones Man" Seppala – [dabonesman@gmail.com](mailto:dabonesman@gmail.com)**

(Continued from Page 1)  
combining with equal gravity...Music - Motion - and EMOTION! For example watch *Redwing* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyKLHmNDtY4>.”

There is a short section in a video that shows a young Spike Bones performing at a summer festival in Chicago. Go to <https://mediaburn.org/video/image-union-municipal-mirth/> and move to 14:24 in the video. It is delightful particularly for those who have only known him as a RBS member.



Children listen to Spike Bones at Pirate's Cove Children's Theme Park in Elk Grove Village. File photograph from Daily Herald, August 1982

In 1991, Spike joined the Lonie Walker's jazz band playing most weekends at the Underground Wonder Bar in Chicago. From that relationship, Spike self produced a limited release CD titled "Bones Meets Jazz."

Another recurring venue was street performers on the Chicago Transit Authority's historical rapid transit train where he was at times joined with city officials.

As for his connection with Percy Danforth, he once wrote this. "I remember the weekend I spent with Percy Danforth at a university in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The university paid Percy to come as a performer, and scheduled him for two all day street fairs, several luncheons and dinner performances as well as a evening appearance with the symphony. Percy was physically drained and his legs hurt, but he just kept on boning.

"That weekend I went along as Percy's

go-for, chauffeur, and assistant. We discussed everything from music to his life as an architect during the depression. I will always remember him saying to me: Spike, always remember every intelligent plan fulfills a need."

Spike with Scott Miller hosted Bones Fest XII in St. Louis, and to read the details search the online newsletters for the Volume 10, No 4 issue or watch 'https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fn-MegTzLeJ8.' We had great facilities and program at the University of Missouri at St. Louis with plans for a riverboat dinner, but some events got canceled for security reasons due to the 100,000 person political rally under the 'Arch' for the 2008 Obama-Biden campaign.

Spike's performances at annual Bones Fests are remarkable. One feature is getting the audience involved by passing out rhythm bones and other musical noise makers and going into the audience. His performances have included a skeleton costume with red fluorescent rhythm bones lit by ultraviolet light, rhythm bones with long red flags attached, juggling rings, limberjack doll, violin, large cue sheets for the audience, skeleton marionette, animal rhythm bones, vegetarian (wood) rhythm bones, and he has given workshops on how to perform like he does. And at a couple of Bones Fests he has put on a shorter performance of his 'Bones Show' that he describes next.

"Now I focus my professional attention on a one-act theatrical presentation titled *Skin and Bones - Hair and Guts*. I define Spike Bones as a 150 theatrical character - part fact - part fiction. This play has allowed me to bring 40 years of boning experience to share with folks in a one hour show. This is my Sunset Show.

"During the last four years, I have been focused on creating a two acre venue called "Bones Camp" sometimes called, "A Poor man's Disneyland. Thank you Mary Lee and Frank Sweet for your visit. You are my witnesses. Originally this camp was to be a venue for my show as a rhythm bones podcast.

"Some of my goals were met, however, the tail was wagging the dog. That is the main reason I've been missing the last two years from these Bones Fests.

"To see a documentary on Bones Camp, A Poor Man's Disneyland go to <https://vimeo.com/214239758>.

"I just purchased my first home and am in the process of closing down Bones Camp. I am simplifying and refocusing my life. I will see you all in Mississippi in May come hail or high water. Looking forward to hearing rhythm bones and your stories."

Spike was interviewed on television recently and promoted the Rhythm Bones Society. Check it out at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PL0o51w-HVCwWsTFDJYp2FeNJ32uZV\\_tc-d4&v=RJjyR-orRuE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PL0o51w-HVCwWsTFDJYp2FeNJ32uZV_tc-d4&v=RJjyR-orRuE)

With such a warm and entertaining personality, it is hard to imagine Spike not on stage or on the streets delighting children and all of us. See you soon, Spike Bones! *Steve Wixson*

## Mary Lee Sweet on Spike Bones

So what do you do on the way back home to Florida when you find yourself near Columbia, Missouri? You call Spike Bones, of course, and invite him to lunch. But he invited us to "Bones Camp!" What an incredible place he created! We saw many of the displays that he has used at Bones Fests. There were also new sights! After the tour, we enjoyed a great lunch together and were on our way. *Mary Lee*

## The Speed of Some RBS Members

The story of Cecil Rivers on the opposite page makes one wonder what are the speeds of some of our fastest members such as Jerry Mescher, Barry Patton, and Bill Vits. The only way I could test this was by using video clips from previous Bones Fests which unfortunately are not their fastest speed since they were playing to live or recorded music. The method was to look at a 1 second clip of triplet rolls with an audio program and manually count the clicks.

The results: Jerry, 8 per second playing solo to Maple Leaf Rag, Bill and Barry, 13 per second.

These numbers suggest Cecil's 18.9 clicks per second is believable, however, hopefully one day we will find out how he obtained that number so we can try to beat it. *Steve Wixson*



## Cecil Rivers



Cecil George Rivers was born on December 13, 1910 at Watersville, Vermont, and died on January 14, 2000 in Portland, Maine following a single car accident. His obituary notes he carried the name of "Mr. Bones," and he was playing rhythm bones and performing right up to the end of his life.

What makes him of interest to rhythm bones players is his claim to be the fastest player in the world, playing 18.9 clicks per second or 1134 per minute. There was mention that this was a Guinness World Record, but no official record has been found.

Cecil lived in Vermont and Massachusetts with his first wife and had two children. Later after marrying his second wife he lived in Moultonboro, New Hampshire and later close-by in Tamworth. There were many step children and step grandchildren, and one of the latter, Beth Barker, was very helpful supplying newspaper articles and calling family members for other stories.

According to his long time next door neighbor, he had an interesting life. When he was a young adult, probably sometime in the late twenties or thirties, he played semi-pro baseball for a team out of Vermont. After that, he spent some time in Alaska and other parts of the country doing construction work.

He was a 'See Bee' in the Navy during

WWII serving in Guadalcanal and the Philippines and was a sharpshooter. He qualified for the 1936 Olympic Shooting team though since Hitler would not let foreigners have a gun in Germany the competition was held in Norway. He had a collection of something like 60 long guns. He was a photographer for a while for a well know historian. He was a registered backcountry and hunting guide in New Hampshire and Maine. He was a carpenter and cabinet maker and later a boat builder, and also had a large collection of axes (his father was a woodsman). Cecil was the kind of guy who, if he decided he liked you, would do darn near anything for you.

In his younger days, he was a drummer, and during the 40' and 50s played in a swing band. His favorite instruments was the banjo that he learn when he was a kid and played professional, however, that stopped 25 years later when he accidentally crushed his hand in a planer. Cecil said, "I was pretty good." He learned to play rhythm bones when he was six years old, and moved to playing them regularly after the banjo accident and when his drums got to be too hard to move around.

His obituary said he was renowned in Washington Valley for his ageless zest, his love for the dance floor and his musical ability. He was a frequent performer with many bands playing rhythm bones, and he was still playing the bones at various country dance halls almost up until the day he died. Cecil loved to tell stories and talk about his experiences.

His stage and dance hall routine went something like this. He would dress up in one of his many outfits and drive some-

times long distances to find a place to play his rhythm bones. When he arrived and there were drums and no drummer, he would play the drums. Bands who knew his skill would invite him to play because the crowd love him.

Cecil said, "I came to play, and if a band wants me to play, I'll play. I go up and tell them I'm better than they are and if there is anyone in the hall who likes to hear me play, they better let me play." If a band didn't think he would fit it, he did not take it personally, and would go back to his table where frequently a pretty young lady would help him on with his vintage sports jacket.

When a band let him play he was most grateful. He had studied the band's playlist and knew what song was coming.

One trait dance hall owners liked is that he would take to the dance floor and get people dancing. There were lots of 'his honeys' that he danced with, however, if they couldn't keep up with him, he would find another.

He readily admitted that his zest for the stage and the dance floor was partly just a search for companionship. After his third wife died he sold his house and bought a trailer. His daytime contact with people was often limited to trips to the post office and with teens who wanted to explore his record collection.

This story of Cecil Rivers is incomplete, and maybe there will be an update in a future issue. One issue is to find the contest where he documented how fast he could play. Another small detail is the identity of the rhythm bones player who play bones at the back of the church at his funeral. *Steve Wixson*



Cecil Rivers playing rhythm bones with The Shifters Band

## The Story of a Pair of Rhythm Bones

This is the story of a pair of Rhythm Bones, circa 1900, played in the trenches by a West Yorkshire soldier in WWI and by his son through WWII

**February 21 2019**

I got the following email from a gentleman in West Yorkshire, England:

“Hi, my name is Stephen Thorp. “I have a pair of very old rhythm bones, circa 1900, which belonged to my grandfather.

“Just wondered if they may be of interest to you or do you know of a collector who may be interested in buying them. I enclose photographs, and look forward to your feedback. Regards, Stephen.”

I engaged in conversation with Stephen and over the next few weeks and I was fascinated, thrilled and humbled by the story that unfolded. I bought the bones from Stephen and I will be putting a tribute video up on my website in the coming months.

Here is the story, mostly told in Stephen’s words, and I hope that people who read it will take a minute to remember Charlie Thorp, his son Jack Noble Thorp, and his grandson Stephen Thorp, and thank Stephen for sharing these precious and amazing memories:

**22 February 2019**

“The bones belonged to my Grandfather, and passed down from his father, and from the tales my father told me they were used to entertain the troops in the first world war.”

**23 February 2019**

“Hi Tom, Thank you for accepting my offer of 35€ for the bones. I am the last surviving member of the Thorp family line and have no-one to pass them on to.

### HISTORY

My grandfather, Charlie Thorp served in the British Army 1914-1918, my Dad told the story of Charlie playing the bones to entertain the troops in the first world war.

My Dad, Jack Noble Thorp, born 1922 served in the British army 1939-1943.

I can remember my Dad trying to play the bones when I was a lad at Christmas and birthday parties, but believe me you wouldn't have wanted him in your band, ha ha.



Unfortunately the ghostly photo of Charlie Thorp is the only remaining photograph of him.

When my Dad died age 86 I became the keeper of the bones. If this little bit of history about the bones does go into the Society magazine I will be thrilled. ‘They should not be forgotten.’ Kind Regards, Stephen.”

I received the bones from Stephen on March 1st. I couldn’t believe I was holding in my hands a pair of bones that had seen two World Wars and been used to entertain troops in the trenches in World War One. I wanted to know more detail of the history, and here is what Stephen wrote:

**March 5 2019**

“Hi Tom, That's great, and here's a bit more information on their history.

My grandfather was Charlie Thorp from Wakefield, West Yorkshire who served in the British Army during the 1st World War. He was in the 1st battalion, K.O.Y.L.I (the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry) 1914-1918. Charlie saw action in Singapore, then the Western front in France, then Salonika Greece.

The bones would have traveled with him, so if they could speak they could tell you a real story of the horrors of war. His and his comrades contribution to the war effort should never be forgotten.

When he finally came home from the war he still entertained people by playing the bones in the local hostelrys and at family gatherings.

Unfortunately Charlie didn't live to a great age, as he passed away at the age of 39. That's when the bones were passed down to my father, Jack Noble Thorp.

Jack served in the British Army R.A.S.C (Royal Army Service Corps) 1939-1943. His rank was Private, Army number T-1070960. 1805 Bailey platoon.

Dad was away from home for 5 years from age 18 to 23 . He served in Italy at the battle of Monte Casino, then North Africa, Holland and Belgium and finally saw the horrors at the liberation of Belsen.

I believe he too had the bones with him during his Army service, even though he was no expert at playing the bones.

It's really hard to believe that a little set of bones could tell such a story.

Please find attached photo of Dad age 86 at his granddaughters wedding with his cap badges and Army medals around the frame (see Page 8). Plus a photo of myself Stephen John Thorp, the last in the line of the Thorp family. Unfortunately dad passed away 10 weeks after this photo was taken.



Jack Thorp in his Army uniform at age 21

Don't know it's of any interest to you , but the story could go on. It's not really relevant to the bones, but I have some letters that my father wrote home during his Army days to his friend back home, that have an interesting twist, as the way I came to have them is quite unbelievable.

Please do use the photo's, I am so happy the story will be told."

Needless to say I could not resist getting back to Stephen and asking him about the story behind the letters written by his dad Jack to a friend back home during World War Two. Here is that story:



Stephen Thorp

### March 8 2018

"Hi Tom, This is the story of Dad's letters.

My Grandfather Charlie Thorp died young, so it left Dad a bit lost without a father to look up to.

Dad started work at the age of 14 and worked for his uncle, Sidney Noble as an apprentice carpenter/ undertaker.

When war broke out and Dad got his call up papers he saw it as a way to get away as he was not happy at the time. 'Out of the frying pan into the fire' as they say. Dad was taken under the wing of an older man called Harry Charlesworth, who was a master cabinet maker. Dad thought the world of Harry, so when Dad went away to war he wrote letters to Harry for 5 years, whenever he got the chance.

When Dad came home at the end of the war in 1945 he got a job at a local firm EMD Parkinson and Son Funeral Directors. He himself then became a funeral director for the next 50 years, until his retirement at the age of 80.

Sadly he lost all touch with his great friend Harry. Fast forward 35 years when Dad got a call from a lady whose husband had just passed away. When Dad went out to arrange the funeral and pick up her husband's body, he was shocked to find out, yes, it was his old pal Harry.

She had no idea at this time who Dad

was. As the funeral arrangements went on, she got to know Dad's name, and she said 'are you the Jack Thorp who used to write to Harry from the Army?' I am said Dad, to which she replied, then I have something for you, she then went upstairs and brought a pile of Dad's letters from Harry's bedside drawer, he had kept them all those years. Then she said I am so pleased that Harry's old pal will be looking after him at this sad time. He would not have wanted it any other way. It was such a shame they couldn't have been reunited in life, rather than after Harry's death.

Dad took the letters home, but never opened or read them again. Then one day about a year before Dad passed away, he told me this story and gave the letters to me. I also did not read them until a few years after his death. They were so lovely to read, but also very upsetting.

If there is such a thing as fate, then this was meant to be. The contents of the letters are not horrific tales, but are of a young man, scared, lonely and far away from home, he just needed a friend.

Dad started dealing with death at the age of 14, and saw unimaginable horrors during the War. And then spent the next 50 years dealing with death and bereavement. He was a kind, caring and compassionate man, who never let anyone down. He had a great sense of humour and a lovely smile. And when he died, I lost my best friend.

I am so pleased I have had the opportunity to tell this story to you, Tom. You are the only person apart from my wife that I have ever told it to. It is something I have wanted to do for a long time. If you do want to know the contents of the letters, I would be more than happy to send you copies of them. If not, I won't be offended, just pleased that you have shown an interest in the story. Regards, Steve."

I found this story touching, sad, joyful and inspiring. Isn't it wonderful that rhythm bones can be instruments for such human connection. Slán go fóill,  
*Tom Connolly*

[Editor Note: Pocket musical instruments like rhythm bones and harmonica have gone to many wars. For another touching WWI music story, search the Internet for WWI and Silent Night.

## Scott Miller on Spike Bones

Spike is an enormously creative and energetic person who has dedicated himself to the ancient art of rattling the bones.

I first met Spike in 2003 at Bones Fest VII in Louisville, Kentucky. His on-stage performance was a big hit with everyone - especially children. After the performance my two young kids met him in the lobby. Spike is a natural entertainer who knows how to make kids laugh.

A few years later we worked together on Bones Fest XII, which was held in 2008 here in Saint Louis. It was Spike's idea to take on the challenge to begin with. About all I did as co-host was arrange for the main venue. Spike did just about everything else.

- He created the BFXII logo.
  - He came up with the "Bones University" theme for the event.
  - He booked a riverboat cruise.
  - He petitioned the Mayor's Office which officially proclaimed October 17 through October 19 as "Bones Fest XII Weekend" in the City of Saint Louis.
  - He coordinated a Bones Fest excursion beginning from our headquarters at the University of Missouri, to the Metro Link train, to Union Station for lunch, then to Soldier's Memorial for an impromptu public bones show.
  - He coordinated the "Grand Bones Fest Show" public performance.
- ...and he did so much more.

Incidentally, Spike even met with the University of Missouri media department, which documented Bones Fest XII - and put it on a DVD that was mailed to each participant.

Oh, and Spike did most the work while living in Columbia, Missouri - a two hour drive from Saint Louis!

We are truly fortunate to have such a creative, resourceful, dedicated, and welcoming member in our group. *Scott Miller*



Spike Bones performing his 'Bones Show' at a Bones Fest



WWI Rhythm Bones - See Page 6



Jack Thorp took those rhythm bones to WWII

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 21, No. 2 2019

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## Executive Director's Column

With the Delta mud barely off my shoes (or Bruno's sandals) and the Blues firmly in my mind, I'm back in the rainy, bug infested world of New England. But the memories of Bones Fest XXIII live long in my consciousness! What an incredible time in the heart of the Delta!

Randy Seppala did an exceptional job organizing the event, and bringing us some of the most incredible musicians, some of whom we have indoctrinated into the rhythm bones world, (that's you Libby Rae Watson)! The Shack Up Inn provided the great atmosphere, and the rhythm bones players delivered, from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Florida,

Washington, DC, Iowa, Connecticut, New Jersey, West Virginia, Tennessee, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, Michigan, New York, and of course Mississippi! I really can't say enough about being in the place the Blues began, and meeting some great and extremely friendly people!

Our performance at the Ground Zero Blues Club was one of our best as the musicians: the Organgrinders, Reverend Robert, Libby Rae Watson did their best to make us sound better, and we did!

Thanks again to Randy who did a spectacular  
(Continued on Page 3)

## Highlights From Bones Fest XXIII

Thanks to all the rhythm bones players who attended Bones Fest XXIII in early May in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Home of the Blues. We had about 35 registered attendees which can be considered a decent number. I did not hear any negative feedback from attendees or from venue providers, so all went well in that respect.

It was music, music, music, right from the beginning on Thursday evening at the hospitality session at the Shack Up Inn Chapel featuring Rev. Robert Reynolds, Libby Rae Watson, Vgo, Bill Vits, Looper, Da Bones Man and all dem rhythm bones players. It is always great to renew old friendships and also to meet new friends. The in house bar furnished needed refreshments and Sasha Montry catering provided some very tasty Hors D'oeuvres for the evening as well as keeping us happy and well fed through the weekend. Much thanks and appreciation to Sasha, and if we ever do another Bones Fest in Clarksdale – she's hired!

Friday morning we got started with another Blues jam at 9:30. At 10:00 Steve Brown presented a great beginner's workshop which drew almost all attendees attention on the back porch. Followed at 11:00 by an enlightening historic presentation by Vgo on Bones and Blues that I understand will become a permanent Rhythm Bones Society video.

Lunch is always a highlight.

At 1:00 Bill Vits, who never fails to inform and entertain did his "Bones Playing with Drums" workshop. More great jamming for the rest of the

afternoon.

At 5:00 Bobby Cook brought his "Live Crawfish Boil" rig in and provided a great Southern feast at a reasonable price available to rhythm bones players and all other Shackers.

The son of the Delta, the one and only "Mississippi Marshall" with his sometimes swampy Blues, added the perfect sound for the boil and more rhythm bones playing opportunities.

Friday evening we move into downtown Clarksdale to Hambone Art and Music Gallery featuring the Hopeless Case Bar for some more  
(Continued on Page 3)



Bones Fest XXIII host, Randy Seppala. BFXIII group photograph on Page 8

## Editorial

Bones Fest XXIII is over and this issue presents highlights from maybe our first targeted Fest, namely the 'Blues Fest.' For the thirty five attendees, host, Randy Seppala, lined up 15 Blues musicians to make this a most fun and memorable Fest. His highlights begin on Page 1.

When the Fest was first announced, there was no graphic or t-shirt yet, so we used a Robert Johnson stamp. Johnson was said to have met the devil at the Crossroad (about 2 miles north of the Shack Up Inn that was our BFXXIII headquarters) where he traded his soul to be the world's greatest guitar player. There is a documentary about him and Blues on YouTube (search for "Robert Johnson", documentary).

There was another major rhythm bones event the same weekend as BFXXIII, namely the All Ireland Bones Championship in Abbeyfeale, Ireland, celebrating the 25th anniversary of that event. The organizers invited RBS to participate and possibly hold a Regional Bones Fest the same weekend. Our Fest host, Randy Seppala, tried to find another weekend for BFXXIII, but Clarksdale had a busy Blues music calendar and he could not change the date.

Three of our members did make the trip, Barry Patton, James Yoshizawa, and Graham Hargrove, and they came in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd in the bones competition. On Page 6, Steve Brown who has won the completion twice and been a judge gives us a history of the event, and this is followed by short summaries from each of the winners. You can read more about Barry by searching for a Page 1 story in the online newsletters.

Jim Lohmann passed away this year. He made high technology rhythm bones. His obituary is on the opposite page.

## Letters to the Editor

GREAT NEWS LETTER. Tom's piece "The Story..." was especially moving for me. *Parker Waite*

I just wanted to update you on Barry Patton. He is leaving May 3 for Ireland and will be playing in the World Cham-

pionship Bones Competition! We are very excited and are looking forward to bringing home the honor for the USA. We will keep you posted with photos and updates! *Rene Patton* [See Page 7]

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Steve Brown, at 2:14 PM at an upstairs room at the Shack Up Inn in Clarksdale, MS, and all members were present except Kenny Wolin. The Secretary and Treasurer's reports were presented and motion made and approved to accept them as printed in the newsletter. The Treasurer's Report and all supporting documentation will be sent to the Executive Director.

Steve Brown called the meeting to order as the Nominating Committee, and all current members were nominated to serve in year 2020.

The location for Bones Fest XXIV was discussed. A telephone call was placed to Kenny Wolin to see if he and Teri would be interested in hosting the Fest on their 10th anniversary. This is a possibility. The Board discussed the significant Bones Fest XXV, and will approach the Cowetts to see if they would like to do it having hosted Bones Fest I, II and VI.

BFXXIII host, Randy Seppala, made signature BFXXIII rhythm bones for sale to attendees, and a motion was made and approved to spend \$30 for a pair for the informal RBS Library.

With assistance from Scott Miller, the late Clif Erwin's daughter gave RBS his remaining cache of finished and unfinished rhythm bones. The Board decided to commemorate Clif by giving them away to attendees with a drawing. [See more in the next issue.]

We approved \$150 to get a big discount for attendees entering Ground Zero Blues Club.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:48 PM. Respectively submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Steve Brown, at 4:35 in the Chapel of the Shack Up Inn. The minutes of the last meeting as printed in the newsletter were approved. The Treasurer, Steve Wixson, gave a brief report noting we had \$7,134 in the bank

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

as of the end of 2018.

The report of the Nominating Committee was presented with Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bit Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin. The floor was open for nominations and there being none a motion was made and approved to elect the nominees by acclamation.

We thanked Randy for hosting BFXXII, and noted he dedicated it to the late Yiridy Machar. A request was made for a volunteer to host BFXXIV.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:58. Respectively submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXIV.** Need a Host. Are you ready to volunteer?

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** October 3-6, 2019, Fremont, NE. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

**(Director Column continued from Page 1)** job producing the Fest, to the Shack Up Inn for providing us the perfect environment for playing rhythm bones, to the community of Clarksdale who welcomed us with open arms, and to each and every attendee who made the event special!

Big news from Abbeyfeale in West Limerick and the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship! For the first time in the 25 year history of the contest, two handed bone players have taken all three top places in the Senior Division! Congratulations to Rhythm Bones Society members Barry Patton from Kansas, who placed first, James Yoshizawa from California placed second, and Graham Hargrove of Stratford, Ontario, Canada placed third. Great job to all of them!

A tentative site has been proposed for next year's Bones Fest XXIV, although we're not ready for a specific announcement, here's a hint, Who's wedding actually took place at a Bones Fest? Update next issue. *Steve Brown*

**(Highlights continued from Page 1)** great music and rhythm bones playing. The Hopeless Case Trio (Rev. Robert, Stan Street & Da Bones Man) kick it off followed by Clarksdale's own Lucious Spiller. The fabulous Organgrinders with Bill Vits on skins are next, and adding Jim Lande and Stan Street on saxophones equals one incredible Blues jam to top off the night.

Saturday morning starts with another awesome breakfast by Sasha, then more Blues music. At 9:30 the Beginner's Workshop continues with Da Bones Man leading the workshop so Steve Brown can start organizing the "Big Show" coming up in the evening.

It's starting to rain now.

At 11:00 Skeffington Flynn presents another great workshop "Rhythm Bones Playing Techniques." After lunch we are treated by a performance by the Organgrinders, my favorite Blues band.

It is now pouring rain, a real Mississippi deluge. More jams and preparation for the evening concert.

The Board meets at 3:00 with a General Membership meeting at 4:30, which closes the day's activities at Shack Up Inn Chapel, certainly the perfect venue for a Bones Fest, or any other like event

for that matter. Shack Up owner Bill is happy and impressed with our festival and our organization and invites us to do it again anytime.

Ground Zero is packed as many Fest attendees dine on the truly Southern cuisine, and curious town's people and tourists crowd in to see what rhythm bones playing is all about?

Shortly after 7:00 begins a fantastic show of "Bones and Blues," but also features the many genres and styles that are applicable to rhythm bones playing. Great job everybody, we opened a lot of eyes and answered a question I've been asked for the last year or more, "What is bones playing anyhow?"

Following the traditional conga line finale, or should I say "Walking Blues" line around Ground Zero, the Organgrinders took over the stage until 12:00, cordially joined by many other musicians to top off an incredible night of music.

Tameal, the night manager of Ground Zero, was all smiles, the club did well, and her concerns about an obscure tradition called rhythm bones playing were dispelled. I'm sure she would be open to hosting us again if it should ever happen. Thanks to Ground Zero for the true Southern hospitality and authentic environment.

Sunday morning, Sasha, our food mother, had breakfast boxes ready for travelers or to eat there and some say good bye as this is officially the end of Bones Fest XXIII.

Most of us however still haven't had enough and head to Bluesberry Café where Blues breakfast happens on Saturday and Sunday from 8:00 to 12:00 and we have the stage from 10:00 to 12:00? More music with Rev. Robert, Libby Rae, Vgo, Ellen and Ginny, Steve Brown, Skeff and more.

I have to call Bones Fest XXIII a success and well worth the effort. Two big highlights for me was seeing a couple of new bones players get it, get with it, and experience the joy of rhythm bones playing. Kate Barfield's animated bones playing and dancing around at every venue was great to see. And my dear friend and sometimes musical partner, Libby Rae Watson, who I have been working on rhythm bones playing with for over a year, "got it" after attending Steve



Libby Rae Watson "got it"

Brown's Beginner's Workshop. This is what it is all about as far as this rhythm bones player is concerned. Thanks again to all attendees and others involved.

Best always, *Randy "Da Bones Man" Seppala*

## Jim Lohmann Obituary

James "Jim" B. Lohmann, was born August 9, 1953, and passed away May 30, 2019.

Jim started Lohmann Woodcarving Company 40 years ago, and specialized in custom architectural and ornamental woodworking. Included among his countless jobs was the restoration of a secretary desk made for the White House, and dozens of decorative pipe screens for organs throughout the world.

I met Jim in 2002 when he got involved in pavilion building project for our community and we made a large wood sign for the building. We started making bones in 2003.

Jim worked for 15 years on perfecting the making of wood rhythm bones on a CNC machine (computerized router). He was always coming up with new jigs and methods for milling bones and pretty much had it perfected where very little sanding was required.

We were partners in the "Dem Bones" enterprise which ceased rhythm bones production in 2017.

Jim attended Bones Fest IX with his daughter, Olivia, who played rhythm bones quite well. Rest in peace dear friend. *Randy "Da Bones Man" Seppala*





Shack Up Inn in the historic Hopson Plantation with sharecropper shacks converted to rooms. See Page 8.



Great breakfasts and lunches on site



Steve Brown's Beginners Workshop showing a few of the attendees



Vgo's Blues History Workshop with Hank Tenenbaum assisting



Bill Vits' Bones and Drum Workshop



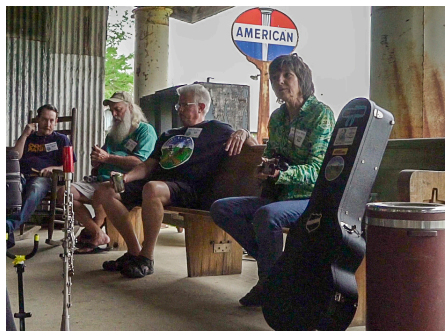
The fabulous crayfish dinner



Hambone with Stan Street, Randy & Rev Robert



Hambone Gallery with Lucious Spiller



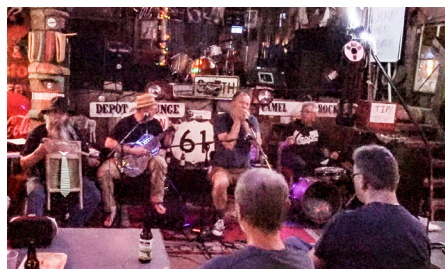
Libby Rae Watson, 2016 MS Blues Musician



Jamming with Mississippi Marshall



Randy Seppala's Beginner's Workshop



Jamming with Rev Robert and Loper



Skeff Flynn's Rhythm Bones Playing Techniques



The photographs below except for the lower right corner are from the Ground Zero Blues Club.  
 Photographs by Mary Lee Sweet and Steve Wixson



Morgan Freeman's Gound Zero Blues Club. We had 2 hours of stage time



Organ Grinders with Jim Lande on sax and Kate Barfield on rhythm bones



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet



Stan Von Hagen



Sharon Mescher



Spike Bones



Ron Bruschi



Blue Hammond



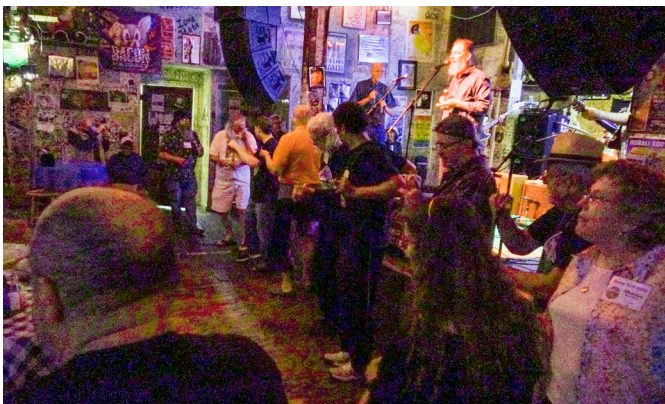
Jim Runner



Dennis Riedesel



Pass-off with Steve Brown, Bruno Giles, Skeff Flynn, & Bill Vits



End of the Grand Finale where all rhythm bones players marched around the customers at Ground Zero Blues Club. Steve Wixson on stage with Looper.



Sunday breakfast at the Bluesberry Cafe with Steve Brown on tin whistle, Jenny Sartain and Ellen Stern on banjo, Vgo and Libby Rae Watson on guitar.



# Abbeyfeale's Fleadh by the Feale Celebrates 25 years

In 1993 the market town of Abbeyfeale, Limerick, located roughly on the border with county Kerry, was offered to host the Limerick Fleadh Ceol (feast of music) which would lead the top finishes to the Munster Fleadh, and eventually to Fleadh Ceol Na Erriennan, where they could compete for the title of All Ireland Champion. The Fleadh, a success, was hosted in Abbeyfeale the following year.

This lead organizers in 1995 to start their own Festival based in Abbeyfeale, and named, *Fleadh by the Feale*. A number of events including competitions for children, master classes, street busking, and concerts were planned, but Dan Murphy, one of the main organizers, felt there was something lacking, something that could distinguish Fleadh by the Feale from the many events that were springing up around Ireland.

Dan, himself a musician and pub owner had brought many musicians to town to play at his pub, The Failte Bar, and was well known in town. Many the session was held at his pub and one particular attendee was Patrick Sport Murphy, a well known rhythm bone player from Ballaugh in Abbeyfeale, who many thought was the best rhythm bones player in Ireland. So it was that the Abbeyfeale Fleadh Committee agreed to host what they called the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship as a part of the *Fleadh by the Feale*.

Initially they contacted the ruling body in Ireland of Fleadh Ceol's, Comhaltas Ceoltori Erriennan to hire a judge, but it became clear that the judge was not too keen on rhythm bone playing in general. The following year they began searching for the most competent of Judges, ones that were well known percussion players, and had some expertise in playing rhythm bones. Those early years saw Seamus O'Kane, Mel Mercier, and Tommy Hayes as judges, all recognized experts in their field.

Too, the early years were primarily a local event, dominated by Patrick Sport Murphy (see online newsletter, Volume 2, No.3), a local family named Kelliher,

and Paddy Donovan, from neighboring Adare. The dominance of 'Sport' was so complete, that after a number of titles in a row, a rule not allowing the champion to compete the following year was instituted. The contest generated a lot of interest locally, and a high degree of participation amongst the bone players in the area, of which there were many. Gradually the swell of competitors began to decrease, and the previous years champion was allowed to compete once more.

In the early 2000's word began to spread amongst bone players in Ireland and other countries that the contest existed, and interest in competing began to swell. So it was that 2003 saw the largest number of competitors, 16, and the largest number of counties of Ireland represented (6), and for the first time international competitors from 5 countries. Also for the first time a competitor from outside Ireland came in first place, displacing Sport Murphy for the first time.

Since that time the contest has seen various changes. Sport Murphy retired from competition. His protégé David Murphy went on to win 5 titles, including the Sport Murphy Cup in 2013. There have been lean years with fewer competitors, and regular interest from outside of Ireland, and from the various counties. Junior Davey of County Sligo has won two championship titles.

The Fleadh organizing committee intends to make every effort to continue the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship into the future and to continue to encourage both native Irish players, and international players to come and compete. The festival funding sources have unfortunately decreased in recent years, and one hopes that additional funding sources will eventually be located and allow the Fleadh and the contest it's self to continue. It truly is perhaps the most competitive rhythm bone playing contest in the world with the highest standard of playing. So if your ready to give it a try contact the Fleadh committee through the web site [fleadhbythefeale.com](http://fleadhbythefeale.com) and give it a go! The music is excellent, and the people are welcoming and friendly. And even if you don't win, you'll have the time of your life!

Over the years, the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter has included many stories about the All Ireland Bones Com-

petition including personal stories and the names of winners. Search our online newsletters using "Abbeyfeale".

In 2019, the 25th Fleadh, all three top finishers were from outside of Ireland, Barry Paton from Kansas took first place, James Yoshizawa from California took second, and Graham Hargrove from Canada took third, a far cry from when the Championship was primarily a local event. It should also be noted that this was the first time that two handed bones players took all three places. What follows is the personal stories from these three winners who are all members of the Rhythm Bones Society. *Steve Brown*

## Barry Patton

[Editor's Note. Fans of bluegrass and traditional music have long known of Barry 'Bones' Patton's skill in playing rhythm bones. For more information go to the story about him in our online newsletter, Volume 9, No.1, and search for him on YouTube.]

This was my first trip to Ireland as well as my first competition. I was excited to be a part of such an event.

Competitors drew numbers to determine the performance order. Each contestant had to play one jig, one reel and one song of their choice from a selection of polkas, marches, jigs or other genres. We were judged based on performance style, how well we kept a beat, rhythm and other factors.

After they start the first jig, you relax and start thinking, I've heard these songs before.

The contest was on the last day of the festival, although there was plenty of rhythm bones playing in the days leading up.

The festival days were declared a bank holiday for the town. People came from all over to jam in the pubs and drink Guinness. At times, there were five or six rhythm bones competition contestants in one pub, taking turns on their instruments.

By the time you're ready to compete, you know almost everyone you're playing with. I made many new friends including Graham Hargrove and James Yoshizawa, both of whom play 'two fisted' and exceptionally well.

The whole experience was amazing! Ireland is a country where rhythm bones are considered to be a very prestigious



2019 Fleadh by the Feale from the left, Barry Patton, Graham Hargrove and James Yoshizawa

instrument and to be able to play them well is considered quite an accomplishment.

I feel blessed to have won, although the judge could have chosen anyone and it would have been fine. I learned to play at the age of 13 from Cecil Hiatt, who wanted someone to carry on the rhythm bones playing tradition. (see online newsletter, Volume 5, No. 3, Page 5)

It brought a tear to my eye, when the judge said I carried a rhythm better than any rhythm bones player he's seen. That felt really good.

As the winner, I received a cash prize of 300 Irish pounds (about \$427 in U.S. dollars) and a foot-tall Waterford crystal vase. I am also the first recipient of a perpetual plaque that will go to the winner every year, with my name the first to be engraved on it. *Barry Patton*

#### **James Yoshizawa**

[Editor's Note. For more about James, go to his website, [jamesyoshizawa.com/bio](http://jamesyoshizawa.com/bio), and search for him on Youtube.]

When I arrived in Abbeyfeale, I was warmly greeted by Martin O'Donoghue, one of the *Fleadh by the Feale* coordinators. Martin then introduced me to bones legend Dave Murphy at a local pub where I also met many of the musicians I would be playing with throughout my stay in Abbeyfeale. The pubs were buzzing with the energy from the sessions that went on all night, every night during the fleadh. I remember finally getting to meet fellow competitor Graham Hargrove — who I had only known from online interactions — in person at my first session in Abbeyfeale where we sat, side-by-side, trading musical ideas on rhythm bones and bodhran.

One of the highlights of my trip was when Dave Murphy organized a session just a few hours before the All-Ireland Bones Competition and invited all of the rhythm bones competitors to join.

Graham, Dave, Barry Patton, some of the local competitors and I all traded off on rhythm bones for hours in a small, packed pub. It can be rare to find more than one serious rhythm bones player in any given town, so to have some of the best from around the world all playing in the same session, sharing ideas and cheering each other on, was a uniquely beautiful experience.

The competition was held on the final night of the Fleadh on an outdoor stage in the town square. Everyone played beautifully. Afterwards, we returned to the same pub and continued playing until 2am.

There was no egos or competitive rivalries in the competition — just comradely, support for one another, and a shared joy for making music on this unique, little instrument.

Bravo to *Fleadh by the Feale* for keeping the tradition of this competition alive! *James Yoshizawa*, 2nd Place All-Ireland Bones Competition, Los Angeles, CA

#### **Graham Hargrove**

[Editor's Note. Graham tell us a bit about himself below and check him out on Youtube.]

My name is Graham Hargrove, I've spent a lifetime playing music, but am new-ish to rhythm bones. I've been playing them for a little over 7 years. I live near Stratford, Ontario, Canada and make my living as a freelance percussionist. Until recently I hadn't met other rhythm bones players; I have stolen from the best of them through the wonders of youtube. Amazing time in which to learn! As it turns out, the language of rhythm bones has worked its way into almost every gig I do: chamber music, theatre pit orchestras, World music ensembles, Celtic, folk, pop...it has this way of being appropriate across every era and style of music.

I made my first pilgrimage to Abbeyfeale in 2017 for the All Ireland Bones Competition. The legendary David Murphy was the first rhythm bones player I met there (or anywhere! I live in the boonies). I spent many great hours over the next couple of days trading sets in blistering fast pub sessions with him. Amazing times! David has the most elegant right hand in bones playing, and he is really a cornerstone of the West Limerick style. Cathy Jordan of Der-

vish was the judge of the competition that year, and I was delighted to come second. Great fun to bring the double handed style to the Irish, thanks Steve Brown for beginning that tradition many years earlier!

This year I was able to duck out of my day job for a week (playing percussion with the Stratford Festival production of *Little Shop of Horrors* this season! Fun gig...) and get back to the *Fleadh by the Feale*, which is a grand weekend in Abbeyfeale of music and revelries that culminates in the All Ireland Senior Bones Competition. Already lots of old friends to see in Abbeyfeale, so it was great to be back. Pat Quille, who is an organizer of the Fleadh, had generously arranged the overseas bones competitors to stay as guests at a lovely B and B a mile or so up the road from the town, so the morning after I arrived I was having breakfast with Barry 'Bones' Patton and James Yoshizawa. I was already a fan of their work from youtube, so it was terrific to meet them both and we subsequently spent many great hours trading sets in pubs, along with David Murphy and some of the other fantastic local bones players. James and I played some bodhran when not on the bones — terrific jamming all in all.

So by Monday night we were all great friends. The competition itself is a pretty small affair — 15 competitors in total I think this year, some local and some from other counties in Ireland. One competitor from Italy and one from England, in addition to my American friends and myself. Some of the young Irish players are great — the one handed style is intricate and beautiful. And all of us two handers from overseas had our own take on accompanying Irish music, which must have gone over all right! The competition judged by the legendary bodhran and rhythm bones player Johnny "Ringo" McDonagh. Grand fun and we all played a couple more pub sessions that night to celebrate and hang out with new friends.

It was a great weekend to be in Abbeyfeale, and I will look forward to returning in future. Though next on the list is the Bones Fest in DC next year if I can make it down! Looking forward to meeting my American bones friends and sharing some music. *Graham Hargrove*



Bones Fest XXIII Group Photograph in the main section of the Shack Up Inn. From the left below, Jenny Sartain, Frank Sweet, Jennifer Brown, Steve Brown (on chair), Jeremy Brown, Ellen Stern, Dennis Riedesel, Jim Landy, Bruno Giles, Skeff Flynn, Libby Rae Watson, host Randy Seppala, Pat LaBree, Vgo Terry, Mary Lee Sweet, Steve Wixson and Hank Tenenbaum. On stage, Jim Runner, Erik Bynum, Sharon Mescher, Ron and Marie Bruschi, Heidi Hess-Bynum, Hallie Joy, Donald Joy, Sam Foster (friend of Von Hagens), Jean and Stan Von Hagen, Spike Bones, Jill and Ted Ramsaur. Not shown are Kate Barfield, Blue Hammond and Bill Vits.

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 21, No. 3 2019

## In This Issue:

Dave Boyles,  
a.k.a., *Black Bart*

Hans Weehui-  
zen: *Dutch Bones  
Player*

Clif Erwin's  
Daughter Donates  
*Rhythm Bones*

Jean Mehaffey  
Obituary

Victor Albert  
Passes

## Columns:

Executive Director

Editorial

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Editor

Bones Calendar

## Executive Director's Column

Our issue this month focuses on four members, two of whom have passed away. Cliff Erwin was a legendary rhythm bones maker and player all the way out on the west coast. Though I never met him his story and dedication to the William Sidney Mount painting, the bone player, is fascinating.

I met Jean Mehaffy at Avoca in 2002. Her playing was articulate, and geared toward blue grass, which she played often. I was surprised that someone I had never heard of could play so well. Over the years she never made a bones fest, but contributed to our Newsletter, and continued to play at a high level, as evidenced by the video's posted on YouTube.

Dave Boyles has been a corner stone of the RBS since he and Spike Bones held a "bone off" contest at Russ Myers house at Bones Fest III. David has lead an amazing rich life, and you will see how rhythm bones have gotten him in some pretty dramatic spots with Symphony Orchestra's, and in the middle of the Milwaukee Irish Festival. His Bones Fest in 2007 was a whirlwind of rhythm bone playing performance, culminating at the aforementioned Irish Festival. I think you will enjoy hearing the details of his life, and we wish him well in the future.

(Continued on Page 2)

## Dave Boyles, alas, *Black Bart*

Everybody has a story. This is mine. We go way back. My family is from Northern Ireland, coming to America sometime in the early 1770s. My great-grandpa Charlie made it to Georgia and then to West Virginia where they settled in for awhile. I grew up in Toledo, Ohio, and moved to Wisconsin for work as a sales representative. I turned down a transfer opportunity and became a tried-and-true Badger. I loved Wisconsin and didn't want to leave. I built my house in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, in 1976 and became a long-time resident.

I'm proud that I started the first high school soccer team program in Cedarburg. I'm proud also of my 25-year tenure with the city's commission that oversees parks and pools and I am an active member in our Rotary. I found success as a director of advertising and as a senior account executive in an advertising agency. My last real adventure was starting a millwork business with a friend. Just about lost our ass the first year but pulled it out so now it's a successful business that I retired from. Those are things I did to make a living so I could do what I love doing - making music.

In high school my instrument was the upright bass. Today, it's rhythm bones introduced to me by my father when I was 30. He had forgotten all about them until I asked him "What were you doing when you rattled some sticks together?" "Why that's playing the bones" he said. He showed me the basic triplets with a couple wood slats then made me a pair from some old hickory-- warped them in water,

then varnished them. I almost got obsessed by "the bones." I went to the library to find out all I could and then started making bones out of real bone.

I read a lot about the implements and began practicing with them to radio music while driving to sales appointments.

I soon learned how various sizes and weights of the bones produced different sounds and eventually began sanding and polishing my own  
(Continued on Page 4)



Dave Boyles Performing at Bones Fest X (Photo by Ballard)

## Editorial

We first met Dave Boyles at Bones Fest III where he became a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society. He challenged Spike Bones (profiled in the Vol 21, No 1 issue) to a 'Bone-Off' contest (photograph below), and after a long back and forth struggle it ended in a tie. He tells us about his obsession with rhythm bones starting on Page 1.

Hans Weehuizen has been a RBS member from almost our beginning. Not only a rhythm bones player, he makes rhythm bones and teaches how to play them at numerous adult and children's workshops. He has contributed articles to our newsletter and attended Bones Fest X in New Bedford noting it was an eye opener seeing so many rhythm bones players as there are not so many now in the Netherlands. Read his story on Page 6.

I met Jean Mehaffey at the National Traditional Country Music Festival when it was held in Avoca, IA. I later met her at her favorite festival, the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, KS. Jean was a really good rhythm bones player. She recently passed and you can read a bit about her on Page 3.

The late Clif Erwin was a rhythm bones player and maker who lived in the state of Washington. Most of us never got to meet him, but he was good at what he did and we heard about him.

With the assistance of Scott Miller, the late Cliff Erwin's daughter, Karen Virta, gave the RBS his remaining cache of finished and unfinished bones. The board decided to commemorate Cliff by giving them away to attendees via a drawing at Bones Fest XXIII. RBS and all attendees were honored that that Karen chose us as stewards of her father's legacy. A letter from her follows.

## Letter to the Editor

Hi Steve Brown and Skeff Flynn. Thank you for writing the article on my father, Clif Erwin's, rhythm bones. I am very happy to hear that people who are carrying on the bone playing tradition will be able to enjoy my father's work. It was such an important part of his life. Thank you for helping honor his memory. *Karen Virta* [See a story on Page 7 and a

photograph of Karen and her father on Page 8. There is a low quality video of Clif playing rhythm bones on our website at <http://rhythmbones.org/ClifErvinVideo.html>.]

### (Continued from Page 1)

Hans Weehuizen is our man in Holland, and so happy we are to have a man in Holland. He attended Bones Fest X in New Bedford, and has contributed to the newsletter on occasion. His connection to the Shanty men of England is fascinating and will get you dredging up those Shanty songs we have all heard Kenny Wolin and Tim Riley singing and playing rhythm bones to at Bones Fests.

But here's the point: this issue is about our members, our community, wide and varied in substance, and spread out around the country and the world, just like rhythm bones! We are made up of many stories just like these, for each member we have a story, intertwining their life, music, and rhythm bones all at the heart of it. It's what makes our organization so unique that each person brings their life to rhythm bones, whether you come to a Bones Fest (and I hope you do) or not like Jean Mehaffey, whether you rise to the heights of rhythm bone playing with Orchestra's like Dave Boyles, or whether you come from Holland like Hans Weehuizen, you can bring who you are to rhythm bones, our organization, and enrich the lives of our members.

Bones Fest XXIV is starting to shape up for the Washington, DC area, and Kenny and Teri are at the heart of it! At the heart of it, I say, because Kenny and Teri met at a Bones Fest and were married at a Bones Fest! I'm hoping you are all planning on attending, who knows you could find your future wife or husband! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Calendar

**Rhythm Bones Workshop: Basics and Beyond** with Bill Vits and Steve Brown, October 12, 2019, 11:30 AM to 1:00 PM, Common Street Spiritual Center, 13 Common Street, Natick, MA. Workshop Fee \$15.

This workshop will start with the basics of how to play rhythm bones, including holding, making the basic sounds, and how to shape the sounds to

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

music. Playing to various styles will be discussed and demonstrated. Advanced techniques will be introduced, and demonstrated. Teaching rhythm bones will be provided for those without!

Workshop Leaders

Bill Vits

Introduced to rhythm bones by Percy Danforth, Bill is the Principal Percussionist with the Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra, and has over 40 years of experience playing rhythm bones. He is Assistant Director of the Rhythm Bones Society and has taught playing rhythm bones in schools and workshops for many years.

Steve Brown

Also introduced to rhythm bones by Percy Danforth, Steve is a two time All Ireland Bone Playing Champion, and Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society. He has taught rhythm bone playing at numerous workshops around the United States and Ireland.



# Jean Mehaffey Obituary



Mary Lee Sweet informed us that member Jean Mehaffey passed away. Not many of us knew her as she never attend a Bones Fest, however she was a contributor to our newsletter (see below). The following was excerpted from her formal obituary.

“Jean Rae Mehaffey, born August 1, 1942, in Atlantic, Iowa, also known as “the Sawyer” or “Bones” passed away Wednesday, August 21, 2019, at the age of 77, in Homosassa, FL. Jean’s early years were spent in Advance, Missouri, and Bellevue and Omaha, Nebraska, before returning to Atlantic, Iowa. She attended school through 8th grade in one of the last one room country schoolhouses in Iowa, before going on to Atlantic High School.

“While growing up on the farm west of Atlantic, Iowa, she played softball with the Marne Girls Softball team. She took her love of softball everywhere from nursing training, to Omaha where her team participated in the 1964 Nationals, to the hospital team in America Samoa that qualified for the South Pacific Games. She would continue to play softball until age 35 when she started coaching the sport.

“Jean graduated from Nursing. She completed her nurse anesthesia course, earning her CRNA certificate. She continued her career as a CRNA in several states as well as in Pongo Pongo, Amer-

ican Samoa, and the Lake Hospital in Yellowstone Park. At age 65 she retired from anesthesiology and worked part time as an RN before fully retiring. Her love of travel took her to 33 countries as well as most of the USA.

“Her passion for Bluegrass music led to expertise in playing rhythm bones and the saw. She placed third in the World’s Bones competition in 1996. She traveled to the Winfield, KS, Bluegrass Festival where she was a member of the Carp Camp Jammers, and played with the Just In Time Old Time Band in Florida.

“Other hobbies she enjoyed were orchids, quilting, and genealogy.

“In her memory, she would be so pleased if you would pick up an instrument, attend a music festival, or make a donation to a musical youth organization.”

Several RBS members met Jean at the NTCMA festival when it was held in Avoca, Iowa, and Steve Wixson met her again at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. She was a great rhythm bones player as Scott Miller shows us in the following Youtube videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-CkEwsnAEjM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOQibXW3OGQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGwigOKxEXg>

Several years ago Jean sent the following letter about herself.

“In 1976, I attended a music festival, an old timer played rhythm bones and I said, “that’s for me!” Then an old lady played the musical saw and I said, “that’s for me!” I proceeded to find a little booklet that had instructions for rhythm bones and the saw, a few pages each, and taught myself how to play both. I have continued to play both for all the years since then.

“I have garnered 3 Florida State Old Time Music Championship wins and a third at the National Traditional Country Music contest in Iowa. Don’t do contests any more, don’t perform on stage, and teach only if someone is interested in my style of play, mostly at festivals.

“Additional information on my rhythm bones. They are made of Ziricote, about 9 inches long and have a slight curve. They are maybe an inch wide. I play two

handed but always play one hand off the other, never together. That comes from teaching myself from a book! By the time I first played in public I had people telling me I should do it their way, but all I could say was, ‘it’s too late now to change!

“I mainly attend bluegrass festivals here in Florida, and my all time favorite, the big Walnut Valley Festival at Winfield, Kansas. It’s in it’s 48th year and I’ve probably made 35 of them (the numbers are updated from the original letter)!



“I have a neat idea with pictures for an additional story about bones in the Civil War. If you are interested, let me know.”

Jean’s article titled, “Rhythm Bones in a Civil War Prison Camp,” appeared in the Rhythm Bones Player, Vol 15, No 4. A Letter to the Editor about rhythm bones in a WWI prison camp was in the Vol 16, No 2 issue. Search the online newsletters to read.

There are a wide variety of camps at the Walnut Valley Festival, from a single tent to very elaborate combinations of RVs and other equipment. To see Jean and Carp Camp check out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCQbsfxbqcE> (Jean at 1:30 minutes into the video).

(Continued from Page 1)  
sets. Later, artist Nick Lakin, a long-time friend who lives in Winona, Minnesota, began adding delicate scrimshawing for a fancier look. The biggest issue was sourcing the bones from slaughter houses and meat stores. I would go into butcher shops and play the bones and sing along. Usually this got a smile and an agreement to save raw bones for me.

Enter another obscure instrument, a Cajun washboard which I play with Lisa Edgar and Razzamatazz (see photograph on Page 1). It hangs on my shoulders, and I make my own brushes out of bicycle spokes. I stick a tambourine on my shoe and a cymbal on the rim of the washboard then sing harmony. Somehow, it all comes together. Check them out in a Youtube video that includes a rhythm bones solo (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4yDyiPSqJw>). The new sound fits in with the Dixieland groups I play with around southeastern Wisconsin. We play so many venues because we are so unusual.

Although I've had "day jobs" in manufacturing and advertising, the music provided my fun. It's still great therapy.

I've been playing and making my own sets of bones for more than 30 years. I even passed along some of my highly-polished bone sets to such Irish musical groups as Altan and performers like country-western star Ricky Skaggs.

I have made about 250 sets of bones. Some with scrimshaw I register in a book that I keep in my home. It takes a long time to clean, boil, sort, bleach, sand and polish a group of bones. I tie the bones together with a short piece of leather string at the top of the bones where I have drilled a hole. This is not common with bones players. But I don't know why because if you lose one of your favorite bones you cannot make noise with one! You're really in trouble then.

### **Black Bart Character Developed**

I developed the character of Black Bart for some of my appearances after writing my own version of some of the legendary 1892 Alaska Gold Rush characters. My thought was to give rhythm bones a personality.

I figured that anybody could make rhythm bones out of anything, and I wanted my rhythm bones, my process to

be special. So I wrote the story The Legend of Black Bart and a "how to" piece to make my bones unique.

I first went to some old-time music festivals as my character, Black Bart, and dressed accordingly to see if any-



body had an interest. I set up my leather covered table to display the bones and posted some blow ups of gold-searching characters. As people walked by I would say "Did you ever see a bones player?" When they stopped I would tell them about rhythm bones and then show them how to play them. I felt a little silly at first, but by the afternoon I sold 20 pair of rhythm bones and had lots of fun playing the bones with some seedy bluegrass musicians by the fire at day's end. I have sold lots of pairs of the Original Black Bart bones over the years. Little did I know that my imagination would lead me to the Rhythm Bones Society and all that it now encompasses!

After moving to Cedarburg, I became good friends with a local Irish-born pub owner, Finbar McCarthy, who moved to our area directly from Dublin, Ireland. I regularly played at Finbar's Auld Sod, a kickback country bar that attracts visitors from around Milwaukee's north shore and beyond. They bring up their friends from Chicago, which led to more playing of traditional Irish music. I had to step back a bit. The Irish whiskey and Guinness was bad for the liver. This was



my Irish connection. I visited Ireland with the MacCarthy clan, 5 trips. Each trip full of fun and music.

In fact, when Peg and I got married 28 years ago we left our party that day for Ireland. No reservations just drove the coast then finally ended the trip in Dublin visiting the MacCarthy family and the sites of Dublin. What a wonderful trip.

I have been featured with the University of Wisconsin marching concert band when they came to Cedarburg. I played "Sweet Georgia Brown" with them. I play regularly with the dixieland group, Lisa Edgar and Razzamatazz (check out a review of their CD in newsletter, Vol 6, No 4), with Pike Creek Bluegrass Band, and at Irish Fest with Finbar McCarthy

The Lisa band plays lots of private parties and at the local casino Potawatomi during Mardi Gras. One of the greatest gigs was playing on the Circus Train when it delivered the antique circus wagons to Milwaukee for the greatest circus parade in the country. We met Ernie Borgnine there. He was the grand marshal. No more parades now.

I took three trips to New Orleans with my church group to clear out water-logged houses damaged so extensively by hurricane Katrina. I got to sit in with a Dixie group on the weekend break. You can't do better than that.

I am Professor Bones when I teach a class in rhythm bones playing at the Milwaukee Irish Fest Summer School. As a rhythm bones teacher, I saw the need to write a brochure titled "Responsibilities of a Bone Player." This was reprinted in the newsletter, Vol 4, No 4.



In 1999, a group of rhythm bones players met in Brightwood, Virginia, for what was called Bones Fest III. About 35 people showed up between 25 and 85 years old and each had a chance to tell



their story about rhythm bones. There we launched the Rhythm Bones Society. I had a contest with Spike Bones that we called a Bone-off. I believe it was a tie.



With member Don Gilmore, we hosted Bones Fest XI at the Riveredge Nature Center in Newburg, Wisconsin, one of the nicest venues for any Bones Fest. Lisa Edgar and Razzamatazz was our backup band shown below with the Mescher Trio.

and on Friday, December 17, 2004, I got my wish when the MSO came to Cedarburg for a holiday concert at the Performing Arts Center. I did not want to play to an upbeat tune like "Sweet Georgia." I wanted to represent the bones at a high level. The only tune that fit for me was "Parade of the Wooden Soldier." Have to say I was great...got a standing ovation. They have asked me to do this again. I said no, I cannot be that perfect again. It was a success and I wrote about it in the newsletter, Vol 8, No 2. There are good bones players and good washboard players. I wanted to be the best washboard/bones player.

There have been numerous news articles on my rhythm bones performances (Cedarburg News Graphic, Milwaukee

cal Traditions:

*I am sad to say that Black Bart is failing in health and finds it necessary to fade off into the sunset. I will not be able to supply you in the future with my unique style of the "Original Black Bart Bones." I sold you the first rhythm bones when Deborah Brower was there back in 1991, and I got to visit your shop once on my way to the first Rhythm Bones Society formation down in Brightwood, VA, in the fall of 1999.*

*You had a display in the park there close by and I got to teach folks there how to play rhythm bones. Well, I have made lots of rhythm bones since and sent them all over including Ireland.*

*And including some real nice scrimshawed bones that I numbered and have*



In addition to normal Bones Fest activities (see Vol 9, No 3), we arranged for two hours of stage time at Irish Fest and exposed the audience to the many styles of rhythm bones playing while having a whale of a good time ourselves.

I had a dream for many years. I wanted to play with the Milwaukee Symphony,

Journal Sentinal, American Post, etc.), but I really appreciated the story in the slick paper magazine, Milwaukee Lifestyle Northshore, where I made the cover as well as a story with another good photograph.

I close with a letter to David Eisner and the great gang at The House of Musi-

*listed in my book. Yes, a pair especially for David Eisner with #23 and Don Mattingly's name, David's favorite all time baseball player!*

*I will pass a box along to my kids with the notes, letter, etc., and some real nice scrimshawed bones. They can decide what to do with the remains of Black Bart. He was a hell of a guy...didn't hurt anybody and boy did he have rhythm.*

*I will follow up this letter with the name of a good bones maker that can keep you supplied. [Editor Note. The new supplier will be Steve Brown.]*

One thing is a constant, though, through all the things I've done, I've always stayed close to music, and I have taken rhythm bones far beyond its folk roots. Playing rhythm bones whether you play them good or bad, just playing them is good therapy. It allows you to not think seriously about anything else as you get lost in the rhythm. David E. Boyles, a.k.a., Black Bart



# Hans Weehuizen “Dutch Bones Player”

I was born in 1945 in Amsterdam, and attended middle class schools. After my school time I always worked in sales jobs: selling and rent out plastic flowers, renting out towel machines, selling furniture, and 17 years as commercial director for a cleaning service company

The last 32 years working for a wholesaler in watersport products with the last 10 years working as export manager, and still working in that job.



25 years ago, by accident I came in contact with a shanty choir “De Compagnie Zangers “ from the town Medemblik, Netherlands. For many years I was very active in this choir with singing and also active in organizing Festivals.

In that period I came in contact with the “Bones.” During shanty Festivals in the U.K. I met “Shanty Jack “ (Pete Hayselden). Pete was organizer of a lot of Festivals in the U.K. and is still a perfect rhythm bones player.

For me he was the first singer I saw who was singing and playing rhythm bones at the same moment.

I was very fascinated by this combination, so Pete became my teacher and the producer for my first pair of rhythm bones (still my favorite rhythm bones ).

Shanty Jack (Pete Hayselden) learnt his rhythm bones playing from Erik Ilott (The Bristol Shantyman - read about Erik in newsletter, Vol 13, No 1).

Pete and I are still very good friends and sometimes we performing together with Sea Songs and rhythm bones, big fun to do !!

During the Festivals, people ask me many times “How do you do that with the Bones ? “ (Kleppers in Dutch)

That’s when I began to produce rhythm bones with my friend Rik Homan (also rhythm bones player) from then the workshops “How To Play The Bones” started.

We have never counted how many pairs we have made in the last 15 years, but it is a lot.

We always produce rhythm bones from “Wenge” (panga-panga wood, Dutch name). This is because Rik Homan is owner of a small classic boat shipyard and uses Wenge wood. There are always lefts over for making rhythm bones.

Beside the basic workshops for adults, shown below with Pete Hayselden, we



have done in the last years more and more workshops for schools, sometimes with classes of 30 young children, and also big fun to do, but not simple.

In the meantime we have given the last 2 years Bones Workshops to 6 classes in the age of 7 years till 10 years “difficult ages“

I am always interested in the experience of other rhythm bones players who have given Workshops to children. Please let me know!

These workshops in the U.K., I do

this with my good friend Peter Elliston from England. Peter was many years ago one of my students during an adult rhythm bones workshop. Now he is a better rhythm bones player than myself.

For all the Children Bones



Workshops Peter Elliston produced the children rhythm bones.

After the workshops, the children can keep the rhythm bones and can practicing at home (and can make the rest of the family crazy)

I’m also active with my own shanty group “ENKHUIZEN 3 “and in every meeting I perform using rhythm bones for 1 or 2 songs.

I hope to go on for many years with my workshops “How To Play The Bones,“ and hopefully I can visit once again one of the Bones Fest in the U.S.A.

Many years ago I was attended the Bones Fest in Massachusetts and that was big fun!!

On my website: “<http://www.howto-playthebones.com>” you can see how I make the combination of singing and playing rhythm bones. [Editor Note: Visit this website as Hans presents ‘How to Play the Bones’ as well as his ‘How to Play the Bones Workshops,’ how he makes his rhythm bones (he is a bit unique as he bends his rhythm bones



into a curve), shows the types of rhythm bones he makes, and includes links one of which is to RBS.]

Sorry for my Mickey Mouse “English.” With best regards, *Hans Weehuizen*



# Clif Erwin's Daughter Donates Rhythm Bones

Some number of years ago we had heard of a rhythm bones maker and player out on the West Coast who had been making bones for many years, some of which were designed to look like the bones in the William Sidney Mount painting, *The Bone Player*. This was both intriguing and fascinating. Intriguing because we had found another bone player who seemingly had slipped under the radar and had

been playing for some time. Fascinating because the bones pictured in the bone player had become somewhat of an iconic shape,

and were revered as one of the great documentations of rhythm bone playing in America. Unfortunately, Clif would pass away before he was able to attend a Bones Fest, and before I was able to meet this interesting man.

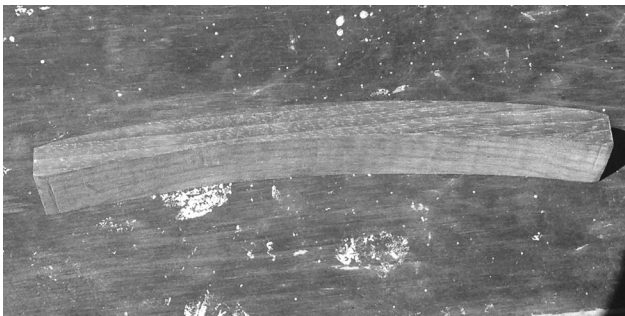
Several of our members had contact with Clif, Scott Miller for one, and Dom Flemons, who was first taught the basics by Clif Ervin. Some time after Clif's passing the RBS was contacted by Scott Miller who had been approached by Clif Ervin's daughter, Karen Virta, about donating the remaining pairs of rhythm bones she had of Clif's collection, including a number of unfinished pairs (see her letter on Page 2 and a photograph of Karen and her father on Page 8).

Last May, the Board decided to distribute the rhythm bones to members in attendance at Bones Fest (see pictures else where in this issue) and to give the unfinished bones to two bones makers at

the Fest. A lottery of sorts was held during Bones Fest XXIII, and Stan Von Hagen was the winner and got to select first (see photograph on Page 8)

I was one of those bones makers who was given several pairs of the unfinished bones, and below is a description of the process I used to finish them.

The first picture shows a pre-cut bone as they were given to us. The wood is unknown, but the bone shape is clearly visible. Clif's rhythm bones were much thicker than rhythm bones I make, and rather than try and duplicate what he did, I decided to take another approach. Perhaps my Yankee nature that can't stand



wasting or throwing anything away (you should see my basement) gave me the idea that I could literally

cut the rhythm bones in half, and double my production. I have experimented with very thin rhythm bones in the past with some success. So I first tried tracing a bone line down the middle, but it didn't work as well as I had hoped, so I began putting dots in the middle of the piece,

being careful to put each dot squarely in the middle.

Next I used a band saw to saw the piece in half (see picture 2). Next I started sanding with a very low grit sand paper, and started to removed all the saw marks and smooth it out.



Once that was done, I started moving up in grit from 80, to 120, all the way to 600 grit. Picture 3 on Page 8 shows the rhythm bones sanded to 120.

After reaching the 600 grit, I took them in the shop and buffed them on a buffing wheel, first using Tripoli brown, and then white jewelers abrasive, to bring

out the nature grain and add some luster. Picture 4 on Page 8 shows the rhythm bones after being buffed. They are quite thin and yet still have a decent resonance, especially for small groups, and people with sensitive ears! Thanks so much for giving me this opportunity, it was fun!

## Victor Albert Passes

Victor Albert of Leominster, Ma., 94 yrs old passed away last week surrounded by his family and friends. Victor was an accomplished French Canadian Fiddler who played at both of the Bones Fests I sponsored. Victor was a frequent participant in the many fiddle contests held around New England in the 70's and 80's. His many awards included the Fiddle and Step Dance Contest in Waltham, -Ma. He was well known in traditional music circles in the area, played harmonica as well as fiddle, and his step dancing at the Fiddle and Step Dance competition in Leominster brought down the house.

In 2001 Victor braved torrential rain to play at the Friday night festivities at Bones Fest V. In 2013, at 88, his daughter assisted him in attending Bones Fest XIX in Leominster, and playing with Bob Goulet's band for a very enthusiastic audience at the Franco American Club.



He was a friend of rhythm bones who encouraged me in my early days, always friendly and compassionate, he will be missed, rest in peace my friend. *Steve Brown*



Top: Clif Erwin on right with his daughter Karen Virta. Bottom: Stan Von Hagen, left, won a set of Clif's bones. Story on Page 7.



Hans Weehuizen leading a childrens' rhythm bones workshop. Story on Page 6.



Made by Steve Brown from Clif's wood, left unfinished, right finished. Story on Page 7.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 21, No. 4 2019

*In This Issue:*  
*Sandor Slomovits*

*Profile of Skeffington Flynn*

*How to Compete in the All Ireland Bones Competition*

*Columns:*

*Executive Director*

*Editorial*

## Executive Director's Column

This month's newsletter has given me an opportunity to share my thoughts on going to Ireland and competing at the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, something I've been interested in doing for some time. I first heard about the Championship from an article by Mel Mercier in this very Newsletter. The video tape I so carefully scrutinized in 2002 was originally purchased by RBS, and lent to a number of members. RBS has been a great support and inspiration to me, and I hope to all of it's members. From one article grew the inspiration to travel to Ireland, and from that one time, I have returned many times. I sincerely hope I can inspire others to

take the same path.

Our profiles this month include Sandor Slomovits, and Board member Skeffington Flynn.

I first met San when he wandered into my Folk Percussion Class at the Music Emporium in 1981. I was delighted to hear of his association with Percy Danforth, my mentor, and could easily see Percy's influence in his playing. Since that time San's work with children, apprenticeship to rhythm bones maker, Ray Sharier, and the true spirit he conveys as a person has been an inspiration to me. I hope you enjoy reading his profile. (Continued on Page 2)

## Sandor Slomovits

In 1975, when I met Percy Danforth, the father of modern-day rhythm bones, I'd been playing folk music professionally with my twin brother, Laz, as the duo Gemini, for about two years. Like most good folkies of the day, we played guitars and sang. But around that time Laz also picked up violin, after having abandoned it in high school some years before, and we also both got interested in Irish music. Laz started learning the pennywhistle and I made a crude bodhran and we began playing jigs and reels in our shows. We were living in Ann Arbor and one night Laz saw Percy play rhythm bones in Donald Hall's play Bread and Roses. (Donald Hall was a renowned poet, playwright, essayist and critic, and from 2006 to 2007 was the fourteenth US Poet Laureate.) Laz told me about Percy very excitedly. "You won't believe what he can do with just four little pieces of wood!" I was intrigued and called Percy and asked if he would teach me how to play. He generously said he would, but said he'd been getting a lot of requests lately. Would I organize a rhythm bones class for him at the Ark, Ann Arbor's famed coffeehouse? I called Dave Siglin who, along with his wife Linda, were the co-founders of the Ark, and a couple of weeks later about twenty of us gathered in the Ark's living room and Percy showed us the tap and roll, the basic rudiments of rhythm bones playing.

I was not a quick study—to put it generously. Now, forty-five years later, when I introduce rhythm bones at our concerts or bones workshops, I show

people what I looked and sounded like for the first few days I played rhythm bones. I close my eyes, contort my face into a painful grimace and try to rattle the bones—silently—Marcel Marceau style. It's not much of an exaggeration. I was so discouraged with my lack of progress following Percy's rhythm bones workshop, that I put the rhythm bones away and forgot about them. But, in 1976 Laz and I were invited to play at the Fox Hollow Folk Festival in upstate New York. Percy was also invited to the Festival, to teach rhythm bones. Laz and I drove from Ann Arbor in our ancient Ford Falcon, while Percy flew out. We met up at the Festival and I hung out with Percy while he taught the (Continued on Page 2)



Sandor Slomovits from his 'Mr. Bones' CD

## Editorial

We owe a big thanks to Steve Brown for this issue. I had a large project for my church (a children's Christmas video), and Steve stepped in to help. That said, this is not the first time he's made significant contributions to getting the newsletter out on time - just go the on-line newsletters and search for 'Steve Brown.'

This is a jam packed issue with profiles of Sandor Slomovits and Skeff Flynn and Steve Brown's article on how to compete in the All Ireland Bones Competition, so I will shut up now.

### (Director continued from Page 1)

Skeffington Flynn is well known to all of you as a Board member. He first came to RBS at the Bones Fest in Alexandria, Virginia more than 10 years ago, and since that time has become an integral part of our organization, and a true "Ambassador of the Bones." I think you will enjoy his story.

And speaking of the Bones Fest in Alexandria 10 years ago, Bones Fest will once again return to the Washington, DC area sponsored again by Kenny and Teri Wolin. Their first Bones Fest as hosts was one of the best attended, and most exciting of all the Bones Fests (they were married that Sunday morning on the bank of the Potomac River with attendees forming a rhythm bones arch for the bride's processional). The allure of the DC area with its rich history, and large number of traditional musicians and rhythm bones players in particular will make for another exciting Bones Fest. I hope you will join us! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXIV.** Tentative, July 2020, Washington DC area. Details to follow.

**NTCMA Festival,** October 3-6, 2020, Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

**All Ireland Bones Competition,** May 4, 2020, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Read Steve Brown's article in this issue and go and compete.

### (Slomovits continued from Page 1)

hythm bones for much of each day of the weekend Festival, and Laz and I gave him rides to and from our accommodations to the Festival site. By the end of that weekend I was a semi-competent rhythm bones player.

I was also very lucky, in two important ways. I was able to practice and play rhythm bones with live music very frequently. My brother, who has a rock steady sense of rhythm, was willing to let me learn on the job—at our rehearsals and on stage with him at our concerts. "Laz even wrote two songs especially for me to play rhythm bones to, I Can Feel it in my Bones and Percy's Song (which is largely comprised of Percy's own description of how he learned to play rhythm bones as a child) both of which we still often play in our concerts." Laz and I also formed a friendship and a musical collaboration with Percy. We often invited him to join us on stage for our Ann Arbor area shows, and so I got many additional opportunities to study and play with him. I picked up so much of Percy's playing style and mannerisms that, many years later, when I met Jonathan Danforth – Percy's grandson and RBS's longtime web guru—Jonathan paid me the ultimate compliment when he said I looked just like Percy when I played.

(My brother also tried learning rhythm bones at the same time that I started, and also didn't get far at first. When I picked them back up at the Fox Hollow Folk Festival, Laz also tried again—with little success. Percy was very wise and kind. Noting my brother's frustration, he told him, "Laz, no duo needs two rhythm bones players." Laz took Percy's counsel to heart and focused his attention on the more than half dozen other instruments he plays.)

In 1980, for Percy's 80th birthday, I organized a concert/birthday party at the Ark. The musicians lineup, all people who Percy had played with, included my brother and I; harmonica wizard Peter Madcat Ruth; famed jazz scholar, pianist, and band leader Jim Dapogny; the renowned Grammy Award-winning composer William Bolcom; and Bolcom's wife, mezzo soprano Joan Morris. (Bolcom and Morris had invited Percy to join them at a number of concerts,

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including ones they gave at Alice Tully Hall in NYC and at the Royal Albert Hall in London.) The birthday party concert was a huge success, with performances by all of the musicians and Percy joining each of them.

Percy lived to the age of 92 and was still playing in concerts a half year before he died. A couple of weeks before Percy passed away, Laz and I played a concert at the senior citizens' home where he and his wife, Fran lived. I had a chance to thank him publicly one last time for the huge gift he had given me when he taught me to play rhythm bones.

One of the other gifts that came into my life as a result of my meeting Percy, was my friendship with Ray Schairer. Ray was a lifelong dairy farmer and woodworker who made all the bones that Percy sold to his thousands of students. Percy introduced Ray and his wife Jane to me sometime in the late 1970s and I stayed in touch with them over the years,

buying bones from him and commissioning him to make several limberjacks and instrument cases. In 2002, I asked him to help me with another woodworking project. My eight-year-old daughter, Emily had been playing violin for about a year and I wanted to build a wooden music stand for her. Knowing I had neither the tools, nor the skill to do that, I asked Ray if he'd be willing to build one with me. He agreed, and that's how began another of the most significant friendships of my life. Ray and I worked on the music stand together, and on my visits to his woodshop, he asked me to help him make rhythm bones. I happily did, and he in turn taught me his process for making the bones. Ray and I stayed friends for the remaining nine years of



his life, making hundreds of rhythm bones together, and I also helped him publish his memoir, *Barefoot Boy: A Year in the Life of a 1930s Farm Boy*. Before he passed away in 2011, Ray gave me all his bones-making tools and I have continued to make rhythm bones to this day. (Although, in 2009, along with my good friend Lon vanGeloven, an engineer and manager at Ford, who has extensive machining and computer skills, we brought bones-making into the 21st century. We bought a small desktop CNC machine and have been using it ever since to cut bones from a variety of woods. But I still sand rhythm bones with the same custom-built machine that Ray devised and used for thirty years before he gave it to me.)

I will turn 71 in January of 2020 and I still play rhythm bones in every one of my more-than-one-hundred yearly concerts. Rhythm bones have brought me enormous pleasure and satisfaction over the years. It is the instrument I play and improvise on most freely. It is the instrument with which our audiences, ranging from preschoolers to senior citizens, are the least familiar. I love introducing them to this ancient art. It is also the instrument that my brother and I use to tame our toughest audiences—middle school and high school age students. We've learned to always begin our shows for these audiences with rhythm bones. They capture their attention in a way nothing else we know.

Besides my experiences playing with Percy, I've had many other wonderful bones-related highlights. Here are two of my favorites. In 2005, Laz and I played a family concert with the Grand Rapids Symphony. The Symphony's principal percussionist is Bill Vits, longtime RBS member and another of Percy Danforth's protégés. Bill learned to play rhythm bones from Percy when he, Bill, was a student at the University of Michigan. Laz and I always include Laz's song 'I Can Feel it in My Bones' in our concerts with orchestras and I always take a rhythm bones solo on it. But for this concert, in addition to that song, I asked Bill if he'd be willing to do a rhythm bones duet with me. He agreed, and our impromptu, freewheeling bones jam was the highlight of the show. It may still be the only rhythm bones duet ever played in an orchestra concert.

In 2010, at the Wheatland Festival, (Michigan's biggest folk festival) where I've often taught rhythm bones workshops, I was delighted to encounter a former rhythm bones student of mine. I'd met Gail Brayden, a cardiologist from Marquette, Michigan, when I played concerts and gave rhythm bones workshops in 2005, at Marquette's annual FinnFest, at the invitation of RBS member, Randy Seppala. Gail learned rhythm bones from me over the course of that weekend festival, and a year later, in May 2006, she won the all-Ireland Bones Championship; one of the things that I am most proud of in my long history with the bones.

My daughter, Emily, is now twen-

ty-five and a fabulous singer and violinist. (Totally objective evaluation from an enormously proud dad.) She's been playing concerts with me, with my brother and me, and with many others, since she was eight years old. And she's on her way to becoming a terrific rhythm bones player. The beat goes on! *Sandor Slomovits*

## Profile of Skeffington Flynn

There's a story that gets told in my family about when I was a toddler. I had a Red Flyer wagon and I was putting cans from the pantry into it. In between making additions to my haul, I had a pot, and a spoon, that I was banging on the back of the pot while shouting, "I'm making a lot of noise, I'm making a lot of noise!" Well here we are a little over 40 years later and I suppose I'm still the same person, making a lot of noise. My choices of instrument, and my technique have evolved, for sure, but I'm still doing my best to make a lot of noise.

I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. My first real instrument was the trombone which I played in 4th and 5th grade. I typically walked home from school and I remember that trombone case being about the same size as I was. This might have put into my mind an early notion to find something more portable,

Like a lot of kids, I took piano lessons after that. My father, Charles Robert Flynn, was a musician as well. My parents didn't want me to be a junior, so they named me Charles Skeffington Flynn, and they called me Skeff from the very beginning. To this day, when someone calls me Charles, I know they are reading my name off of a form. Most of the time that means that they want money, so I'm in the habit of saying "No, he's not home right now, can I take a message?" As for the piano lessons, they didn't quite inspire me, but they did help me along my musical journey.

At the age of 15 I decided I wanted to learn how to play the bass guitar. All the credit goes to my mother for supporting me. We went to Bill's Music in Baltimore and found a suitable instrument, one that I still have and play to this day. (<https://www.facebook.com/VforVelcrOhm> – some tracks even feature bones!) I

remember that I didn't like the color, or that I wanted a different instrument, but it turns out that Mom had it right. We bought a Charvel P Bass copy and it was one of the last Charvel basses to be made in the USA. At some point, I replaced the bridge, but I have not found another bass under a thousand dollars that sounds or plays better. Good work Mom!

Over the next two years I did everything I could to learn the bass guitar. Again, credit to my family for supporting me in my journey. I was able to study with Jim Charlsen on the bass. What a wonderful teacher, an incredible mentor, and a really solid human being. With such an incredible supporting cast, I was able to make it into Berklee College of Music after just two years of study on my instrument. During this time I played both with a speed metal band – The Sowers of Dischord (I still laugh at that name) – and a rock band named Prodigal.

Getting to Berklee was an amazing feat! But I have to admit, I wasn't ready. I routinely say that if I had gone to Berklee at 19, my life might be very different. At 18, my whole identity was wrapped up in being a bass player. I now understand that I am both a person, and a musician. This is a very different perspective.

When I got to Berklee I placed out of many of the entry level Music Theory classes. I also placed out of some of the introductory Bass labs. Honestly, I was ranked or placed higher than I had expected to be. I was asked to audition for ensembles, something I had not envisioned as a possibility. I hastily prepared a piece – A Night in Tunisia – which I failed to execute in my audition. Berklee at that time had a numeric system for rating players after auditions, I don't know if they still use this system but I certainly hope they don't. I scored straight zeros across the board. The effect was demoralizing and I did not do another ensemble audition again in my time there.

I should be clear that my time at Berklee was not all bad. I played in an experimental jazz band that was a lot of fun, The Iodine Stories. We had a few memorable gigs and it drilled into my head that I need to find a portable instrument. Our drummer lived in Allston. Typically if you have a drummer who can play at his residence, you go to him. The drummer usually has the most equip-

ment and is usually the loudest player, so if they have an established practice spot you go to them.

One night while practicing for a gig, the final episode of "Cheers" aired on TV. You may remember that the show was set in Boston and as a result the streets were packed. In order to get to the drummers house, the guitar player and I took the subway and then the bus. Going home was another story. At the time I had a 4x10" speaker cabinet on wheels, and a 4 rack space head to go along with it (pre-amp + power amp). The cabinet alone must have weighed over 70 pounds, with the head adding another 30. Getting on the bus back home wasn't a problem. Getting on the subway, however, was a different story.

As the guitar player and I were getting my amp onto the subway (the horn players never helped), I had a young woman run into me full speed as I was anchoring the top end of pulling up my amp. I was set, to pull the weight, she was not. She bounced off of me, and frankly, I had little sympathy. When we got everything on board the train (the guitar player had a smaller amp to load as well) we realized we had made a mistake. On Boston subway cars there are some entrances that have access to both sides, some do not.

We arrived at our stop, and realizing that our door was on the wrong side and that we would need to move up I called out "excuse me, pardon me", and everyone on the train just looked at us. Needless to say, we missed our stop. At the next stop I said the exact same things, "excuse me, pardon me", but I powered on through. I had my bass in a gig bag slung over my shoulder and the guitar player later told me that I hit everyone in the face as I passed – doink!, doink!, doink!, doink! I have no regrets, except possibly that I didn't do it at our original stop. We had to walk about 5 blocks (thank goodness the amps were on wheels) to get home.

I left Berklee after 5 semesters. At the time I felt as though I didn't want to play my bass anymore. I still loved music, but the experience didn't encourage me to keep on as a bass player. I moved back to Baltimore for a while but then felt the pull to move out west. I then moved to San Francisco for about a year and a half.

While I was in San Francisco I cemented my love of percussion, routinely playing the bongos at parties and jams. I was also fortunate enough to get a gig as a guitar tech for a group called The Mermen. This was enlightening! Here was a group of musicians that had been together for more than 10 years. They had a record deal, they had a loyal following, and they still all had regular jobs. I was fortunate enough to see how their contracts were structured and I want to be clear that they were a model of success to me. Success meant that they had their own sound person, they didn't have to haul their own equipment, they were fed well, they drank good beer, and they got paid around \$200 a show. This reinforced to me that while I always wanted to play music, making a living might be something different.

After moving back to Baltimore I decided to get back into school. My father passed in '98 and one of the last things he said to me was "get your degree". Since I already had so many credits in music, I decided to pursue a music degree at Towson University. In my first real music class back, which was a jazz lab, I remember another bass player calling out chord changes to me. He could see that I was lost, being a bit out of practice, and his help was invaluable! It struck me that no one at Berklee would have done the same. The environments were very different.

I decided to pursue a minor in Business and I must admit that my business classes always felt like a relief. "What, I just need to read the book and tell you what it says?" No problem. That was nothing compared to the constant improvement required from my music classes.

I finally graduated in December 2002. I struggled to find work. I spent 2003 into 2005 teaching bass students (between 5 and 20 a week), playing bass in a rock band, and working a full time 40 hour a week job, whether that was serving coffee as a barista, or moving pianos.

In the Spring of 2005 I started my current career. I was hired as an entry level support representative to a company called CTSG in Washington, D.C.. I quickly moved up the ranks and was managing the department a few months later. That company was acquired by another, which was acquired by another, etc., etc.



In the Fall of 2007 they closed the office I was working in but they didn't lay me off. As a result I was able to move to a family home in Hedgesville, WV in February of 2008. I had never lived outside of a city limits before. While I had been visiting this cabin my whole life, I wasn't sure how it was going to go.

Early on I met a group of spoon playing karaoke junkies. At the time there were 4 generations of spoon players in their family. We were asked to play at Rosemont Elementary in Martinsburg in the Spring of 2009. The Spooners asked me if I would talk to the kids. I said that I would be delighted. I would give them not only a 5 minute talk on how to play the spoons, but a 5 minute history lesson as well. As I researched the history of spoon playing I found the bones. I started watching players like Dom Flemons and Rowan Corbett on YouTube and I said to myself, "I have got to learn how to do that!" This is the video that made me decide I needed to get into this:

<https://youtu.be/oLazWX8uxPU>

I then found Scott Miller's store and ordered some Danforth bones:

<https://www.bonedrymusic.com/>

The video that really got me on my way was this one:

<https://youtu.be/mU31eqwC3w4>

Finally I had an instrument that I could take with me wherever I went! Focusing primarily on rhythm and song structure, I was able to sit in with anyone!

A few months later I attended Pickin' in the Panhandle, a music and BBQ festival that was held in the Eastern Panhandle of WV for several years. There I met my good friends Tim Quigley, and Bill Newland. Tim is the founding member of a group called The Shedhoppers. We jammed together at the festival and had a wonderful time. Tim invited me to join. I had no idea at the time what an important role the Shedhoppers would play in my life.

The Shedhoppers get together every Wednesday night. We are one part social club and one part jam session, with a community outreach component. Mostly we play in people's homes, or sheds, but we also play at local businesses and community or charity events when the fit is right. One of the incredible things about the group for me in the early days was that no one told me you shouldn't play bones on every tune! Because of

this, I developed a simple style that supports the music. I will take a solo when called upon, but getting underneath the group and laying a foundation is far more important to me. Playing with all acoustic players, I have had to be very conscious of my volume and dynamics. This led me to adopt the "half mast" position of bones playing as my default, something I have covered in workshops over the years.

The Shedhoppers offer a supportive environment where people can play, learn, sing, and really enjoy true fellowship and a sense of community. The Shedhoppers were also a huge part of Bonesfest 19! (More on that to follow.) Tim built something amazing with this group. He built a community where musicians feel connected and supported. It's the very thing I had hoped for when I had the realization that I wanted to play music for the rest of my life, but that I didn't need to make a living playing music – I wanted to make a life playing music. This spring will mark 10 years that I have been a member, and now a leader, of this group. Grateful doesn't quite capture my feelings.

<https://www.facebook.com/shedhoppers>

<https://youtu.be/FVcTlgBRO0k>

I learned about the Rhythm Bones Society in 2009 but wasn't able to make it to the Bonesfest in Louisville that year. Nonetheless, I was persistent. I attended my first Bonesfest in Alexandria in 2010, about a year after I started playing. I found myself welcomed with open arms into an amazing musical community. Kenny and Teri Wolin hosted that year and I was honored to join the "Bones Honor Guard" at their wedding! I also had the opportunity to give Rowan Corbett a tip on his technique! (Don't take this as boastful, there are probably a hundred things Rowan could show me, I was just elated to be able to offer him one.)

I have attended every Bonesfest since, including in 2015, when I hosted Bonesfest in Shepherdstown, WV. The Shedhoppers turned out to show their support. They hosted the Thursday night jam, helped out in workshops, and played a huge role in the Saturday night concert! I was fortunate enough to join the board of the Rhythm Bones Society in 2011. Aside from hosting Bonesfest 19, I have contributed to the production of an RBS brochure and have given workshops at

a number of Bonesfests. I hope to keep making positive contributions to RBS in the coming years!

The friends and the community I have found through the bones continues to amaze me and I feel blessed any time I reflect on it. I have had the opportunity to help RBS Executive Director Steve Brown with workshops and bones sales at the New England Folk Festival in 4 of the last 5 years. I have given countless impromptu and many formal bones workshops, including a spoon workshop at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2015 (where I snuck in a bones demo).

The rhythm bones have brought a great deal of joy to my life and as such, I am, always happy to share. A friend of mine jokes that I could be in the process of being sworn in as President of the United States, and if someone in the crowd shouted "Excuse me sir, but what are the clicky things?", I would almost certainly stop the proceedings for an impromptu bones lesson. As someone who has actually printed business cards with the title "Bones Ambassador", that sounds about right. Besides, I'm making a lot of noise!

## **How to Compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship**

Over the years many folks have asked me about the possibility of going to Ireland to compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, and the particulars about being there. It truly is enticing, not only to attend a festival setting in Ireland, but the idea that bone playing is known and accepted there are certainly two of the reasons I originally attended. I've been fortunate to have competed, and judged the contest a number of times, and so I thought I would give you my thoughts about going and preparing for the contest. Last year was the first year that two handed bone players took all three spots in the competition, and it's no secret that the organizers are actively encouraging participants from outside Ireland to compete, but more on that later. This article is intended to inform the reader about competing in the contest and the various aspects of being in Abbeyfeale and attending the festival. It should be noted that the information in this article is to the best of my knowl-

edge, and experience. If the reader has questions or comments, I would be more than interested in hearing them. I have great affection for the place and the people of Abbeyfeale, and if this helps any of you to under take this endeavor, I would be delighted.

Perhaps a little history to give you a reference point. About 26 years ago the town of Abbeyfeale sponsored the Limerick County Fleadh, a sort of music competition sponsored by the organization, Comhaltas Ceoltori Erriennann. After two years of sponsoring the Fleadh, the town decided to hold their own festival, Fleadh by the Feale (Fleadh Ceoil or Feast of music). As many of these small festivals are held in Ireland it was decided to make their festival more unique by holding the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship as part of the festival, largely due to Padraig ‘Sport’ Murphy, a local bone playing legend. A children’s contest, called the Junior Bones, was also scheduled. Along with the contests various other events were planned including a “Busking” or street performers competition, an art show, classes on various instruments, children s competition on various instruments (which was later dropped) a Ceili or dance, and concerts-both small and a larger concert featuring a nationally known performer. In addition there would be a Session trail- informal music “sessions” held throughout the town, in the various pubs. This is the basic structure of the Fleadh by the Feale today, held during the “may Bank “holiday week end, the May Bank Holiday being the first Monday in May.

#### **Where is it?**

To begin with where exactly are you going and how do you get there. The contest is held in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, Ireland, in west Limerick, almost as far as you can go in Limerick, before you reach County Kerry. It is approximately an hour or so drive from Limerick City, and a little more than an hour from Kilarney, both being major cities in Ireland. It’s always been my choice to rent a car at the airport. This affords you to see the sights around Abbeyfeale, an easy drive to Dingle Peninsula, the Ring of Kerry or even take the Tarbert to Kilimer Ferry and up the Clare coast to see the Cliffs of Moher. But public transportation is doable, bus from the airport

to Limerick City, provided that you have landed in Shannon Airport, the closest International Airport, and another bus to Abbeyfeale, or the train from Dublin to Limerick, and a bus to Abbeyfeale, if you have flown into Dublin. I would prefer Shannon, but sometimes the flights are cheaper to Dublin.

#### **Where do you stay?**

There are a number of places to stay in and around Abbeyfeale. Leens Hotel is in the center of town, great if you like being where the action, not so great if you’re looking for quiet and relaxation. From my first visit my choice has always been the Park Lodge Bed and Breakfast on the Kilarney Road. About a mile out of town, they are close enough to easily get to town, and far enough to provide an oasis from the craziness of the Fleadh. The owners are friendly and knowledgeable , and provide the best breakfast in Ireland. There are several other options for bed and breakfasts, and a youth hostel in town. It should be noted that the Fleadh by the Feale organizing committee has offered two nights accommodation at the festival for the first five International competitors to register. Inquiries should be made to Martin O’Donohue email [martin@theatticstairs.ie](mailto:martin@theatticstairs.ie) .

#### **The Contest**

The Championship is usually held on Monday and is the last official event of the Fleadh. You must register and pay the entrance fee (usually E10) by Friday before the contest by 5pm. These rules are usually not written in stone and I have seen people register the day of the contest. The contest is scheduled around 7:30pm, and bone playing starts after a short concert by local musicians. Prior to the contest , the names of the competitors are drawn from a hat to determine the place to compete. After each competitor has finished, the judge tallies the scores, and announces the winners. For most years prizes have been awarded for the top three competitors. In some years, the committee has expanded the awards to include a fourth place. After the contest, many of the competitors adjourn to a local pub to congratulate the winner, kibitz over the result, play tunes, and have a few pints.

In previous years, the Junior Bone Playing Championship was held on Sunday. Most recently the Junior Bones has

been held just before the Adult section. This tends to be shorter, and with fewer competitors. In the past, Junior competitors have been as young as 5, but always 18 or younger.

Competitors have come from all over Ireland, and a number of countries, including: England, Scotland, France, Denmark, Canada, and the United States. Though the winners have almost all been Irish, a number of international competitors have placed, including three 1st place finishers, all from the United States.

#### **The Judge**

Judges are hired by the Festival Committee usually based on an expertise in Bone playing/Bodhran (Irish Drum) playing, or traditional Irish music in general. Dating back to the beginning of the contest, Judges associated with Comhaltas were hired. Later the festival committee approached individuals they deemed having an expertise. Past Judges include Seamus O’Kane, Mel Mercier, Tommy Hayes, Gino Lupari, Ronnie McShane, Junior Davey, Steve Brown, Cathy Jordan, and Johnny McDonagh. Judges mostly have judged both the Junior and the adult competition.

#### **Format and Judging**

This might be a good place to mention that there are very few bone playing competitions. Though we know that contests of this nature have been held since colonial times here in the States, the actual structure, and format of the contests are really unknown. The bones have not been a part of the National contests in Ireland, as they are not univervally played or accepted. Abbeyfeale, though, is a different matter. Even in the early days of the Abbeyfeale contest, the format and rules were really left up to the individual judge, and this would change year to year. We do know that in more recent years the format for the contest has been set by the Organizing committee. In my first year of competition, players selected two tunes of dissimilar time signature. For example, a jig (in 6/8) and a reel (in 4/4). In the video’s I have of Sport Murphy competing, he played a horn pipe, and a slip jig. Martin O’Donohue of the Fleadh committee has been nice enough to furnish us with the current rules as they were in last years contest:

### **Bones Rules**

Junior Bones: play two different tunes: reel/ jig/ hornpipe

Senior Bones: play a jig, two reels one into the other, and one tune from the following:

Hornpipe or Polka, Slide or March

Beyond these rules there really are no other rules, or judging guidelines. In other words, it is clearly up to the discretion of the judge as to how he/she determines a winner. In my years I developed a point system with categories to award points. I began to realize how subjective judging is and suffice it to say that it really comes down to the individual judge, what they think is important, and what they like.

One more thing about the Contest it's self. Over the last two or so years the contest is streamed live on Facebook. This has been a fantastic way to see the contest as it is actually going on. As it is streamed live, you can make comments on the live stream, and cheer on your favorite! Just go to the Facebook group, Fleadh by the Feale, like it, and you will have access. Last years contest is available to watch now.

### **How to prepare**

Remember that the basis of this contest is traditional Irish music. It may be a bone playing contest, but the context is the music. The better prepared you are by knowing the music, the better chance you have of doing well, in my opinion. I used to tell my students at the Boston Irish Music School the three most important things in learning Irish Music is: Listen, listen, listen, a paraphrase of the three important things in real estate (location, location, location). Only by listening attentively to the music can you assimilate into the flow, get the feel, and react to the intricacies of the music. If you only approach it as a mechanical time construct, you lose what binds the music and the musician, the feel or flow, that which is impossible to describe, you can only feel it when it happens. When I first prepared for going to the contest I had one video tape of two years of the contest. I would put that thing on every day, play along, and listen. I soon acquired numerous recordings by countless musicians, and listened at home as much as I could. When I went someplace in the car, I listened, when I was at work, I listened, I took every opportunity I could

to listen to the music, and internalize it. It should probably be noted that this didn't happen over night for me, and that I started getting a serious interest in Irish music and the recordings around 1975.

As you can see from the above rules, Irish music is categorized into tune types as they relate to dances. Know your tune types! The rules state only 6 tune types, there are a number of others. Most are distinguished by time signature. Jigs are in treble meter ie 6/8, 9/8, or 12/8, Reels are in 4/4, Hornpipes 4/4, Polka's in 2/4, "slides" a type of jig is in 12/8, and marches can be in 4/4, 2/4, or in some cases 6/8. A word of warning, in this part of Ireland Polka's are played extremely fast. Sport Murphy didn't like them much and wouldn't play them often. Just play along with some recordings, preferably from this area, and you can get the feel of it.

Accompanists are supplied by the organizing committee. They are excellent musicians, usually local. There is, however, no opportunity that I was able to find to practice with them. There are literally thousands of Irish tunes, and a word of warning, often the musicians will not know the name of a tune that you know it by, but will recognize it if they hear it. Some contestants have brought their own accompanist, there's no rule against it, that I know of. Sometimes the accompanists are in the pubs over the week end and you can get a chance to play along with them then. This year I noted that the festival organized opportunities to play in which the bone players were invited to. This is also a great opportunity to get to know the musicians and play along.

Perhaps a word on style. Irish bone players almost exclusively play with one hand. Because they don't have the other hand to add to what their dominant hand is doing, they have developed intricacies with the one hand that many of us two handed players don't develop. There is no better example of this than Sport Murphy, David Murphy, and Paddy Donovan, all local players. I have always felt that the local style is the perfect marriage between bone playing and the music. It is truly beautiful, and a sight to behold and hear for the bone playing aficionado. Tommy Hayes says his jaw dropped the first time he saw Sport Murphy play.

Two handed playing may have it's own appeal, and over the years a number of two handed players have done well at the contest, especially last year where all three spots went to two handed players. Remember, though, the Judge has the last word, and their opinion reigns.

### **On the Road to Abbeyfeale**

Hard for me to talk about Abbeyfeale without getting a little choked up. I have met some of the best people in the world in Abbeyfeale! I came to them from another country, and they took me in, and made me feel at home! The Fleadh has always been a draw to people around the country, but the bones are an Abbeyfeale phenomenon. The contest has always drawn more local people both as participants and observers. And it's always a joy for me to return.

There are a good number of Pubs in Abbeyfeale, and most of them will be holding sessions. The Fleadh committee puts out a list, which includes the musicians that are featured at the session. Usually the sessions are in the evening, but some are scheduled in the afternoon. Sessions can run all night and into the morning. At some point the door is locked and it's hard to get into a session at 2 or 3 in the morning, but it can be done. My advice, stay where you are after 1 or so and you won't have any problem.

Rhythm bone players aren't universally accepted at sessions in Ireland. Though they are common in Abbeyfeale, other parts of the country aren't used to having them around. Best to feel your way into a session, ask if it looks like a closed session. Play one tune and see what kind of reaction you get. My method from my first visit was to stand outside the pub and see if I heard bones, go in if I do, and gradually get next to the bone player and see if they are friendly and welcoming. My favorite session of all time was at the Ploughman standing between Dave Murphy and Paddy Donovan, each taking turns playing until about 3.

Well that's about it. I hope to return to Abbeyfeale myself one day, perhaps this year, maybe not. If you go, be sure and go to the Winners Circle Pub, have a pint, and tell Tommy O'Connor I sent you! Slan go foil! (bye for now) *Steve Brown*, Two-time winner



Photographs; Upper left, Skeffington Flynn, Upper right from Bones Fest XIX, the Tin Roof Pickers Band with Paul Young, Andrew Montgomery and Ben Denny, Bones Fest Host, Skeff Flynn, and the Shedhoppers with Tim Quigley, Mary Gunderson-King, and Bruce Reich, Lower left, The San, Emily & Jacob Trio with Sandor Slomovits, Emily Slomovits and Jacob Warren.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 22, No. 1 2020

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## Executive Director's Column

Well here we are in the 21st Century, feeling a lot like moments in time when epidemics threatened the world. I'm writing this in the depths of the Brown Bunker located here in Winchendon, where we've been now for about 2 weeks. The effects of the threatening virus has canceled the New England Folk Festival normally held in April, and the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, normally held in May. We are holding our breath that we may yet be able to hold Bones Fest in July.

While these are but blips on the screen in comparison to the devastating effects on our country, they do matter to us, players of this ancient of

instruments. In truth, my personal schedule hasn't changed much, having been retired for a few years, and spending a fair amount of time at home in a normal week, but for the vast majority of people this is very different. I'm trying to avoid telling you that you have an amazing opportunity here, but clearly it stares us in the face. Practicing has always been a bit of a boondoggle for me, and many other musicians, but here it is, more than enough time to focus on playing, and improving your ability to play. In some ways I feel a weight  
(Continued on Page 4)

## Kenny and Teri Wolin

### Kenny Wolin Profile:

I grew up just a few blocks from the Detroit border-line in Oak Park, Michigan. In 4th grade I wanted to play the trumpet, but my mom thought I would drop out of band after a year just like my older brother and sister. To save money she pretended that I was gonna need braces so, instead of trumpet, I could either choose drums or violin (knowing I'd choose the former). At the time, my parents were pretty relieved that it only cost them a pair of drumsticks and a drum pad, but little did they know how that one pair of Bunken 2B sticks would change my life.

The next few years I was taking private drumset lessons until 7th grade when that all changed. My new teacher was Sam Tundo from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He co-owned a store nearby called "Percussion World" with Norm Ficket (DSO). Sam got me back on the drum pad doing a lot of heavy rudimental-style playing, but once he introduced me to the marimba I was like a duck to water and couldn't stop practicing. Which reminds me, my mom likes to joke about whenever I got in trouble she couldn't just send me to my room because that's where all my instruments were!

Anyway, that same year I played a xylophone solo at the 1979 Michigan Percussion Festival in Ann Arbor for the first time in public for Charlie Owen during his masterclass. Charlie later became my role model. He was the timpanist and marimba soloist with "The President's Own" Marine Band

during the 30s-50s, then became Principal of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and THEN taught at the University of Michigan.

After Charlie's masterclass I decided to stay for the next one, which just happened to be led by Percy Danforth! I can't begin to tell you how amazing it was to see and hear the bones for the first time and be taught by Percy himself. After his workshop I begged my mom to buy me a pair of Joe Birl Rhythm Bones directly from Percy.

Through high school I played in several outside orchestras from the Detroit Symphony Civic Orchestra to my first paid job with the Birmingham/Bloomfield Symphony. I spent most of my summers at Interlochen Music  
(Continued on Page 5)



Kenny and Teri Wolin

## Editorial

Our main stories are profiles of Kenny and Teri Wolin, Mardeen and Randy Gordon, Teilhard Frost, and Dennis Marks.

The timing of the Wolin profiles beginning on Page 1 is to coincide with them hosting Bones Fest XXIV, and to introduce them to prospective attendees new to RBS. The rest of us know that they have made many contributions to RBS, and Kenny Wolin was elected to the Board in 2009.

We met the Gordons at BVXXI, a crisis Fest interrupted by the arrival of hurricane Harvey. We knew them as makers of Shooting Star rhythm bones, and it was great to meet them. Mardeen wowed us by playing to the William Tell Overture. Their profiles are on Page 5.

Years ago Teilhard Frost gave us one of his CDs and permission to put a track on our website. Check that out at <http://rhythmbones.com/TeilhardFrostFrom-Flapjack.html>. His profile is on Page 4.

Steve Brown's article on ebony rhythm bones (see Page 7) brings back a memory. I have three sets of ebony rhythm bones including a magnificent set made for me by the late Jerry Mescher, but early on my only set was made by Percy Danforth/Ray Schairer. Val Cowett, wife of the late Everett Cowett, our founding father, was a spiritual person, and when I played those ebony rhythm bones for her she said it touched her soul, not my playing, but the sound of ebony.

A widow named Barbie gave me her husband's ebony rhythm bones even though I tried to get her to keep them and learn how to play them. Now they are my 'Barbie Bones.'

Dennis Marks found our website and contacted us. Some of his story on Page 4 is familiar, and that rhythm bones helped recovery from a shoulder injury is inspiring.

Our country has had times of division, such as the American Revolution and prohibition, and maybe the greatest was the Civil War. Member Dom Flemons found a cartoon from Abraham Lincoln's opponents presenting him as Nero playing rhythm bones. Christian McWhirter from the Abraham Lincoln Library gives us some perspective on Page 3.

Claude Bonang is an occasional *Letter*

*to the Editor* contributor, and this issue's letter interests me. A few years back, I tried to tap dance while playing rhythm bones by buying a pair of tap dancing shoes and taking tap dancing lessons. Made some progress, but never perfected the 'Time Step.' And it is really hard work until you build up the appropriate muscles which I never did. We do have some rhythm bones/dance examples, Scott Miller, Bob Goulet, Spike Bones, and Anika and Joseph Kooi who not only play rhythm bones in the Mescher style and tap dance, but they also do it together in synchrony.

In preparation for a much needed overhaul to our website, I have converted Adobe Flash video files that require a special player to .mp4 files that everyone should be able to play. Also cleaned up file names which has the side effect of you NOT getting the content of a every requested page. If you find broken pages, let me know via and I will fix them.

There is a real possibility that we will have to postpone or cancel Bones Fest XXIV due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic. This decision will be made and announced in the May RBS Email as well as on our website.

## Letter to the Editor

After viewing a video of James Cagney dancing to Yankee Doodle ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4ze\\_OBI15k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4ze_OBI15k), it starts about 2:55 minutes into the video), it provided me with the idea of what I should perform at this year's Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent Show—play my rhythm bones while tap dancing to Yankee Doodle dressed as Uncle Sam.

I now have a pair of tap shoes and I Googled the Internet for lessons on how to tap dance and Mitch Miller's Orchestra's rendition of Yankee Doodle, which I recorded. My Uncle Sam costume arrived yesterday afternoon and I'm sending along the picture that my wife, Ann, took of me after I tried it on (see Page 8). I'm hoping to compete in the Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent at the Brunswick High School Crooker Theater at 7:00 PM on May 18th. I hope it isn't going to be canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic. Warm regards,  
*Claude Bonang*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Bones Fest XXIV Preliminary Information

This Bones Fest is subject to cancellation depending on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic. Check our website for the latest news.

Kenny & Teri Wolin are excited to host this year's "Virginia is for Lovers" Bones Fest XXIV here in the heart of Old Town Alexandria (est.1749), and the hometown of our 1st President, George Washington, this Summer July 23-26, 2020.

Once again, we have been fortunate to have the historic Lyceum at our disposal. The Lyceum is located in the heart of Old Town that has seen various service throughout it's 180 year history. It opened in 1839 as the city's first cultural center and provided a place for lectures,



debates, scientific experiments, performances, and quiet reading. It has served as a hospital ward during the Civil War, a private residence, and today hosts concerts, exhibitions, a museum store, and Bones Fests!

Our host hotel will be the newly renovated Sheraton Suites Old Town Alexandria. The Sheraton is nestled a few blocks away from the banks of the Potomac River. It is located just 2 miles south of Ronald Reagan National Airport and 1 mile from the Lyceum. It is less than 5 miles to our Nation's Capital and is a short drive or water taxi to Mount Vernon. If you plan to fly in we strongly encourage you to arrive through Reagan National (DCA) as the traffic here is...challenging. There is 2 hour street parking around the hotel (9-5p) and then free after 5pm. Sunday, street parking is free so there may be away around paying so much for overnight. Good news is that the hotel is next to a Harris Teater (organic grocery store) and Trader Joes. Click the link at the bottom of this page to book your room.

We're looking forward to seeing all of our Bones-family here, and to also celebrate our 10 year anniversary since our marriage at Bones Fest XIV. *Kenny and Teri Wolin*

## Bones Calendar

**NEFFA**, April 24-26, 2020, with Steve Brown's Workshop. **Canceled**

**All Ireland Bones Competition**, May 4, 2020, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. **Canceled**

**Bones Fest XXIV**. July 23-26, 2020, Washington DC area. Check newsletter to see if Fest is Canceled.

**NTCMA Festival**, October 3-6, 2020, Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.



A cartoon showing Abe Lincoln as Nero playing rhythm bones

This political cartoon appeared in a Civil War newspaper hostile to Lincoln on December 27, 1864. People who opposed the Emancipation Proclamation (and the 13th Amendment, which would pass congress about a month later), frequently tried to foster racist, negative associations between Lincoln and African American imagery, especially minstrelsy. This goes all the way back to his first presidential campaign, when some tried to characterize him as a secret abolitionist. There was also a scandal during the 1864 election, in which some newspapers falsely reported that Lincoln had requested a minstrel song, "Picayune Butler," while touring the Antietam battlefield. My guess is this image was intended especially to recall the Antietam incident.

So, what you have here is a take on the old "Nero fiddled while Rome burned"

trope but instead it's Lincoln playing an instrument associated with minstrelsy and African American culture, with exaggerated facial features intended to make him resemble contemporary racist depictions of African Americans, while the Union burns in the background. These kinds of attacks were common and fed off of minstrelsy's association with African Americans and "lower" culture, Lincoln's fondness for the genre, and general racism towards African Americans.

So, there's a lot packed in here. For your purposes, it's a good example of how rhythm bones could have negative connotations at the time as symbols of supposedly inferior African American culture. *Christian McWhirter*, Lincoln Historian, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, IL

(Continued from Page 1)

being lifted from me, as I've always felt a bit guilty practicing instead of doing all those things I'm suppose to be doing and now, poof, it's there for you if you want it.

But practicing in and of it's self has never been particularly motivating for me. And I have found that when I get a wave of excitement like a new piece of music, a new band, or a Bones Fest, I'm able to ride that wave in a flurry of playing and practicing, carrying me on, and helping me to stay at practicing for some time.

So here's the challenge: get excited, get inspired, seek that which brings you closer to why you started playing rhythm bones in the first place. Inspired by old bones players like Percy Danforth, Jerry Mescher, or Joe Birl? Go back to the source on record, video, or music they played. Inspired by Bones Fests? Go to the video section of the RBS web site and watch workshops and performances from a number of Bones Fests. Remember times that you felt inspired and get on that wave!

One of my significant moments came from a recording by the Chieftains, and Ronnie McShane, Chieftains 5. The last track on side two features Ronnie playing a set of Kerry Slides, and it never fails to get me back on board. Often times it's in the shadow of disaster that our greatest triumphs are born.

I don't go any further that a young father whose child was born with the prospect of lifelong disability, both mental and physical, and yet the child inspired him to change his life and work in the field of disabilities, and has never failed to bring great joy into his life.

The Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, once said to a patient when he had lost everything to a fire, "Let's open a bottle of wine and celebrate, something good will come of this." So maybe we too can celebrate this seeming catastrophe, something good will come of this too!  
*Steve Brown*

## Teilhard Frost

I started playing rhythm bones in Toronto Ontario back in 1997.

A friend had loaned me a set of English whale bones which her great-grandfather had used as a longshoreman off the East coast of England.

I would ride my bicycle through downtown Toronto, practicing with one hand, then the other, avoiding cars and pedestrians, adding to the distraction.

I played for many years with the renowned contra dance band Flapjack, then with Sheesham, Lotus and 'Son and now often touring solo.

I take a set of rhythm bones with me where ever I go and have recently introduced them to the Indonesian Gamelan Orchestra in Ubud, Bali.

My main two sets of rhythm bones are camel rib bones I brought back from Mongolia and solid cow femur bones from here at home.

I live on Wolfe Island, located in the St. Lawrence River, where I make rhythm bones, banjos and old time world music.

Here is a video from time in Bali:  
<https://www.facebook.com/2061490087399570/videos/400328337545074/>  
(cow femur bones)

This isn't a great video but here is something:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHzMIR5rXDw>  
(those are the camel ribs)

Here is a rough video a friend of mine and I did:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msd7zl2Avl0&t=39s>

*Teilhard (tay YAR) Frost*, Musician, banjo maker

## Dennis Marks

I am sorry that the East coast has a monopoly on Bones Festivals.

It is unrealistic that I will ever check this off my bucket list, but it sure would be fun to wander the streets of New Orleans for a few days and play along with the multitude of street bands there.

My Dad played the rattle bones quite well and when I was a kid showed me how they were held and played, but I

never did play along with him. He passed away in 1988. I retired in 2011 and in 2014 I ran across a box that was his, in it were a couple sets of his old rhythm bones.

I decided that I should learn to play them and started practicing. At first I could only play along with 1 or 2 songs before my wrist and arms became tired. I burned a CD of appropriate music started playing one pair while driving to and from work. I felt that I was doing pretty well when I had a severe right shoulder injury and subsequent surgery 4 months later that took away the ability to play right handed.

The enjoyment of rattling out a beat to the music was strong enough to keep me playing left handed and trying to regain the ability to play with the right as well. Now, 2 1/2 years after the surgery I can manage a few songs right handed before getting tired, but can play left handed for hours and enjoy an almost daily session.

I am fully self taught and have looked for other rhythm bones players in my area to learn from, but have not found even one other rhythm bones player. I purchased a couple of new sets of rhythm bones on-line and I have made a few sets myself. I enjoy the different sounds from different woods and playing 2 different wood sets that play in what I call the same key so they compliment each other.

The picture on Page 8 was taken in 2019 at the Fischer's Mill 3rd annual folk festival in Silverton, Oregon. The old pipe display case just seemed fitting and Dad's old 'Rhythm Bones' box got the idea across or at least that was the plan. I also gave out business cards with several web site links to rhythm bones info and had pictures from the web on the back side showing how to hold rhythm bones in your hand. They were popular with a few folks. I did get to play a number on stage with a guitar player that put out a good tune to play rhythm bones with.

I gave 2 pair of rhythm bones to a local school teacher of 3rd or 4th graders. Who knows where they may lead...

I play rhythm bones regularly to recorded songs and do enjoy it greatly. The guitar player and I got together again a few days ago and even though less frequent than I would like, playing to live music is progressing and that exposes more people too. *Dennis Marks*



# Randy & Mardeen Gordon

## RANDY GORDON:

My wife Mardeen and I live in Ben Lomond, CA in the Santa Cruz mountains, since 1988. A rhythm bones player since 1982, I got started by playing wooden spoons at the Renaissance Faire in Agoura, CA as a performer with an English Country comedia/dance troupe.

It was there I was introduced to rhythm bones and acquired my first set...a pair of Percy Danforth rhythm bones, although I had little training and knowledge of how to make them work! Once I'd accomplished a triplet with one hand, and matched it with the other, without the nonexistent YouTube, there was little to help me figure out how to do anything other than make an annoying noise, let alone music.

Months later, while attending a dulcimer festival at a mansion in Beverly Hills with a Morris dance team, my wife and I were stunned to come around a corner upon Percy, Danforth, Mr. Bones himself in the flesh, playing incredibly phrased passages to classical music coming from a boombox behind him, matching the music with delicate flourishes in the way only Percy could. We were astonished and fortunate to then get schooled by the master himself. He left an indelible impression on me.

Since that day, my skill and abilities have grown immensely, and I continue to push myself to find different ways to contribute to and enhance the sound of whatever music I am playing with. Mardeen also became a rhythm bones maker, and together we still manage and produce Shooting Star Bones proliferating rhythm bones and rhythm bones players whenever and wherever we can.

## MARDEEN GORDON:

My husband, Randy and I were introduced to rhythm bones at the Renaissance Faire in 1982, where we got a pair of Percy Danforth rhythm bones, but not much instruction. After teaching ourselves to get a triplet, we were lucky

to meet Percy himself, as my husband described in his bio.

Once we had the basics, I wanted a pair of my own, so I made one. When we took them to the Faire, I ended up teaching someone almost every weekend, and soon was selling the pairs I made.

The name "Shooting Star Bones" came from the way I signed my name at the time. My maiden name was Smith, and I wrote the M of Mardeen with 3 lines above the star, and you get the Shooting Star logo.

Lark in the Morning was the first catalog to carry my rhythm bones, and Capritaurus Music sold them at their booth at Faire. Eventually, we created our own booth, "Bonecastle", partnering with a friend selling her ceramic castles, and teaching hundreds of people to play.

Several other music stores have carried my rhythm bones over the years, and we did a couple of road trips on the west coast, doing workshops at music stores along the way. We also sold them at the Strawberry Music Festival in the Lark in the Morning booth for several years.

That is where I met an Irish rhythm bones player who showed me a different way of holding them that enables changing tone while playing. That has become my preferred way to play. Currently, Shooting Star Bones can be found through Scott Miller at Bone Dry Music ([www.bonedrymusic.com](http://www.bonedrymusic.com)).

[Mardeen wrote a story about her Shooting Star rhythm bones that appeared in newsletter, Vol 14, No 4, Page 6, available on-line on our website]



Mardeen Gordon embroidered this for Sharon Mescher. Sharon's hand is on the left and her late husband Jerry's is on the right

## (Wolin - continued from Page 1)

Camp where my teacher, Eric (Wetstein) Forrester recommended his teacher, Mike Rosen at Oberlin Conservatory to study marimba.

I auditioned and received a full scholarship to Oberlin, and then I attended the University of Michigan on a Fellowship for percussion performance studying under Michael Udow and Saul Rabbio. It was my 2nd year there in 1991 when Percy Danforth was the guest artist on bones during our percussion ensemble concert. We played a mallet sextet arrangement of a tune called "Graceful Ghost Rag" as Percy improvised on the bones, which was just a year before he passed away.

For the next 6 years after college I moved to Boston and played with the Rhode Island Philharmonic until I finally won the Marine Band audition after 4 tries since 1992. Perseverance!

Fun fact: "The President's Own" Marine Band was founded by an act of congress in 1798 making it America's oldest continuously active professional musical organization in the country. In 1801 President Thomas Jefferson named us "The President's Own."

My first year in the band we celebrated our 200th anniversary with a gala performance at the Kennedy Center with guest conductor, John Williams. The program featured his film scores, complete with the scenes projected on a screen behind us. One of the pieces was from the movie "Far and Away" that had a prominent rhythm bones part. Huzzah!

Everything was coming full circle since that MI Perc. Festival almost 20 years earlier.

I excitedly rushed back home, rummaged through my sock drawer and found my rhythm bones. It also didn't take very long to also find that 1: these plastic bones weren't going to cut it with John Williams, and 2: I forgot how to play them.

I was able to get a hold of Percy's instructional VHS tape as well as a pair of wooden Danforth bones, and a few pairs of the Cooperman Fife & Drum Company rosewood, steam-bend ones. In my research, I was happy to discover that there were more rhythm bones players out there than I thought. Then I got downright "giddy with delight" to find out that a Rhythm Bones Society existed

and that their next “Bones Fest” was only a ½ hour away in Reston, VA! Woo-Hoo! Our good friend and bandmate, Scott (he provided the sound for our last bones Fest here) jokingly compares us to a bunch of platypuses: when you think that you’re the only platypus around and all of a sudden you’re swimming in a nice cove with other platypuses. That’s bones bliss, my friend!

This first Bones Fest made such an impact on me. The first rhythm bones player I met was Russ Myer in the bookshop. He asked me to help him find the book, *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, showed me how he changes pitches on rhythm bones (What?!), and then pulled out some seashells and played em like rhythm bones. If you’ve ever met Russ you’d totally get that!

Jonathan was outside with his fiddle and after we stopped jamming together on some mixed-meter Nickel Creek tune, he said he had someone I HAD to meet. Once he put Tim Reilly and I together, well to quote my lifelong dorymate Tim, “it’s like gas and matches.”

But when I saw Bill Vits run out on stage with a lampshade on his head playing burning fast rhythm bones, followed by Steve Brown and Steve Wixson (wearing a long blond wig) parodying a Bernie and Jerry Mescher variety show act, I oddly felt at home.

Since then I dedicated more time to our folk tradition and over the years I had the opportunity to teach a lot of rhythm bones. My favorites that come to mind are a few times with Tim and Jonathan at the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festivals, and at Camp Lejeune to a room full of active-duty marines.

Besides playing rhythm bones with the Marine Band for our anniversary concert, I got to perform several times with rhythm bones on two of our national concert tours across the country. I’m also in my 10th year as the leader of the Marine Band’s White House Irish Ensemble/Celtic Combo, mostly playing concertina peppered with some bodhran and rhythm bones. Each year we provide the background music (session tunes) during the St. Patrick’s Day Reception honoring the taoiseach/prime minister of Ireland.

Outside of that, Teri and I perform together as The Mollyhawks (formerly

Anston Bruder) with an emphasis on Celtic sea music, and (full circle) we were one of the featured groups at the Kennedy Center a few years ago.

Our latest project is called McCushla celtic marimba guitar duo combining my three loves: Teri, session tunes, and marimba! <https://www.facebook.com/McCushlaMusic/videos/933390213712597/>

Although, I do have to say that my favorite performances has been doing skits at our Bones Fests— here are just a few that come to mind:

<https://youtu.be/xRY3VsPD9x8>, <https://youtu.be/ywMsHcevJ8s>, <https://youtu.be/gdkBpXTFj2M>

Considering that I met my wife 15 years ago at Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, got engaged on stage at Bones Fest XIII in Louisville (<https://youtu.be/p0m2bzTXXJ0>), and hosted AND got married at Bones Fest XIV in Alexandria, Teri and I really love rhythm bones and our rhythm bones family because it’s what brought us together. *Kenny Wolin*



#### Teri Wolin’s Profile

I’ve had a love of percussion since I was about 7 or 8 years old. That was during the folk revival era of the 1960’s and everyone was picking up guitar. My mom wanted me to do the same. She thought it would be great to have someone in the family who was able to play some accompaniment around the campfire and get everyone going with “If I Had a Hammer” or something like that. I don’t know why she was so insistent that I learn guitar for that reason; growing up we NEVER went camping or even had a

fire pit in our back yard. I really dug my heels in on drums though and she struck up a deal with me to let me take private drum lessons if I took group guitar lessons at the local YWCA in the summer. That sounded like a good compromise so I learned both. It’s a good thing too, because these days I earn a living with a guitar in my hand not drum sticks but it doesn’t hurt to be versatile.

I’ve played both instruments in many bands over the years from metal to Irish and as a music director at a couple of churches. I was even lounge - lizard in my 20’s (hey, it paid some bills so don’t judge). I’ve been a music teacher for the past 15 years and love introducing rhythm bones to the kids. In the beginning, they have a love/hate relationship with them. The love the idea of clacking them but get a little dispirited when they find it’s not initially as easy as it looks. What joy comes to their faces when they manage their first triplet though! I remember that feeling.

I’ve been a member of the RBS for around 13 years. I began playing rhythm bones around 14 years ago and was inspired first by the instructional video put out by Mel Mercier on bodhran & bones. Once I got my first rattle & snap going, I began to search for other means of improving my technique. That’s what led me to the Rhythm Bones Society. I was so excited to learn that there was an entire group of people that were so passionate about this ancient, odd & cool instrument that I quickly became a member myself.

I was told that there was this strange event that occurred every year called the “Bones Fest.” That sounded intriguing so I made plans to go to my first Bones Fest hosted by Steve Wixson at Chattanooga TN. WOW – what an event! I was blown away by all of the rhythm bones players gathered there. I enjoyed the fact that some players had a certain expertise in one particular style and that others could switch from one type of playing to another. All were so willing to share their knowledge. While I wouldn’t dare play in front of anyone that year (yes, you could say I was just a wee bit intimidated), I took what I learned from these gracious musicians and practiced for a year – until my next Bones Fest hosted by Jonathan Danforth in New

Bedford, MA.

That was another amazing year! I wasn't so shy about playing in front of others any longer and had the thrill of playing alongside of my very first rhythm bones tutor Mel Mercier in addition to Tim Reilly and, best of all, my (now) husband Kenny Wolin. There were some amazing Irish jam sessions with Jonathan Danforth and a host of so many others.

Bones Fest has come to mean so much to me that I'm thrilled to be hosting another Fest here in the DC area. Kenny & I have such amazing memories of past Bones Fest's such as meeting at a Bone Fest, getting engaged at a Bones Fest and getting married at a Bones Fest. It is with great pleasure that we look forward to celebrating our 10 year anniversary at this year's Bones Fest in Old Town

[Editor's Noe: There are many references to Kenny and Teri in the on-line newsletters, and you can search for them using their names (search also using Teri Davies). Below are their newsletter articles.

#### **Kenny's Articles:**

Bones with John Williams at the Kennedy Center, Vol 5, No 4 Page 6

Kenny Wolin Bones Fest Workshop Follow Up, Vol 6, No 4, Page 5

Bones on Tour with "The President's Own," Vol 8, No 2, Page 6

Bones Fest VIII Summary, Volume 8, Special Issue, Page 13

Kenny Wolin Played Rhythm Bones in the White House, Vol 12, No 2, Page 6

#### **Teri's Articles:**

Bones, A Great Instrument, A Great Lesson Plan (teaching rhythm bones to children), Vol 8, No 1, Page 4

Highlights From Russ Myers Funeral, Vol 8, No3, Page 3

#### **Both of Them:**

Highlights from Bones Fest XIV, Vol 12, No 3.

Bones Fest XIV Summary, Vol 18, No 4, Page 9

## **In Search of the Elusive Ebony Bones**

"Species of ebony include *Diospyros ebenum* (Ceylon ebony), native to southern India and Sri Lanka; *Diospyros crassiflora* (Gabon ebony), native to western Africa; and *Diospyros celebica* (Sulawesi ebony), native to Indonesia and prized for its luxuriant, multi-colored wood grain. Mauritius ebony, *Diospyros tessellaria*, was largely exploited by the Dutch in the 17th century. Some species in the genus *Diospyros* yield an ebony with similar physical properties, but striped rather than evenly black (*Diospyros ebenum*)." Wikipedia. The use of ebony in carvings and furniture dates back to Egyptian times. It has also been used for furniture, particularly cabinets in Europe dating back to the 15th century.

From my earliest days of playing bones I have heard the stories of ebony bones. Not the ones you can get from China or Pakistan, but the old ones, only found in Antique stores, Flea Markets, or sometimes passed down in families. They seemed to be as rare as hen's teeth, they say, but occasionally you run across them in the most unlikely of places.

Using Ebony for rhythm bones seems to have started in the mid 19th century, when bone playing was common and popular during the minstrel show era. A number of companies produced ebony bones including banjo producing companies in Boston and other locations. A number of mail order companies, including Sears, offered ebony bones in their catalog. So we know that ebony bones were available to the general populace, but how common would they be, and the best question, how do you find them.

In my private collection I have some 25 pairs of ebony bones, and I have to say, I mostly acquired them by pure accident. The bones themselves vary in size, although the shapes are almost identical. The quality of ebony is both pure black Gabon ebony, and the brown streaked lower quality Macassar ebony reportedly from Indonesia. I'm going to relate a few stories of collecting these bones, hoping they might inspire you to search on your own.

The first acquisition of ebony bones occurred in late 1979 or early 1980. I was two years into my bone playing apprenticeship with Percy Danforth, and had heard numerous stories about ebony bones. They seemed to be particularly hard to get, but everyone you talked to seemed to have a story.

I was dropping in to a local music store in Fitchburg where I worked, just to check in. The owner, a friend, looked surprised to see me. "I thought of you the other day. I was in an Antique store and saw some ebony bones." "Where. Where?" I repeated. Within 10 minutes I was walking in to a local Antique store. As I walked up to the front counter, I couldn't help but stop short. There in the front display case was literally a pile of black ebony bones. Trying to keep my composure, I asked the clerk to take out the bones. As she lifted the tray, she said, "They're all ebony, \$2.00 per pair". I quickly counted, 8 pairs or 4 sets. One bone caught my eye right away, and though I was thrilled, I said to the clerk, "Not all ebony, this one is much lighter than the others, see?" Taking this as a rebuff, she said, "Oh you can have them all for \$5.00!" Barely able to compose myself, I paid, and ran out the door, feeling somewhat like a thief. Years later I showed the one set of matched Gabon ebony bones I got out of the set to Jerry Mescher, who called them one of the finest sets of ebony bones he had seen.

I've had some success stopping into to various antique stores in my travels around New England. Mostly I get blank stares from the owners, but one time in New Hampshire, I stopped in a store to look around. In a collection of bric-a-brac I spotted one ebony bone. I picked it up, and went to the young clerk behind the counter. "Where is it's mate?" I asked. She looked at me puzzled, I explained they come in pairs. She was tending the store for her mother, and said she would call her. In a few minutes in came her mother with the matching bone. Total cost: \$10 per pair.

I was working one day a week in the Employment Office in Gardner a number of years later, and became quite friendly with another worker there who often went to auctions. I told him of my fascination with bones, and asked if he



Mardeen and Randy Gordon (See story on Page 5)

ever found any. “Oh yes, we see them occasionally.” But hadn’t seen any in years he said. I asked him to be on the look out, and several months later he called, “Hey I found some of those bone things you’re looking for.” Meeting him at the office the next day he opened a bag with 8 pairs! Total cost: \$40.

Those old bones are elusive, and do play tricks on you. I’ve had several pairs stolen in the most unlikely places, but I’ve also had people call me out of nowhere with pairs they have found or been given. Well don’t give up trying, and persevere! When you least expect it, they suddenly appear! *Steve Brown*



Dennis Marks and his Rhythm Bones Box (S)



Steve Brown’s Ebony Rhythm Bones Collection (see story on Page 7)



Claude Bonang and his Yankee Doodle costume (See story on Page 2)

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 22, No. 2 2020

*In This Issue:*

*Sky Bartlett*

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*James Yoshizawa*

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## Executive Director's Column

I suppose you don't need me to bring back Thomas Paines' famous words, "These are the times that try mens' souls," but how much more appropo can they be. We're in Day 90 of our self imposed quarantine for the good of ourselves and anyone we might infect. Rhythm bone playing activity has been canceled, from the New England Folk Festival to the Washington, DC Bones Fest sponsored by Kenny and Teri Wolin, to the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship in Ireland.

But rhythm bones in some way is the least of our worries, given the COVID-19 Virus, a completely stalled economy, and civil unrest across our country.

We're hoping that you are well and surviving this most difficult time!

As we search our own souls for strength and reach out to our neighbors to provide help where needed, I bring some news which might shed a little ray of sunshine in a dark time. The Rhythm Bones Society Board of Directors has unanimously voted to conduct the first ever Virtual Bones Fest on July 25th, and possibly on July 26th. In all of the difficult times in my life, the coming together of like minded people to give support has been a strengthening, and heartening experience. (Continued on Page 2)

## Sky Bartlett

It was 20 years ago this year that I learned to play rhythm bones. I learned from Ernie Duffy, a close family friend. He had learned to play from Shorty Boulet a few years before. I had the advantage of a teacher in Ernie. Ernie had to learn from Shorty via pure observation and will power. Once I got the hang of it Ernie would take to square dances and let

(Continued on Page 6)

## Ernie Duffy

I was born and raised in a small New Hampshire town called Thornton. My elementary class had less than 16 kids in it. Most everyone was a local so we knew our friend's siblings, parents and grandparents. It wasn't until many years later that it became a getaway spot for vacationers and condominium complexes and

(Continued on Page 7)



Sky Bartlett and Ernie Duffy performing together at Bones Fest XXII, hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett

## Editorial

In this series of member profiles, what a treat it is to present Ernie Duffy and his protegee, Sky Bartlett, though their story is not complete without mentioning the late Shorty Boulet who was profiled way back in Vol 6, No 2. That story was a reprinted newspaper story and does not mention Ernie and Sky, but Ernie's story ties the three of them together. This new story has extra meaning as it shows how a mentor or two can introduce rhythm bones to a talented youth, namely Sky.

Many of us including me have only recently been introduced to percussionist James Yoshizawa, but as you will read in his profile, he is one of the very few professional rhythm bones players.

It is sad to cancel Bones Fest XXIV in Alexandria, Virginia, but in the long run we may have instituted an annual virtual Bones Fest that brings together rhythm bones players from all over the world. The preliminary program for our Virtual Bones Fest I begins on this page.

Periodically, I search the Internet for new websites, and this time found Walter Hollister in an old newspaper article. Were he still alive, I'm sure we could all learn something from him.

## Letters to the Editor

At least so far, I've always taught in person. I know a couple musicians who teach other instruments that are trying out doing it online.

A few years ago, I made my '101' documents for both rhythm bones and bodhrán available on my web site. I don't track downloads so I have no idea who has seen them. *Michael Ballard*

<https://www.mdb-services.com/app/download/2138000/Bones+101.pdf>

<https://www.mdb-services.com/app/download/2137966/Bodhr%C3%A1n+101.pdf>

Billy Dunbar is a musician who attends the NCTMA Festival and frequently accompanied Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell and later Sharon Mescher in their shows. He wrote the following in response to the June RBS Email, "All the Best to you and God Bless the Bone Players of the World!"

### (Director continued from Page 1)

Bones Fest has often been described as a family reunion, and we're really hoping that by getting together in a virtual sense, we can feel the community and love we will miss by not getting together in person.

But think about this for a second. The Rhythm Bones Society literally has members all over the world! Bones Fest attendees have been almost exclusively come from North America given the expense of travel. For the first time attendees are not expected to travel which immediately opens the prospect of members attending literally from all over the world!

For example, I have often lamented that my friend and percussionist Boris Sichon from Vancouver could not attend a Bones Fest because not only is he an amazing rhythm bone player, he's an amazing human being. But here is his chance!

Already we have had interest from Ireland, and several European countries. Several folks from California have expressed an interest in attending. We really think the proverbial sky is the limit, and all we need is you!

Please register at the web site to give us the information we need for planning and implementing the Fest. We will be presenting the details on the web site, as well as providing support for folks who need it to access Zoom, the format of choice for the Fest. Please help to make this Virtual Bones Fest a success, and join us to renew the family feeling of our organization. We've experienced the worst of times, let's experience and remember the best of times! *Steve Brown*

## Virtual Bones Fest XXIV Preliminary Program

Bones Fest XXIV will be a virtual Bones Fest using ZOOM teleconferencing technology that will look like the photograph of the proposed t-shirt on Page 3. The exciting aspect is that people who have never been to Bones Fest are attending this Fest, and that means we have rhythm bones players from around the world in virtual

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

attendance.

The Virtual Fest is scheduled for July 25, 2020, and will begin at 1 PM, GMT which is 9 AM Eastern Daylight Time, the time used in the program details below.

**Zoom Meeting Rooms.** Bones Fest XXIV will use three Zoom meeting rooms, and attendees will receive an email with the information needed to join each room (Meeting ID and Password). The room titled 'Main Room' will be open for the entire Fest. The 'Bone Room' and 'Rhythm Room' will be open for concurrent workshops.

**Legal Backup Music Required.** At previous Fests, performers who played to commercial CDs did not get their performance video on our website due to copyright issues. Since this year's Fest is entirely online, we have a library of legal music that you can download and use. This has the benefit that you can practice to a song ahead of time. Attendees will be emailed a link to the library. If you have

legal music, you can certainly use it.

If you would like to play to a fiddle tune, Jonathan Danforth will record it for you. Details will be emailed to attendees. Thanks to Jonathan.

**Fest Graphic/Motto/T-shirt.** There will be a t-shirt that can be ordered after the Fest. It will be similar to the photograph on this page, but with the Group Photograph. The Fest motto is “*Streaming Rhythm Bones Around the World.*”

**Technical Details.** Prior to the ‘Practice Workshop’ described in the next section, attendees will receive an email with the technical details needed to attend the Fest.

**Saturday, 12:00 to 3:00 PM - July 18, 2020 – Practice Workshop – Moderator: Skeff Flynn**

This Pre-Bones Fest workshop is for attendees and us as hosts to practice how to use Zoom for the greatest benefit. It will cover how to sign in, basic controls, microphone placement, video camera placement, lighting, screen sharing, chatting and more so all of us get the most out of the Fest.

**Preliminary Program.** The following program is likely to change based on responses to Registration Forms still coming in.

**Saturday, 9:00 AM – July 25, 2020 – Bones Fest XXIV Begins**

**9:00 AM- Opening Session - Meet and Greet with Steve Brown**

The session begins with opening remarks from Rhythm Bones Society’s Executive Director, Steve Brown. During this session in a somewhat controlled way, attendees can say hello or chat with old friends, and we can find out what parts of the world are represented.

**9:30 AM – Individual Introductions – Moderator: Steve Brown**

Each participant gets an allotted time (5-10min) to introduce themselves, talk about how they came to the bones, and demonstrate how they play. This is the hallmark of the Rhythm Bones Society, including everyone, no matter level of play.

**1:00 PM – Workshop Sessions A**

**Main Room – Intermediate – Moderator: Tommy Hayes**

Know the basics, how to hold, make the sounds, and playing a bit to music? Tommy picks you up from here, and helps you develop skills to apply to music.

**Bone Room - Beginner – Moderator: Steve Brown**

This session teaches the basics of getting started, holding, producing the sounds, the tap, the triplet, and shaping the sounds to music.

**Rhythm Room – Advanced – Moderator: Kenny Wolin**

This workshop will focus on taking 2-hand independence to the next level. We’ll start with thinking the bones triplet-tap motion as 4 sixteenth notes to create more syncopated rhythms. Then, we’ll work on some right hand repeated rhythms (ostinato patterns) while improvising basic rhythms with the left hand. I use this technique a lot in my playing, especially with rock, bluegrass, polkas, and Latin music. Search “Kenny bones Wolin” on Youtube for some examples.

**2:00 PM – Workshop Sessions B**

**Main Room – Rhythm Bones Around the World and History – Moderator: Jonathan Danforth**

Rhythm Bones date back literally thousands of years, and can be found in a multitude of cultures. Join our resident historian Jonathan Danforth as he takes us on a journey to different times, and places where rhythm bones have been played and developed.

**Bone Room – Round table discussion on teaching techniques: – Moderator: Mardeen Gordon**

Teaching is paramount to spreading rhythm bones to a new generation, and keeping it alive. Each player has their own unique approach, passed to them from their mentor, and given their own personal touch. Hear the experience of attendee’s, and join in on the conversation.

**Rhythm Room – Tips, techniques, and food for thought – Moderator: Steve Brown**

This session will feature several short presentations including, Graham Hargrove, accompanying Ottawa Valley Step Dance, Brad Dutz, Quads and odd

**Bones Fest XXIV  
July 25, 2020  
Virtual Using Zoom**



Sessions, Workshops, Performances

**Your Host, Board of Directors  
of the Rhythm Bones Society**

*To Register go to*  
[rhythmbones.org/nextFest.html](http://rhythmbones.org/nextFest.html)

time signatures, Borris Sichon, rhythm bones and Didgerdoo, Mardeen Gordon History Rap, Tom Connolly rhythm bones and washboard, Brad Dutz and James Yoshizawa rhythm bones duets, and others yet to be identified. This session continues for another hour.

**3:00 PM – Workshop Session C**

**Main Room – Applying Rhythm Bones to the Drumset – Moderator: Bill Vits**

We will explore the possibilities of rhythm bones with sticks, brushes and shakers while incorporating the feet at the drum set. Different styles (bluegrass, country, Latin, swing and rock) can all add rhythm bones for a unique flavor. Drumming techniques that apply to rhythm bones playing will encourage experimentation as we sample some rudiments that work on rhythm bones. You don’t know till you try!

**Bone Room – Round table discussion on Judging the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship: – Moderator: Steve Brown (Continued on next page)**



Ever want to compete in a rhythm bone contest? So very few exist, but perhaps the best known, and most competitive is the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, held in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, Ireland. We have assembled a panel of 5 Judges who have more than 15 contests between them. Junior Davey, Tommy Hayes, Johnny Ringo McDonagh, Mel Mercier discuss their perspective and experience judging the contests.

***Rhythm Room – Tips, techniques, and food for thought*** – Moderator: Steve Brown

This session continues from Workshop Session B above.

**4:00 PM – *Virtual Pass Off/Open Jamming*** – Moderator: Skeff Flynn

The late Walt Watkins gave us the Pass Off where each person in turn plays for a short time and then passes the playing to the next person. In Zoom there is a time delay so the players will seem to be out of ‘sync’ with the music, but it will still be fun for all.

**5:00 PM – *General Business Meeting*** – Moderator: Steve Brown

The Rhythm Bones Society Bylaws require an annual meeting to elect the Board of Directors and other matters raised by the members present. This is normally a short meeting.

**5:30 PM – *Open Jamming*** – Moderator: TBD

**6:00 PM – *Show Performances*** – Moderator: Steve Brown

This will be like our Public Performance at a traditional Bones Fest. Attendees who want to perform sign up using the Chat tool.

**?:00 PM – *Cocktail Party*** – Moderator: TBD

The time for this session is approximate as the Show may run longer than planned. This is a time to enjoy more jamming, say goodbyes and close with the traditional Congo Line with each person presented full screen.

## Virtual Bones Fest Presenter Preview

Virtual Bones Fest is almost upon us, and as the chairman of the Program Committee, I’m particularly excited about the new faces we will see who have never been able to attend a Bones Fest due to distance, and schedule commitments. Now that we are meeting on line, and during a time when many events have been canceled, it has freed up time and availability to include some really interesting players.

From Canada we have two professional percussionists who have registered to attend. Borris Sichon was classically trained percussionist at the University of Leningrad in Russia. He toured Europe as part of a state sponsored ensemble, and defected to France and later to Israel. He picked up rhythm bones and has brought his own sense of spirit to the instrument. He now lives in Vancouver, BC. Graham Hargrove is a multi-instrument percussionist, living in Toronto, Canada. He picked up rhythm bones after an interest in Bodhran, and has competed in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship twice, coming in 2nd, and 3rd respectively.

I am thrilled to announce that some legendary rhythm bones players from Ireland have registered to attend. Johnny Ringo McDonagh’s name is synonymous with bodhran and rhythm bones in Ireland, having been a founder member of DeDannan, and his own band Archady, and someone who has literally changed percussion in traditional Irish music. Equally as iconic, Tommy Hayes, founding member of Stocktons Wing, and appearing on literally hundreds of recordings as a percussionist, Tommy’s unique approach to percussion has made him one of the most innovative players in traditional Irish Music. His video of how to play rhythm bones, bodhran, and spoons has taught a generation to play the instrument. Junior Davey, 5 time All Ireland Bodhran Champion, and 2 time All Ireland Bone Playing Champion, and a product of County Sligo, one of the most legendary areas for traditional Irish music. His Father, Andrew Davey was a corner stone in the Sligo fiddling style. And our own Dr. Mel Mercier, for-

mer Board Member and regular attendee of Bones Fests, son of iconic Bodhran / rhythm bones player Peadar Mercier, and Director of World Music Performance at University Limerick. We are thrilled to have Mel back in the fold. One of the events we have planned is a discussion on judging rhythm bone playing contests with all of the above players.

From California we have Randy and Mardeen Gordon, both expert players, and the proprietors of Shooting Star Bones. Randy and Mardeen have attended one Bones Fest Previously, and have an exuberant style of play that will spur you into playing. Brad Dutz, professional percussionist in the Los Angeles area, has appeared in a number of films, and television programs, including Black Sails, the popular HBO program. One of his former students, James Yoshizawa, professional percussionist, and 2nd place finisher at the 2019 All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, will also be attending. See below for a separate profile of James.

Several of our Board Members will be involved in presentations as well. Kenny Wolin, percussionist with the ‘Presidents Own Marine Band,’ will be presenting an advanced rhythm bone playing workshop, and one that he has done at previous Bones Fests. Bill Vits, principal percussionist with the Grand Rapids Symphony will present a workshop on how to integrate rhythm bone playing into the drum set. Jonathon Danforth will be taking us around the world in rhythm bones, and throwing in some history as well.

These are just a few of our registrants so far, with a month to go, who knows who else will register! Register today at [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)!

## James Yoshizawa

I am a lifelong student of the percussive arts. I was born in the greater Los Angeles area, and my first paying gigs ever were when I was 12 years old playing Japanese percussion and taiko for the Obon Festivals in the summer in Little Tokyo. [Photograph on Page 8.]

My foray into rhythm bones began in 2004 after being introduced to them by my teacher at the time, percussionist Brad Dutz. I was instantly hooked and have since earned a reputation for



utilizing rhythm bones in a wide array of musical situations. My rhythm bones playing can be found on many albums that range from more traditional Irish and folk music to progressive modern jazz and electronic music.

In 2016, I served as the bodhrán and rhythm bones soloist and percussionist for the Broadway musical, "Come From Away" during its run at Ford's Theater in Washington, DC. In 2019, I competed in the All-Ireland Bones Competition in Abbeyfeale, Ireland and was awarded 2nd place. I have also been a guest artist at the annual Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival in Fairbanks, AK since 2013 where I perform and teach classes in Irish percussion.

One of my favorite sets of rhythm bones are a pair of wooden rhythm bones made by Barry Patton in one hand and a pair of Pea Patch Tri-Tone rhythm bones in the other hand. Another set of real rhythm bones I play often were custom made by Steve Brown.

The All-Ireland Bones Competition was canceled this year, so I put together a video of all of the US competitors who would have competed this year in Ireland. To view go to: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=P8LDDfpC2Zk>. *James Yoshizawa*

## Walter Lee Hollister

When the traveling medicine show came to his hometown in rural eastern Pennsylvania back in 1917, young Walter Hollister was fascinated by the rhythm bones, and he determined to have some of his own. The next time the family butchered a pig, his wish came true.

Walter Hollister was born June 10, 1909 and died August 16 1985. After 37 years as an employee of the Borough of Brooklyn, Hollister retired to Florida and lived in New Smyrna.

He was a 33rd degree Master Mason who contributed thousands of hours to the Shriner's hospital. He was a World War II veteran of the Army Air Corps (Engineer).

Walter, known as "Mr. Bones," had been clacking them for nearly 70 years (except for a brief time in the 1940s when he lost his rhythm bones and used spoons instead). His daughter said he

was self taught and his favorite music was Dixieland. There is a photograph of Walter playing with a band on Page 6.

He played at Mummers' parades, Macy's parades, mall openings and wedding receptions, and in taverns, churches, hospitals and resort hotels, and entertained President Nixon.

He appeared on Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour on September 13, 1964, and according to Albert Fisher who was producer of the show, he played to Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey. [Editor Note. Albert Fisher bought the rights to the show video and donated the video to the Library of Congress. See <http://originalamateurhour.com>.]

His original ivory bones were at the Roy Acuff Music Museum in Nashville, but that museum is now closed. The connection between the two of them is unclear, but David Holt notes, "At one time when Roy Acuff was opening his museum in Opryland he was buying a lot of unusual instruments. My guess is he had seen rhythm bones players and wanted to show the instrument, but I never saw Roy play rhythm bones."

The only Internet information on Hollister and his 'Rattling Rhythm Bones' was a performance in Orlando during Artfest '85, a festival sponsored by the Council of Arts & Sciences for Central Florida. The schedule read, Noon: Rosie O'Grady's Goodtime Band with Walter Hollister's Rattling Rhythm Bones. 3 PM: Altamonte Springs Community Jazz Ensemble with Walter Hollister's Rattling Rhythm Bones. The Artfest people purchased 10 sets of plastic rhythm bones for use in children's workshops. [Editor Note. The reference to plastic and that they were called 'rhythm bones' before the Rhythm Bones Society was formed suggests they were made by the late Joe Birl.]

He once said, "I used to have a nice set of calluses between my fingers and could play all day, but now I have to wear Band-Aids and take a good breather after each three-minute piece."

Some of the information in this article is from the Orlando Sentinel. Go to - [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1985-04-21/news/0290200127\\_1\\_artfest-rhythm-bones-hollister](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1985-04-21/news/0290200127_1_artfest-rhythm-bones-hollister), April 21, 1985

## Online Rhythm Bones Teaching

[Editor Note: This article is in response to an email asking for online rhythm bones instruction experience.]

The school where I teach music has gone on to online teaching, so I have a couple of weeks experience so far, teaching music lessons one to one.

I've discovered a good trick to get around the limitation that two people can't play at the same time because of the time delay. It works fine with Zoom or Facetime, for example.

One person, me, perhaps, plays a tune on my fiddle into my computer (I use an external mic)

The person on the other plays along with me while simultaneously using another app on their computer which records what is coming into their microphone. So they are recording both the sound of their instrument (bones perhaps) plus the sound of me playing.

Then, after the recording is made, they play it back from the app they used to record with, so that we can both hear each other playing together and then we discuss playing techniques, timing, etc.

It works from either end of the online conversation.

Another variation is to use a pre-made recording. I play the recording so that my student can hear it. The student records them self playing along, and then we both listen back after the recording is made.

I found that when I am playing along with someone on the other end, and recording our duet, It works best to set the volume of their playing on my computer speakers, to be about the same volume as that of the instrument that I am playing. That way it sounds much like two people playing together in the same room. And we can do that from either end of the video call.

I'm on a Mac and I found that either Quicktime or Photobooth works to do the recording. I set Quicktime to save and place the recorded audio file right onto my desktop to make it easy to find and play back. Photobooth puts the file into a sub folder so I have to dig it out. Not a big deal though. *Ryan Thomson*

(Sky Bartlett continued from Page 1)  
me play along with him and Shorty. That was the key to continued effort - playing in public. (see on-line newsletter, Vol 18, No 1 for more details)

Ernie brought me to my first Bones Fest (and many more), his second I believe. Part of the fun was that Ernie hadn't learned to play very long before I did, meaning that we got to learn a lot of things together or at nearly the same time. This allowed us to develop a similar style of playing that allows us to sound, what I believe to be, greater than the sum of our individual playing. Check us out at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp4sVvDfdUQ>.



Sky's rhythm bones dance at Bones Fest XXII

I've had twists and turns, stylistically speaking, with rhythm bones. I've tried to imitate as many players as I could over time. But I always come back to the fact that the high quality triplet is the magic of rhythm bones. That's about where Ernie was at when I first saw him play, high quality triplets. It's funny to think how hard we worked on triplets and stopping and starting, things that seem so natural now.

I've been influenced and awed by too many people over the years at Bones Fests to even think about listing anyone, but what a list it would be. The talent of the rhythm bones community never ceases to amaze me. *Sky Bartlett*

[Editor Note. Sky has written several articles for this newsletter.

The first was his primetime appearance on the ABC television show 'Wipeout' described in Volume 14, No 1 that is online on our website.

He and his aunt were watching TV when the show came on and his aunt thought he was the perfect contestant. He drove his truck to Hollywood and auditioned with hundreds of others.

During a camera audition, he brought out his rhythm bones and said "Watch this." After several month's he got a call, "Our producer loves your bones, be here in 10 days if you want to be on TV." He got in back in his truck, and did stop along the way in Colorado to see Jessye Weinstein before continuing on to California.

He did not win the contest, but had a second fastest time. And he did get to play rhythm bones on national television. He said, "I was rather surprised at the response I got for my 20ish seconds on TV. Dozens of people found me through Facebook wanting to know what those 'thingsy' were I was playing."



Sky and Jessye perform at the Alamo Compound at Bones Fest XV

That Jessye person mentioned is the lady in the photograph with the violin, and it turns out the two of them got married. You can watch that performance at the Alamo Compound at Bones Fest XV in San Antonio at <http://rhythmbones.org/video/BFXV-SkyJessyeEngagement.mp4>. This is the second couple who met at a Bones Fest and got married (the first was Kenny and Teri Wolin.)

Hosting a Bones Fest is a lot of work, but very rewarding. Sky and Jessye hosted Bones Fest XXII in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. This was a super Fest and you can read the highlights online in Volume 20, No 2.



Walter Hollister performing (see story on Page 5)

**(Ernie Duffy continued from Page 1)** housing developments sprang up where there used to be farms. Eventually we became a “real” town and Thornton built a municipal building and police station.

I had lots of hobbies growing up but most of them were with the older crowd. I didn’t have much in common with my peers so I never cared much for the party crowd. I enjoyed hunting, fishing and gardening. The outdoors was always my playground.

I knew my wife, Debbie, most of my life since she also grew up in Thornton. In fact, our houses were probably less than a ½ mile from each other. We were married at an early age. She was 17 and I was 19. Everyone predicted it wouldn’t last. I hope they’ve stopped waiting for us to call it quits since on June 30th of 2020 we’ll celebrate our 48th wedding anniversary! We raised two sons, Chris and Matt, but they moved to southern NH once they grew up and got married. We have three grandchildren and they are one of the biggest joys of our lives.

I don’t recall my family having much of a musical background. My sister, brother and I did attend the local grange and they held square dances on occasion, so we all liked that type of music. I was always tapping my toes and moving my feet anytime a song with a beat was played.

The Blake Mountain Band was the group that played most of the local square dances. Lester Bradley was the caller and he loved to instruct people how to dance. It was so much fun to have several squares full of experienced dancers as well as brand new folks. I loved attending those monthly dances.

One time when the Blake Mountain Band was playing, a jolly old guy named Shorty Boulet joined them and played rhythm bones with gusto. He was obviously having fun and added a new level to the dance. I later told Debbie “If I had a pair of bones, I could play them.” That year for Christmas I received a pair and soon began annoying the family with my constant practicing!

After that I was invited to play a song or two at the square dance. What I liked best was playing with Shorty. It was a pleasure teaming up with him as we played and the crowd always liked hearing us together.

A young friend of mine (about 13 years old at the time) seemed interested in playing the bones so I showed Sky Bartlett how to play. It wasn’t long before Shorty, Sky and I were a trio. We attended the local square dances as often as we could and soon the three of us and Shorty’s wife, Shirley, started traveling to Bones Fests. The four of us made quite a picture as none of us were world travelers but we somehow managed. When Shorty, Sky and I played together we intuitively understood each other musically. These are some of my best memories of playing rhythm bones.

To give you an example of how well we clicked (pun intended), one time I was at a Bones Fest and was standing outside of one of the doors. To hear the music better, I closed my eyes. Without knowing it, Sky came along and began playing next to me. I knew it was him on the first click of the bones. Even with my eyes closed and with any one of the 40 or 50 other players that it could have been, I knew it was Sky.

The bond I have with Sky is very special. There are videos of the two of us playing off our knees, arms and heads. We didn’t plan it but automatically were able to start and stop doing this – like mirror images. I am also pleased to step aside and let Sky play as only he can. He not only plays rhythm bones, but can entertain the crowd. I love watching him!

A couple of highlights of my rhythm bones playing was one time Debbie and I and another couple were waiting to go into the Grand Ole Opry. Of course, I had my rhythm bones in my back pocket so I pulled them out and softly started playing to the tune that the warm up band was playing. One of the band members spotted me and gave me a nod to join them on stage. I was reluctant to get up in front of that crowd, but now I can honestly tell people that I played at the Grand Ole Opry!!

Another treat was playing with street musicians and in pubs in Ireland. One of the most special Bones Fests was in 2007 when I had decided I wouldn’t be able to attend that year and Debbie surprised with a trip to Bones Fest XI in Wisconsin. To say I was shocked that she was able to pull off all those details would be an understatement. Sky went with me and the two of us had a blast.

From having traveled to many Bones Fests, I believe being around others encourages you to grow as a musician. Watching other players techniques inspires me to improve. I also really enjoy teaching others to play rhythm bones. I believe the ability to pass on the love of rhythm bones playing is the way to keep it alive for the next generation.

I am proud to be a part of the Rhythm Bones community. They are a wonderful group of people and I look forward to future Bones Fests. I also appreciate all the work behind the scenes in hosting Bones Fests and for the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter. Thanks to each of you for all you do. *Ernie Duffy*



Ernie Duffy playing rhythm bones off his body ‘Shorty Boulet’ style

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXIV.** Virtual Fest using Zoom technology, Saturday, July 25, 2020. Preliminary details in this newsletter.

**NTCMA Festival,** October 3-6, 2020, Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Rhythm bones contest will likely be on





Sky Bartlett, Ernie Duffy and Shorty Boulet performing at Bones Fest X (See Page 7)



James Yoshizawa (see Page 4)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 22, No. 3 2020

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## Executive Director's Column

20 years ago I flew to Chattanooga, Tennessee, to attend my first Bones Fest, Bones Fest IV. Of the 40 or so folks in attendance, I had previously met four people, Russ Myers, Everette Cowett, his daughter Martha, and his wife Val. I came to the Fest to fulfill my obligation as a newly appointed Board Member. Though I had been invited to Bones Fests I, II, and III, I just couldn't motivate myself to drive the several hundred miles to attend, and I kept thinking, "why would I go to North Carolina to play rhythm bones, I can play rhythm bones here!"

It wasn't long at Bones Fest IV that I got the answer. I soon found that I was part of a fraternity, a family of people who had never met! There were

people from all over the country, and even from Ireland. After my performance on the first day, people spontaneously ran up to hug me! Playing rhythm bones was not only valued, it made me one of them, unconditional love!

Fast forward 20 years, and I'm sitting in my spare room in front of a computer screen, in the little town of Winchendon, Massachusetts. In front of me are literally people from all over the world: Poland, Switzerland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, as well as many states across the US, and guess what, we're playing, rhythm bones and even more amazing, that feeling is there, (Continued on Page 2)

## Highlights From Bones Fest XXIV

Bones Fest XXIV has so many highlights. It was originally planned for Alexandria, Virginia, hosted by Kenny and Teri Wolin, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic was retooled as a virtual Bones Fest using Zoom teleconferencing technology. The host for the Fest was changed to our Board of Directors with Steve Brown as Program Committee Chair and Skeff Flynn as Technical Committee Chair (shown in the photograph on this page along with Randy Gordon and Dean Robinson who were Technical Hosts during the Fest). The host normally pens the highlights article, and keeping with tradition, several Board Members 'wordsmith' from their own perspective.

**Steve Brown.** As the full impact of the virus began to take shape in March, and the ways that it was going to effect our lives gripped us, the awful realization that there would be no Bones Fest this year became clear. We tried to deny it at first, but there was no avoiding it. At a Board Meeting to discuss the cancellation, the obvious suggestion came up: why not go virtual? The idea was batted about, but soon became

like the proverbial snow ball rolling down the hill, gathering momentum, until it was literally the size of a house. The Board began to have regular meetings, new zoom accounts were purchased, and we began to reach out to the multitude of rhythm bones players around the world, and then it hit me, it's going to happen!

The responsibility of gathering a large group of people together, on a format few of us had used beyond short family meetings hovered over us like a cloud you're really not sure will rain on you. (Continued on Page 3)



Bones Fest XXIV hosts; from left to right and down, Dennis Riedesel, Steve Wixson, Sharon Mescher, Skeffington Flynn, Bill Vits, Dean Robinson, Steve Brown, Randy Gordon and Kenny Wolin.

## Editorial

Put Parker Waite and me together and we have been to every Bones Fest, 12 players at Bones Fest I to 89 (the largest) at Bones Fest X to 60 at Virtual Bones Fest XXIV.

The BFXXIV Group Photograph, shown on Pages 4 and 5 is in two pieces so half of it goes on the front of the Fest T-shirt and the other on the back. Each half looks like a Zoom Gallery view. As soon as it is finished, we will send an email form from which you can order.

There will be many Videos of the Month that show up on our homepage. The first two came out with August and September RBS Emails. Each month over the months until Bones Fest XXV will be more of the story of the first worldwide Bones Fest. Attendees can attest that the Fest was outstanding!

The Minutes of the Board and Membership meetings are on this page. Our Bylaws stipulate that the Board determines the time and place of meetings, and while it does not mention an electronic meeting, it seems within the spirit of the Bylaws that it is legal.

### (Editorial Continued from Page 1)

that love, that family I never met before feeling is there! On a computer screen! To be sure Virtual Bones Fest was a success, and in fact, it may have changed Bones Fests forever! Now we know there are people literally all over the world who will join us, even if the physical act of coming is beyond them, and they are one of us! One of the family!

Next year in Alexandria, Virginia, the 25th Annual Bones Fest will take place, as hosted by Teri and Kenny Wolin. As it is our 25th, Silver Anniversary of sorts, we would like to do something special to commemorate the event. Various ideas about special commemorative rhythm bones have been floated around, and we are asking you, the members, do you have any idea's that you would like to see to mark this remarkable even. Make all suggestions to Steve Wixson (wixson@epbfi.com) or Steve Brown (stevebrownbones@gmail.com). Thank you in advance! *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting

The Board meeting used Zoom teleconferencing technology on Monday, June 29th, starting at 7 PM EDT. All members were present. There was a discussion about the program and technical details for the upcoming Virtual Bones Fest XXIV, and much progress was achieved such that the preliminary program could be included in the 2nd quarter newsletter.

Then Executive Director, Steve Brown, called the meeting to order as the Nominating Committee and all current Board Members were nominated to serve in 2021, Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and members at large, Skeffington Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin. Motion was made, seconded and approved to adjourn at 8:05 PM. Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson Secretary

## Minutes of Membership Meeting

The Membership Meeting using Zoom teleconferencing technology was called to order by Steve Brown, Executive Director, at 5:03 PM on July 25, 2020. The minutes of the last meeting as printed in the newsletter were approved. Steve Wixson as Treasurer noted there was over \$7,000 in the bank and a full Treasurer's Report will be mailed to the Executive Director.

Steve Wixson presented the Nominating Committee Report noting that all current Board Members were nominated for 2021. The floor was open to nominations and there being none a motion was made and approved to elect the nominees by acclamation.

There was no old business. Steve Brown thanked the Board for organizing the Fest and Randy Gordon and Dean Robinson for their work as technical meeting hosts.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

Kenny and Teri Wolin volunteered to host Bones Fest XXV, our Silver Anniversary Fest. A motion to confirm them as hosts was made, seconded and approved. Due to the success of Zoom for Bones Fest XXIV, there was support for adding it onto the face-to-face BFXXV. The meeting was adjourned at 5:20 PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXV, Silver Anniversary Fest.** July 2021, Alexandria, VA hosted by Kenny and Teri Wolin. Details to follow.

**NTCMA Festival,** October 3-6, 2020, Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

**All Ireland Bones Competition,** May, 2021, Abbeyfeale, Ireland.

### **(Highlights Continued from Page 1)**

As the idea of the Virtual Fest inched toward reality, I think we all experienced a mixture of excitement and the nervousness of potential failure. It soon became clear that the Board was not the only ones excited, as the registrations grew, offers to do presentations and workshops came in, and volunteers to tackle the nitty gritty aspects of the Fest appeared.

The day of the Fest dawned early for the Board, scrambling to make sure all the little details were covered, and that we were prepared for the eventual glitches. Participants began to gather, new faces from far off lands, old faces from Bones Fests gone by, all popping up on a screen like a version of Hollywood Squares. We chit chatted, and greeted, all while the squares grew to a sizable portion of the screen, and grew and grew!

The Fest began as each participant, starting with the Board, began to tell their own rhythm bone playing story, how they came to rhythm bones, who might have brought them there, and then show their style and what playing rhythm bones means to them. This is the hallmark of Bones Fest as it has began since the first gathering in Everett Cowett's back yard almost 25 years ago. As each participant began to tell their story, something suddenly hit me, here was the spirit of a Bones Fest on a computer screen! You can take Bones Fest away from the people, but you can't take people out of the Bones Fest! That family reunion feel was coming through, the excitement and enthusiasm was there, We were together, and as Mary Lee Sweet told me when I was commiserating about my second hosting of Bones Fest, "That's all that matters!"

After introductions we began to separate into groups, first workshops on playing, and then specific topics and demonstrations. We had all felt in the planning that this was going to be the challenging aspect of the Fest. Would the rooms work, would people get to where they were suppose to be, would presenters show up? The answers to all of the questions were a resounding YES!

Another question from the beginning was, how would the pass-off work?

A corner stone of the fest since Walt Watkins introduced it at Bones Fest VII, the limitations of Zoom, and a new word, latency, spelled potential disaster for rhythm bones players trying to play in time, one after another. We, as the Board, decided to go ahead with it, knowing that it's potential benefits far outweighed the potential chaos. For almost an hour most of the participants, as directed by our technology wizard Skeffington Flynn, played along with a variety of legal music, and the joy of playing rhythm bones was evident!

My personal highlights are somewhat limited by the rooms I was in, and my responsibilities that I attended to but here are a few: the entire introduction section, experiencing the joy in peoples faces and their expressions as they entered our long standing rhythm bone playing family! Annika from Poland, Chris from Ireland, Steve from Switzerland, and the many, many faces from around the world, and our country excited by playing rhythm bones! Brad Dutz and James Yoshizawa's duet, written by James, and entitled "Latency" was both playful and impressive! Boris Sichon combining Didgeridoo and rhythm bones painting an almost prehistoric atmosphere. Kenny Wolins advanced workshop and the enthusiastic response from the participants. And sitting in a room with legends of Irish music Tommy Hayes, Mel Mercier, and Junior Davey, recounting our experiences judging the 'All Ireland Bone Playing Championship' was a true joy.

I want to thank all of the participants who made this amazing event a reality, but specifically: Skeffington Flynn's whose expertise, and patience with participants contributed greatly to the success of the Fest, Board members Steve Wixson, Dennis Riedesel, Sharon Mescher, Kenny Wolin, and Bill Vits whose efforts before and during the Fest were instrumental to it's success, technical hosts Randy Gordon and Dean Robinson who worked tirelessly, Presenters Kenny Wolin, Tommy Hayes, Mardeen Gordon, Jonathon Danforth, Brad Dutz, James Yoshizawa, Gerry Hines, Bruno Giles, Rowan Corbett, Boris Sichon, Graham Hargrove, Junior Davy, and Mel Mercier for their excellent presentations.

Here's hoping we see you all at Bones Fest XXV in Alexandria, Virginia, next year! May your bones be with you! *Steve Brown*

Technology is not one of my fortes. As the Board Members would meet to plan the first virtual Rhythm Bones Fest, I felt as if I was the one from another planet! While listening to the tech gurus throw out all their ideas, I'm thinking, "What are they talking about??"

Thankfully, because of Stephen Brown, Steve Wixson, Skeff Flynn, and Dennis Riedesel, I believe the Fest was an over-the-top success.

I appreciated that this festival allowed us to meet participants from around the world. It is always a joy to watch the myriad styles of playing rhythm bones, and we definitely had that opportunity. This first virtual festival was pure fun. I'm looking forward to seeing all of you next year in Alexandria, VA. *Sharon Mescher*

My perspective of Bones Fest XXIV is very positive due to my exposure to so many different aspects of playing the rhythm bones that I may not have had if this was another face to face festival. I feel this way even as hindered as we were by the limitations imposed by computer hardware, software, and telecommunication issues that we were not able to overcome.

Sure, as so many others have lamented, there were no "bone's family" hugs and personal interactions but online venues allowed other positive experiences:

\*It was a distinct pleasure to meet other players from around the world as well as the U.S. that I would probably never have met at one of our traditional festivals. It was also good to see other players that I have not seen for several years.

\*I witnessed bone playing skills and techniques that were new to me. Not that I could or would become proficient with them but I now know exist. There were even some that were discussed but not demonstrated that I need to find out about.

\*The utilization of the online venue opens other ideas that we could pursue, ie. virtual skill and technique sessions;



From left to right and down; Greg Adams, Michael Ballard, Kate Barfield, Mitch Boss, Jeremy Brown, Tom Connolly, Rebecca Cooke, Rowan Corbett, Tom Cowett, Gray Cox, Joey Craighead, Jonathan Danforth with son, Emmett, Doug Danforth, Junior Davy, Brad Dutz, Skeffington Flynn, Chris Flynn, Bruno Giles, Mardeen Gordon, Randy Gordon, Graham Hargrove, Tommy Hayes, Heidi Hess-Bynum Gerry Hines, Jim Holloway, Pascal Huynh, Timothy Jones, Jim Lande and Sophie Lichens.

virtual regional bones festivals, incorporating a virtual component into our future bones festivals.

\*The presentations that I attended and those that I visited for a few minutes were excellent. Kudos and thanks to all of our presenters. Teaching online adds a bit more complexity and distractions than a face to face class. For me, this was a day well spent. *Dennis Riedesel*

## Randyman Show

Randy Gordon, the Randyman, has a radio show on KBCZ 90.1FM - Boulder Creek Community Radio, California. Inspired by Bones Fest XXIV, he put together a playlist of different styles of music to play with rhythm bones.

<https://www.mixcloud.com/TheRandyman/unburied-treasure-show-117-7-25-20-bones-music/>

## BFXIV Program

The program summary for the Fest is on Page 5. Attendees greeted each other during the Opening Session. Individual Introductions gave them the chance to tell about themselves and demonstrate their style, and most of the photographs above were taken from this session. The Beginner Workshop didn't have many true beginners. The Intermediate Workshop covered slow music and three rhythm bones in the hand. The Advanced Workshop, had three topics, turning triplets in to 16th notes, the Gallup rhythm, and Ostinato patterns. The Rhythm Bones Around the World Workshop also included history and the slides from this workshop are available. How to teach new people was addressed in the Teaching Workshop. The two Tips

and Techniques Workshops included Rowan Corbett on polyrhythms, Brad Dutz on Quads and odd time signatures, Mardeen Gordon on tuning rhythm bones, Graham Hargrove on Step Dancing and rhythm bones, Gerry Hines and Bruno Giles on harmonica and rhythm bones, Boris Sichon demonstrating Didgerdoo and rhythm bones, and James Yoshizawa in a duet with Dutz. The workshop on Applying Rhythm Bones to the Drumset also included playing drum rudiments using rhythm bones. Contest judging at the All-Ireland Bones Championship had a panel of former judges including Steve Brown, Dr. Mel Mercier, Tommy Hayes, and Junior Davey. The Virtual Pass-off session didn't really work, but everyone had fun. Officers and Board Members for 2021 were elected at the Membership Meeting (see Page 2).





From left to right and down; Dick Lily, Steve Litsios, Daryl McDicken, Dr. Mel Mercier, Sharon Mescher, Annika Mikolajko, Lisa Olnstein, Irvin Osborne-Lee, Joanne Rawlings-Sekundo, Dennis Riedesel, Dean Robinson, Eugene Rothman, Jim Runner, Paul Sedgwick, Boris Sichon, Nicole Singer, Ellen Stern, Marty Stock, Mary Lee Sweet, Hank Tenenbaum, Robert Vickory, Bill Vits, Stan Von Hagen, Parker Waite, Hans Weehiuzen. Noel White, Steve Wixson, Kenny Wolin, Teri Wolin and James Yoshizawa

Time (EDT)	Time (UTC)	Description	Moderator	Room
9:00 AM	13:00	Opening Session	Steve Brown	Main
9:30 AM	13:30	Individual Introductions	Steve Brown	Main
1:00 PM	17:00	Beginner Workshop	Steve Brown	Bone
1:00 PM	17:00	Intermediate Workshop	Tommy Hayes	Main
1:00 PM	17:00	Advanced Workshop	Kenny Wolin	Rhythm
2:00 PM	18:00	Rhythm Bones Around the World and History	Jonathan Danforth	Main
2:00 PM	18:00	Teaching Techniques	Mardeen Gordon	Bone
2:00 PM	18:00	Tips and Techniques	Steve Brown	Rhythm
3:00 PM	19:00	Applying Rhythm Bones to the Drumset	Bill Vits	Main
3:00 PM	19:00	Contest Judging	Steve Brown	Bone
3:00 PM	19:00	More Tips and Techniques	Mardeen Gordon	Rhythm
4:00 PM	20:00	Virtual Pass-Off	Skeff Flynn	Main
5:00 PM	21:00	Membership Meeting	Steve Brown	Main

## BFXIV Reflections

Many people talk about the Rhythm Bones Society as a family and the Bone Fests as family gatherings. That was so true of the virtual Fest also.

I think one of the enablers was that we have become so accustomed to “Zooming” with our own families so the technology was no real problem for anyone.

The other enabler was the hard work and preparation you guys did. Thank you Steve Brown, Skeff Flynn, and Steve Wixson for your brilliant work.

The astounding moment of the Fest for me was when Jeremy Brown did his intro. All the way over here in Ireland I could see and feel the love pouring from every little screen.

The Fest lit up with big smiles and waving hands and a pulse of positivity went around the world on wires and through the air. I have never experienced anything like that online before. We are so lucky to have Jeremy in our family.

*Tom Connolly*

Though I was only able to take part in portions of the program, I really enjoyed it. I found the tips on getting different tones from Mardeen very stimulating.

Jonathan’s history of the bones proved to be more helpful than I expected because it not only gave interesting info but it suggested ways of exploring relationships systematically between rhythm bones and other instruments in order to explore new ways of playing rhythm bones themselves.

Boris Sichon’s extraordinary energy and skills were a major inspiration to do more, move more, try more, and have more fun with it all.

And it was goofy but fun to try to play with folks in a Zoom environment -- at times a bit like eating a tasty meal right after a trip to the dentist in which my



mouth has been anesthetized. All the best. *J. Gray Cox*

The amazing passion and eccentric dedication Of Very interesting Creative people to such an unusually flexible And varied instrument! I see now I must make it to the next live event.

Thanks again much to The Really unique musical individuals involved ,,,So Great !!!!

One good thing About this terrible virus “scare” For me was It caused Bone Fest to become an onLine event. You can’t imagine how this fear of COVID has DESTROYED the Livelihood of the music industry.

“We are suffering”- and not just financially - because our full time passion is to make music And interact with others, If we can’t do that - then what’s left????

Thanks again so much for not allowing a virus to stop your completely amazing 24th Bone Festival, and so nice of you to invite me to participate And bring some much needed joy back into my life. With much respect. *Brad Dutz*

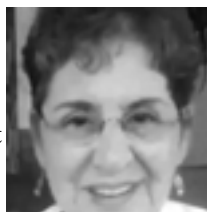
Thank you everyone--RBS Board and other festival volunteers, participants, everyone--for the best day I’ve had since everything shut down in March. It was a long day but worth it in every way. How do

we get to see what Hank had planned for us today? So sorry to miss that!

Small survey/food for discussion:  
~ Have you always been a rhythm keeper? Pencil-on-the-desk drummer? Teeth tapper? Other? If so, how early were you aware of it? Is it just a nervous activity or is it some kind of inner rhythm? Something we’re born with or an acquired skill?

My dad said I was patting him on the back when I was a month or so old.

A suggestion for being photographed while playing rhythm bones: back away from the camera so folks can see your hands in relation to your body--your wrist movement, your posture, etc. When



played up close to the camera they’re just a rhythmic blur--exciting but not very useful.

Several times it was said, “The computer hears rhythm bones as background noise.” Well, hells bells, so does a lot of the rest of the world. Maybe we ought to talk about that sometime. I have a few rhythm bones horror stories to share in a laugh-a-lot session.

The future: snare drum bones etudes, Annika’s “only rhythm bones projects” playlist--so much creativity! And Junior’s young student--the future of RBS is secure!

My only regret? I wish I’d had kids so they could say they learned how to play rhythm bones from their mother. :-)))

*Ellen Stern*

Well, Covid. I have not been to a blues jam since first week in March and my rhythm bones were packed in my jam bag. So yesterday was the first time I have played bones since then.

No complaints -- I listened to the fellow who hadn’t played since his musical partner died two years ago. Today I’ll try them a little in a jam kazam session with an acoustic blues friend. They are an old friend.

Looking forward to some of the sessions being online, especially Jonathan Danforth’s because I missed half and that isn’t information I absorb on one hearing.

The one thing I would wish for is slow motion, close up video for some of the technique demonstrations. Some smart phones can do that but maybe there is some good, cheap equipment the organization could buy that would facilitate. Cheers, *Jim Lande*

It was a great Fest. Doing it over the Internet presented certain challenges but they were addressed as they arose. I’ve missed a few Fests so it was great to see so

many familiar faces and to meet some new faces. This was the most international Fest that I’m aware of, with countries represented that wrapped almost all the



way around the globe (and people willing to be up far past their respective bed times in order to participate).

As usual, many of the participants are up in their years but it was also great to see some talented younger folks. Annika, in particular, was impressive. Check out what she has posted on YouTube.

It was also fun to re-connect with Mardeen who I haven't seen or spoken with in many years.

I like the idea of including a virtual component to future Fests so that people who are not able to make the trip can still participate. Hopefully, I'll be able to be there in person when the Wolins host next year. *Michael Ballard*

At a normal Bones Fest I am always amazed at the talents of the individual participants, but this went WAY beyond that. From Australia to Poland and many points in between the talent and variety was incredible.



The many other instruments played, the background stories, the innovation in the types of rhythm bones made, I can go on and on. It might not ever be repeated as the logistics of travel for some many stand in the way of actually attending in person. I hope that some element of this virtual Fest can be incorporated into the future. *Gerry Hines*

Although the Fest went very well, I think there are a few things that could be improved if future "virtual" Fests and/or workshops are planned. The workshops I attended were great. I wonder if something like this could be provided throughout the year (either as stand alone workshops or via the website).



Finally - something deeper: It really was great to see and hear about some of the "legendary" (at least to me) rhythm bones players. Especially to see and hear Dr. Mercer and his conversation with Sharon Mescher and their reminiscing about Jerry. Also, just to hear people talk about their learning about rhythm bones from such as Percy Danforth, Joe

Birl, Fred Edmunds and other mentors. This is something that you occasionally overhear in passing at Bones Fests. But the virtual interaction over the Internet felt to be almost one-on-one.

Thanks for the opportunity to participate in such an endeavor in these perilous times. The thought that this annual get-to-gather would be missed this year was disappointing. I am so glad that the Steves, Skeff, and the Board were able to pull this off. *Stan Von Hagen*

Wanted to give you my impressions of Bones Fest XXIV. In general I felt that it was extremely well organized and well run, especially given that it was the initial virtual Bones Fest.



All of the presenters were outstanding. As this was my first Bones Fest I was looking forward to meeting new rhythm bones players, so I found the introductions to be very interesting and informative. One of the advantages of a virtual meeting is the opportunity it provides for people living in distant places to attend. It was quite a thrill to be able to see and talk to legends like Junior Davey and Tommy Hayes. Another nice feature of the meeting Saturday was the ability to mute the participants, which allowed everyone to play and practice during the presentations without drowning out the presenter.

All in all it was a wonderful experience and I'm already looking forward to BonesFest XXV. *Dean Robinson* [Thanks Dean for serving as a Technical Host.]

Thank ALL of the principals that took the time and energy to put the Virtual Bones Fest together! I am mostly a technophobe and had little interest in a Fest by zoom. How wrong I was. It was GREAT!

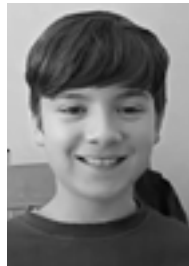


With the shut-down of all live music venues this is just what I needed AND this technology may prove to be a shot in the arm to ensure and promote the Rhythm Bones Society. As a recruiting tool and wealth of material for on-line YouTube promotion, the possibilities are

endless.

There are a lot of (young) rhythm bones players poised to take this obsolete instrument in a plethora of new directions that I can't even imagine. I look forward to learning from them at the next Bones Fest. *Hank Tenenbaum*

I attended the first virtual Bones Fest this year, had it not been virtual I would not have had the amazing opportunity to be part of it!



I have been playing (& learning) rhythm bones since May 2019.

I am 11 years old and from Sligo Ireland, I also play the bodhran and am so lucky to have the great Junior Davey as my teacher! It was Junior who introduced me to rhythm bones, Junior is an amazing musician and the very best teacher.

Unfortunately (for now) there isn't a huge interest amongst kids my age in rhythm bones but that is changing thanks to Junior, and when he sent us the message about the Bones Fest I just had to join and I am so glad I did, so many people just like me playing rhythm bones - I couldn't believe it! It was so unreal!

I loved hearing the stories on how everyone came to rhythm bones and to have the opportunity to hear the different styles of playing.

As I was the youngest and with the least experience I was so nervous to introduce myself and play but Steve was great and helped me relax! I was so happy to read all the comments from everyone on my playing - such encouragement it means so very much thank you guys!

I loved the lesson with Tommy Hayes, I have been trying his style of using 3 bones - a challenge for sure!

I had a chat with Randy after the introductions and before the zoom call, and he really made me feel so confident that I can play and to keep going!! Thank you Randy ☐

I know I WILL attend Bones Fest in person someday and can't wait!!

It was amazing to be part of such a geographically and musically diverse group, everyone was so kind and welcoming. Thank you for a great experience! *Noel White*





The Bones Fest XXIV T-shirt.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 22, No. 4 2020

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## Executive Director's Column

I've always been resistant to musical notation. From my piano lessons in 5th grade, to school band and drum lessons, it didn't seem to mean what I was hearing, maybe my lack of perseverance. Later, in high school when I played rock and roll and Jazz, the emphasis was on what you were feeling in the music, and that seemed just right to me.

That's always the way I've played rhythm bones. It's in the feeling of the music, especially in Irish music, that indescribable "flow" of the music.

Percy asked my brother to transcribe some of his playing in the 70's for exercises, and he used standard musical notation, which seemed to work out ok,

though I didn't pay much attention to it.

But I admit, developing a specific notation for the instrument brings it into a different realm, gives it a certain kind of credibility, not to mention sharing specific ideas on the bones.

Rhythm bones themselves seem to defy standard notation, with the different movement of rhythm bones, as Annika Mikolajko has demonstrated in her notation, and almost indescribable rattles and rolls we seem to emanate. In some ways, rhythm bones notation has been a bit of a holy grail, with various players searching for some way to express (Continued on Page 2)

## Rhythm Bones Notation

Have you ever played along with a song and did a 'lick' that sounded good that you wanted to remember, and then later could not repeat it? You could have memorized it, recorded it, practiced it until as Bill Vits says, "you put it in your rhythmic vocabulary," or just written it down in some way. This article examines what it might take to write down rhythm bones rhythms.

First is a review of the known ways to notate rhythm bones rhythms, and that is followed by comments on the different schemes.

Kenny Wolin presented several Bones Fest workshops where he notated what he was teaching on easel paper. After his "Latin Rhythms and Notation" workshop, he recapped the workshop in a newsletter article.

On our website is Dr. Fred Edmunds "Bones Unlimited" instructional video and Fred used a notation scheme of his own design.

Matteo, member and world class castanet player, devised a scheme he called "Castanotation." He gave RBS a video that demonstrates his scheme.

Jonathan Danforth in his article on Chlefele found a Swiss website with a notation scheme.

Dr. Mel Mercier in his PhD theses used a notation scheme to document the late Jerry Mescher's arrangements.

And at Bones Fest XXIV, we met Annika Mikolajko who commissioned a piece that uses a notation scheme. Her article on the scheme is what inspired this special issue on Notation.

So where do we go from here. Our professional players use percussion notation, and likely don't need a different scheme. Most of us can feel the rhythm in a song and string our rudiments together instinctually. That playing doesn't want notation as live performance can create moments of magic.

Bill Vits during his BFXXIV workshop talked about a 'rhythmic vocabulary' (which for him is quite large) from which you think it and your hands do it. For the successful beginning traditional rhythm bones player, their 'rhythmic vocabulary' contains the Tap, Triplet/Tap, and Triplet roll, but not the Triplet which is hard to play. Would we notate the Triplet/Tap as two separate rudiments or is it a derived element with its own name. How would a large 'rhythmic vocabulary' be notated?

When we hear people like the late Jerry Mescher's playing solo or with his sister, Bernie Worrell, playing arranged songs, we appreciate that. For them it lets them practice until they are very good. We do not know if Jerry or his father used a written notation, but we do know from Bernie that she learned arrangements from recordings that Jerry sent her so that when they rehearsed together they worked on polishing their performance.

I hope this issue leads to a discussion as something good could come from it. *Steve Wixson*

## Editorial

Rhythm bones notation has come up a few times over the years, and Kenny Wolin is the only person who has written an article on the subject. Now Annika Mikolajko tells us about the rhythm bones notation used in a work she commissioned, and it inspired this issue.

Annika is a talented young rhythm bones player who attended Virtual Bones Fest XXIV, and we are trying to figure out how we have not known about her until now. Check out her article on notation and her profile.

I wanted to pay tribute to the late Jerry Mescher so I used Mel Mercier's notation (see Page 6) to learn his signature piece, *Maple Leaf Rag*. I performed it decently at a recent Bones Fest, but I do not have the timing and speed that made Jerry one of the all-time best players and had to slow the recording down a bit. I could not have played it without Mel's notation.

In Dom's Letter to the Editor he mentions his friend Taj Mahal. Dom's note reminded me of an article I wrote on John Henry *Bones* Noble, and I went to the Internet and found more information about him that is presented on Page 8. The tie-in is *Bones* and Taj Mahal play a duet in an on-line movie titled *Bones*.

## Letters to the Editor

Friends! Here is a bit of "John Henry y los Vaqueros", my arrangement of the traditional tune. I'm playing the rhythm bones which are real cow rib bones and joining me onstage is Brian Farrow on fiddle! I was at the Louie Blueie Festival, and also opened for my good friend Taj Mahal. *Dom Flemons*

<https://www.facebook.com/DomFlemonsMusic/vid-eos/1678591388832395>

Here with Dante Pope on Cow 'rhythm' bones.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVJVOMMBNug>

This is a friend of ours, Paul Draper on banjo playing with Dom & Company in Virginia; James Pentecost, Dom Flemons, and Paul Draper at historic Clover Hill Tavern, Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, 2019. *Ron Bruschi*  
[https://youtu.be/9FGb\\_dnBE-I](https://youtu.be/9FGb_dnBE-I)

(Director continued from Page 1)  
their playing on paper, but never getting it to be a universally accepted method.

In this issue, while several older and newer methods are examined, guest author and accomplished musician Annika Mikolajko gives us the first in depth method for transcribing rhythm bones playing onto paper. I think we need to take a long, hard look at this, and what it means for rhythm bones playing in the future.

Speaking of Annika, she showed up at our Virtual Bones Fest this summer, and made quite a splash in our rhythm bones playing world. Her highly developed playing, and relationship to classical music wowed us, but her genuineness, and openness in embracing us and our quirky instrument was heart warming. If you haven't perused her video's, you will be amazed at her playing! Thank you Annika for joining us in our rhythm bones playing pursuits!

I am sitting here looking out the window at a major snow storm paralyzing the Northeast, and causing us to stay inside even more so that the Pandemic has. Jennifer is baking cookies, and Jeremy is taking in yet another Christmas movie.

It brings me back to a snow storm over 40 years ago, the Storm of 78' which resonates with everyone around here. It was right at the beginning of that storm that I found a package on the front steps of the house, and wrapped in brown paper I found 2 pairs of rhythm bones, instructional material, and a picture of the sender, Percy Danforth. Scrawled on a note was the message, "have fun with your bones!"

It was then that my bones adventure began, and in the short term it meant attempting to make some kind of sound while trapped inside of a three room apartment with 2 women, and 3 kids! Suffice it to say that I wasn't thrown out in the snow, or dismembered, and eventually some kind of sound did emerge from the rhythm bones which I could build on, and develop. But a snow storm always brings me back to that time, and reminds me, maybe now is the time to bring out those rhythm bones, keep them rattling, give yourself a little joy, and remember those who inspired you to play in the first place! Thank You Percy! *Steve Brown*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Matteo Castanotation

Matteo, a RBS member and world class castanet player had a soft spot for rhythm bones. He attended Bones Fests III and IV and dazzled us with his castanet playing. In his book, *Woods That Talk*, he called rhythm bones a type of castanet.

He developed a notation scheme he called *Castanotation*. Castanet rudiments have a Spanish name and he assigned each a symbol: both tap, TOC, plus sign; right tap, Ti, dot; left tap, TA, slash; right roll, RiA, dash+slash, left roll, RAi, dash+dot; and hit both together, CHO-QUE, vertical+dash.

On Page 5 there is an example of an exercise called Master Combination. He made a video that demonstrates the notation and more including the Master Combination at [rhythmbones.org/video/Newsletter-matteocastanotation.mp4](http://rhythmbones.org/video/Newsletter-matteocastanotation.mp4).

# Kenny Wolin's Notation Workshop

Since I'm a percussionist, I mostly notate rhythm bones with sticking patterns similar to traditional snare drumming.

I have led several workshops where I use easel paper to show what I am teaching using a simpler? scheme. The figure below was used in my Latin Rhythm and Notation Workshop at BFXIII. In the figure, numbers are used to mark measures and plus signs mark the off beat. Numbers that are circled are played as a tap and in this case two quarter notes indicate a Double that can be played traditionally or with two Taps. This sequence can be typed by replacing the circle with an underline.

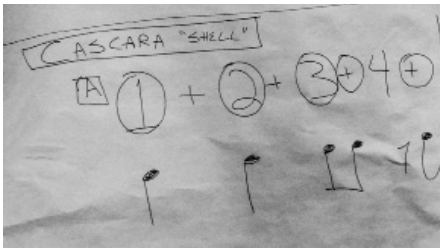


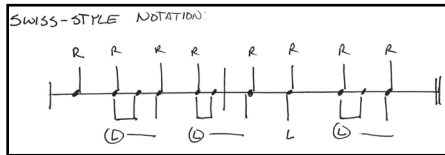
Figure ?? Workshop Notation

$$\underline{1} + \underline{2} + \underline{3} + \underline{4} +$$

For more details read the Workshop Summary in Vol 15, No 4.

It does get challenging to notate the unique motion of the rhythm bones triplet, but I found a way to do that for myself that I'd like to share. This helps me differentiate from playing rapid single taps, which I could then be able to notate differently. See the two column Figure below.

I have also been experimenting with Swiss drumming notation which has the hands separated by the up and down stems on the line.



Swiss style notation

I'm still experimenting to find a notation that could help bones players with limited music theory knowledge, but still provide some kind of practical shorthand for ideas they come up with (apart from just video taping themselves).

Kenny Wolin

NOTATION:

(L) — CAN be  $\overline{\text{TTT}}$  (TRIPLET) OR  $\overline{\text{TLT}}$  (GALLOP) Rhythm  
 (R) — DEPENDING ON NOTATED Rhythms ~

T = together (  $\begin{matrix} R & L \\ L & R \end{matrix}$  alternate notation)

DRUM CADENCE:

FILLERS:

Figure ?? Wolin Triplet Notation Ideas

# Bill Vits' Rhythmic Vocabulary

During my Bones Fest XXIV Workshop I mentioned my 'Rhythmic Vocabulary' and how I used it to perform the Tap Dance line (see figure below) in Morton Gould's *Tap Dance Concerto*. A Rhythmic Vocabulary is stored in the brain (probably in the basal ganglia), and is put there with lots of practice and repetition. With years as a professional percussionist and long time rhythm bones player, my rhythmic Vocabulary is very large. All I have to do is think it and his hands do it. A completely different example is touch typing where you do not think about the letters you type, but think of words or phrases and your fingers type the letters.

The Tap Dance line below was written as a guide for the dancer and I approached it as such by adding accents and embellishments ad lib. My performances probably varied, but I used the written rhythm as a point of departure.

In rudimental drumming all stickings are precisely notated. We could borrow the tradition of "F" for a right flam (leftRIGHT) and "F with a circle around it" for left flam (rightLEFT). These save space and are widely accepted.

Music notation often covers rhythm, pitch (for bones not necessary), dynamics (volume from pp-ff) and other performance instructions. The varying motions of bones playing often accompany distinct rhythms but would be challenging to notate (arms in and out, side to side, overhead, etc.). Mahler was famous for extra instructions so they could be added (play like a drunken sailor!)

I have never tried to notate other bones solos but it might be interesting to transcribe some famous players. I know Mel Mercier dissected the Mescher tradition but this was for research. Bones players are often so unique that it would be interesting to see a notational fingerprint from each. We all tend to vocalize rhythms and perhaps this has been the tradition for bones players. *Bill Vits*

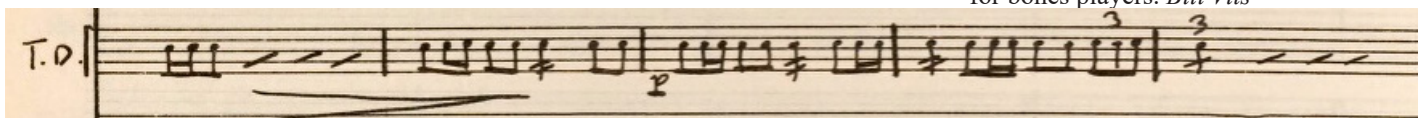


Figure ?? - See Bill Vits Article



# TALAM I

## Notation For Rhythm Bones

In 2014, composer Natalia Wojnakowska dedicated to me a piece “Talam I” for rhythm bones and contemporary cello. I worked with Natalia for a few months before the world premiere of this piece and we created a special method to write down the part of rhythm bones. Our goal was to present not only the rhythm but also the diverse and complex sound of rhythm bones

The whole piece is based on Indian rhythmic and because of that we created our own system of notation.

Basic types of hits of equal length are connected with Indian rhythmic:

1. T (Ta) – bones hit OUT
2. Tk (Taka) – bones hit OUT and IN
3. Tkt (Takita) – OUT IN OUT
4. Tkdm (Takadimi) – gradually changing from crossed position to parallel position from arms down to arms raised up
5. Trktt (Tarikitatom) – OUT IN OUT IN OUT

The duration of each note in one square is equal to one eighth note. Hexadecimal pauses are marked with dashes as shown in the figure below).



You can see it on the sample page as shown in the upper figure on this page.

For this piece I had two pairs of rhythm bones – one thicker pair which sounds lower and one that sounds higher. Changes of pairs is marked in score by words.

Because of different pitches, the position of the rhythm bones is strictly planned. As you can see in the figure titled “The position of bones in hand,” we have 5 different positions (bones held parallel in half of length, bones held parallel in upper part, bones held parallel in lower part, bones crossed, bones shifted relative to each other) and to changing positions (gradually cross bones, gradually changing crossed position to parallel)

### THE POSITION OF BONES IN HAND

) - stationary bone      ( - moving bone

- X - bones held parallel in half of length
- X - bones held parallel in upper part
- X - bones held parallel in lower part
- X - bones crossed
- X - bones shifted relative to each other
- X - bones shifted relative to each other
- X ---> X - gradually cross bones
- X ---> X - gradually changing crossed position to parallel position



position).

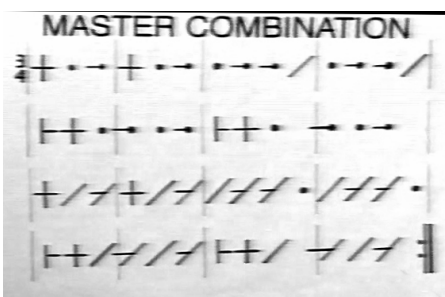
Another collection of marks is devoted to “Special positions of bones” (see figure to the right). In this section we can find symbols for holding bones one inside the other, for striking a muffled pair of bones against one another, for rubbing pairs with the shorter parts of bones, for rubbing the edge of one pair of bones against the surface of the other one, for rubbing the surface of one pair of bones against the surface of the other one, for playing on bones propped up on the cheeks.

Because of that sound of bones is changing depending on the position of the instrument in relation to the body of the bone player, the composer clearly indicates that the “Position in relation to the body of the musician” (see figure to the right). There are seven different positions: standard (at right angles to elbows, arms slightly extended), front (arms extended), arms raised up, arms down, right arm extended to the right, left arm extended to the left, arms crossed in front. There is also a mark for gradual change between positions.







“Special articulations” got different marks (see figure to the bottom right). We have here tremolo (fast movement OUT and IN), tremolo started with the accent (with right or left hand), tremolo performed with circular hand movements, very fast change from position up to down connected with wavy movement of the wrist, very fast change from position right or left to standard position connected with wavy movement of the wrist (approximate rhythm: 2 thirty-second notes and 1 sixteenth note), an infinity-shaped wrist movement.

You can see the video of world premiere here (on YT channel Annika Mikolajko): <https://youtu.be/VUAG6hZfYo>.  
Annika Mikolajko








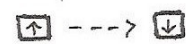
## Matteo Notation



















### SPECIAL POSITIONS OF BONES

-  holding bones one inside the other
-  striking a muffled pair of bones against one another
-  rubbing pairs with the shorter parts of bones
-  rubbing the edge of one pair of bones against the surface of the other
-  rubbing the surface of one pair of bones against the surface of the other
-  playing on bones propped up on the cheeks

### BONES POSITION IN RELATION TO THE BODY OF MUSICIAN

-  standard (at right angles to elbows, arms slightly extended)
-  front (arms extended)
-  arms raised up
-  arms down
-  right arm extended to the right
-  left arm extended to the left
-  arms crossed in front
-  gradual change between positions

### SPECIAL ARTICULATIONS

-  tremolo (fast movement OUT and IN)
-  tremolo started with the accent (with right or left hand)  
 
-  tremolo performed with circular hand movements
-  very fast change from position up to down  →  connected with wavy movement of the wrist (approximate rhythm: )
-  very fast change from position right or left to standard position  /  →  connected with wavy movement of the wrist (approximate rhythm: )
-  an infinity-shaped wrist movement (approximate rhythm: )

# Chlefele Notation

The example to the right is from the Swiss website <https://rhythmics.ch/clappers.html> and is a screen shot from a freeware rhythmic notation program called Rhythmic 3.0. The Upper Figure shows the notation for a complete arrangement and the Middle Figure shows short segments that are used in the arrangement each identified with a letter which in this example run from A to K plus a few words.

The symbols are as follows: single tap is 'x,' triplet tap is four filled in circles, measures are marked with a vertical line, end of a sequence is marked with a slash, and there are more that can be found at <https://www.rhythmics.ch/notation.html#notation> (a good German to English translator is at <https://www.deepl.com/>).

To get a feel for the notation scheme play the recording at <https://www.rhythmics.ch/sounds/chlefele-01.mp3> while viewing the Upper Figure.

The naming of segments has a useful purpose in that the names can be used to notate an arrangement. The shorthand for the song in the Upper Figure is: 2x AABBA / CDCE FGFH / 2x IIIK / End / Signal.

In both Switzerland and German, children memorize arrangements to compete or play them together in groups.

# Dr. Mel Mercier Notation Scheme

Mel Mercier's PhD thesis is titled "The Mescher Bones Playing Tradition," and explores the Mescher two-handed bones playing style developed by the German-American farmer, Albert Mescher, and subsequently passed on to his son, the late Jerry Mescher. ([https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/1530/2011\\_Mercier.pdf?sequence=5](https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/1530/2011_Mercier.pdf?sequence=5)). Appendix A of the thesis presents transcriptions of Jerry's arrangements and two examples are shown to the right. There are two standard percussion lines, one each for the left and right hands. Triplets are marked with the number 3, and other markings are possible.

Oder:  
Hier eine ausführliche Notation - ins Fenster einpassen und einfach draufklicken (Mp3 - 1:18 / 534Kb - 56Kba/44100Khz/stereo).  
Player-Fenster kann dann auf \_ weggeklickt werden, damit man mit der Maus der Notation folgen kann.

Hier das Gleiche, aber schematisch dargestellt:

SW screen shots / Rhythmics 3.0 (siehe unter Notation - Freeware-Programm zum Bestellen)

**Maple Leaf Rag**

Comp. Scott Joplin  
Bones arr. Jerry Mescher  
Piano arr. Jo Ann Castle

Fast ♩ = 124 A

From Dr. Mel Mercier's PhD Thesis - Jerry Mescher's Maple Leaf Rag Arrangement

From Dr. Mel Mercier's PhD Thesis - The Mescher Tradition Offset

## Annika Mikolajko Profile

Annika Mikolajko, a new Rhythm Bones Society member, contributed the article on rhythm bones notation that begins on Page 4. She was born and raised in Poland (see photograph on Page 8).

She is Master of Music and Vocal Arts, coloratura soprano, musician, multi-instrumentalist, pedagogue, sailor, graduate of the Academy of Music in Krakow at the Faculty of Artistic Education and Rhythmics, Vocal and Acting as well as a graduate of the Academy of Music in Katowice. She performs opera, operetta, musical, oratorio, choral music, film music and contemporary music.

As part of her involvement in promoting the maritime culture, she published a book in 2017 entitled “Shanties as a Vehicle of Musical Education Amongst Seamen in the Age of Sail.”

Annika has played rhythm bones since 2012. She trained her skills using all available sources of books and films.

From 2013 she was (as a rhythm bones player) member of a shanty duo, which appeared at several editions of the International Sailing Song Festival “Shanties” in Krakow.

She is also a member of “MozarTap & Bones” with which she performs as part of events promoting American tap dance with playing rhythm bones.

As part of popularizing rhythm bones in contemporary music, Annika premiered among others a piece by Natalia Wojnakowska “Talam I” for rhythm bones and contemporary cello and the arrangement of Lucian Berio’s song “Azerbaijan love song” for string duet, piano, voice and rhythm bones.

[For videos of the above mentioned pieces and more, visit Annika’s Youtube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUAG6hlZfYo>.]

## Fred Edmunds Notation Scheme

We acknowledge Dr. Fred Edmunds as the grandfather of the Rhythm Bones Society as he developed a percussive style of rhythm bones playing, produced an instructional course titled “Bones Unlimited” and now is on our website ([rhythm-bones.com/EdmundOverviewPage.html](http://rhythm-bones.com/EdmundOverviewPage.html)), edited a newsletter, and talked Ev Cowett, the father of the Rhythm Bones Society, into hosting the first Bones Fest.

The instructional course consisted of a book and a video. For the book, Fred devised a notation scheme shown in the figure below. There are two lines, the lower shows the beats of the bar (measure) and are labeled by numbers. The upper line shows the clicks of the rhythm bones using capital letters as follows:

- R - Means to play a right hand click
- L - Means to play a left hand click
- T - Means to play both hand together
- ^ - Means to accent that click

His first exercise was count only, no rhythm bones, to call attention to the importance of timing.

In many of his exercises some written sound effects are included to help the pupil to understand how it should sound.

The figure below shows how easy it is to write down a TripletTap played in the right hand. If you change the fourth R to an L the Triplet is played in the right hand and the Tap in the left hand. If instead you change the R to a T the Tap would be played by the both hands. This notation does not tell you if the Triplet is played with the traditional side-to-side motion or with three single Taps. Of course you could alternate Ls and Rs as a different way to play a TripletTap. The example shows three equally spaced Rs for the Triplet, but the Rs could be moved within a measure to change the timing. A letter half way between in a bar would be an off-beat. A Double would be notated by a letter on the beat and another half way in between. It could be played traditionally or with taps.

R . . . R . . . R . . . . . R . . . R . . . R . . . . . R . . . R . . . R . . . . . R . . . R . . . R
4 . . . . . 1 . . . . . 2 . . . . . 3 . . . . . 4 . . . . . 1 . . . . . 2 . . . . . 3

Fred Edmunds notation for a TripletTap played in the right hand

## Comments on Notation Schemes

The following are comments after seeing all the notation schemes summarized in this issue of the newsletter.

Steve Brown’s Editorial on Page 1 is from a skeptic who now is considering the possibilities.

Most of the schemes address notation for both hands. Edmunds uses a single line with the letters R and L for right and left hands. Mercier used two lines one for right and one for left. Wolin shows a Swiss scheme with one line with right hand using upper staffs and left hand using lower staffs.

The Chlefele scheme allows the creation of short sequences of clicks. They name them with letters but meaningful names could be used. String these together and you have an arrangement.

Bill Vits noted, “Wow...Annika’s is a well written set of instructions and she could give a whole master class on this system. You have to decipher it but there is an amazing amount of information notated. Blows my mind to see this level of preciseness applied to rhythm bones. It would be great to see her demonstrate all the components with the written text.”

Brad Dutz noted, “For musicians, I would just say two traditional musical lines are needed.” Wolin notes that he is experimenting to find a notation that could help rhythm bones players with limited music theory knowledge.

In an unrelated story on Page 8 about *Bones Noble*, I would be surprised if he used notation, but there is a pattern to his playing.

We solicit comments about this issue and would print them as articles or Letters to the Editor. Please contribute. *Steve Wixson*



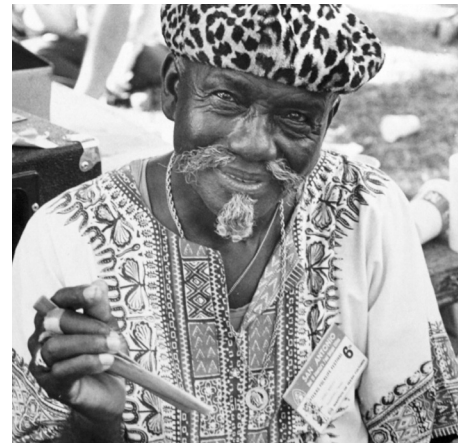


Annika Mikolajko from Poland Her article on notation is on Page 4 and a profile is on Page 7.

## John Henry *Bones* Nobles Update

I learned about John Henry *Bones* Nobles from member Dutch Kopp and after researching him I wrote an article that appeared in RBP, Vol 10, No 1. Part

of my information came from historian, Alan Govenar, who I recently discovered thought enough about *Bones* to create a study guide for children to learn about *Bones* and his traditional culture (see <http://www.everydaymusiconline.org/11>). That website has a video of him



playing his rhythm bones, and his style is quite unique. There is also a video of his daughter playing rhythm bones.

The original article mentioned a movie about him titled *Bones* produced by Carol Mundy Lawrence, but at that time it was not on-line for viewing. Well it is now at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gE8uOtNMPqI>. There is a duet in the middle of the video with *Bones* and Taj Mahal.

Don't we wish *Bones* could have attended our Blues Bones Fest in Clarksdale, MS. He would have been right at home. *Steve Wixson*

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 23, No. 1 2021

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*Jonathan Danforth*

*Bones in Space and Time*

*Virtual All-Ireland Bones Competition*

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*Executive Director*

*Editorial*

*Calendar*

## Executive Director's Column

Winter has always been, for me, a bit isolating, and low energy. Settling in by the fire, dreaming of the coming festivals, and Bones Fest when we can get together and rattle the bones!

Well somewhere between a world pandemic, and a national election, we've been living like winter for what seems like months. We try and soldier on through our own trials and tribulations, through uncertainty, and with the hope that the vaccine will bring relief.

For many years this has been a time for me to plan my annual trip to Ireland to compete or judge the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship in Abbeyfeale

Ireland. The prospect of seeing old friends in the friendly confines of Abbeyfeale, my favorite bed and breakfast Park Lodge, and the many pubs has meant so much to me over the years.

However, things have changed over here in the US, and unfortunately for Ireland too. Pubs and restaurants are locked down, St.Patrick's Day festivities cancelled, and the return of sessions uncertain.

But wait! There is , on the horizon, a glimmer of hope that presents the continuation of a great tradition for bones players. In the true spirit of  
(Continued on Page 2)

## Jonathan Danforth

Jonathan Danforth in his own words.

"My grandfather is Percy Danforth who a lot of people know as a teacher or have seen his instruction video. He taught me when I as just a little kid, probably four or five or so. I never did much with them, but I could do the clack or the triplet. Most folks in my family really didn't do a lot with them - it was granddad's thing and we were real proud of him.

Around 1997 I came across a website, *Rhythm Bones Central*, that was put together by Martha Cowett as a birthday present for her dad, Everett Cowett. I was really impressed because one of the things you find in common with rhythm bones players is "I thought I was the only one until I met all these people." I knew there were some other people, but the idea of a gathering of people was pretty exciting.

"Many years ago I was at the New England Folk Festival and I saw there was someone doing a workshop on rhythm bones. I was kind of thrown cause that is kind of weird. I went to the workshop and Steve Brown was leading it. He was very happy to meet me because he considers Percy as one of his teachers as well. He was excited to meet me even though I was not 'great shakes' as a rhythm bones player, but I get by. I learned a lot from him and found out about the Society and that it was connected to this website that I discovered years earlier. And it's been all down-hill since.

"I went to Bones Fest V which Steve Brown hosted, and I have been to most every Bones Fest

since then. I have become more involved with the Society."

Indeed he has! In 2002 he took over as webmaster and served until 2014. In 2005 he was elected to the Board of Directors and served until 2014. In 2006 he and his wife Melissa hosted Bones Fest X in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and it had the largest attendance of any Bones Fest. The group photograph from that Fest is the signature photograph of the Rhythm Bones Society.

As appreciated as all that is, maybe his most appreciated contributions are at Bones Fests when he will graciously provides background fiddle music for anyone who ask him. At his first Bones Fest, he jammed, but starting with his next Fest, he provided lots of backup music.  
(Continued on Page 3)



Jonathan Danforth from his Bones Fest XXIV Workshop

## Editorial

I also mourn the passing of Joy Watkins (see Mitch Boss' Letter to the Editor). She joined RBS after Walt passed, and was a member at the time of her death.

This is kind of a special issue in that it is about Jonathan Danforth, the father of rhythm bones legend Percy Danforths' great grandson, Emmet. I am embarrassed that it took all these years for him to be profiled. His contributions to RBS include being a Board member, RBS webmaster, host with his wife, Melissa, of Bones Fest X, musician at most all of the Bones Fests, and author of several newsletter articles. AND in this issue, his fantastic workshop at Virtual Bones Fest XXIV titled *Bones in Space and Time* has been captured to share with the rhythm bones community. Jonathan, many thanks for this yeoman's work.

## Letter to the Editor

Walt Watkin's daughter, Jennifer Korjas, called me to let me know her mom Joy Watkins died on 13th of January 2021. Joy would have been 89 years old on the 16th. Rhythm bones old timers will remember Walt Watkins. He started the pass around that is a must do at all Bones Fests. Walt and I liked to play a tune together at Fests. Our wives Joy and Annette hung out together. We kept up with Joy after Walt passed away. We will miss her. *Mitch Boss.*

## Bones Calendar

**NEFFA, 2021**, with Steve Brown's Rhythm Bones Workshop. **Canceled**

**All Ireland Bones Competition**, May 2, 2021, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Virtual this year. Read about it in Steve Brown's Editorial.

**Bones Fest XXV**. 2021, Washington DC area. Check our website to see if Bones Fest XXV, the Silver Anniversary of Bones Fests, is In-Person or Virtual.

**NTCMA Festival**, 2021, No information available.

### (Exec Director continued from Page 1)

innovation, and a sign of the times, the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship is going virtual! For the first time ever, in any bone playing contest, participants will be able to perform and be judged virtually. The Fleadh By the Feale organizing committee has announced that 10 competitors from Ireland, and 10 International competitors will be selected to compete in the senior section. In addition they are seeking competitors under 18 to also compete in the Junior section. Numbers of people have approached me about competing, but the expense of time and money have represented too much of an obstacle to overcome.

Well here is your chance! Competitors will need to submit a recording of two traditional Irish tunes, and a short introductory video to Martin O'Donohue before March 31 to gain entrance into the contest. Admissions should be submitted to [martin\\_fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com](mailto:martin_fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com). Competitors will be chosen based on the tapes, and the contest will be streamed on Fleadh By the Feale Facebook page Sunday May 2, 2021. Results will be live on the page.

All questions and inquiries can be submitted to Martin O'Donohue at [fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com](mailto:fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com). Imagine, a chance to become All Ireland Champion with out ever leaving your living room!

Hard to believe that it was 20 years ago at the New England Folk Festival that I first ran into Jonathan Danforth, my mentor Percy Danforth's grandson. Words can't describe the great pleasure I have from being friends with Jonathan over the years. Also hard to believe is that we haven't profiled him in the newsletter, though he has contributed to RBS in so many ways. Well this issue will end that oversight, and bring into focus his amazing work. Included is his amazing workshop from Virtual Bones Fest XXIV. Thank you Jonathan!

As we look toward the summer, and the possibility of an in person Bones Fest we realize this remains an uncertainty. Although it would seem hopeful that with the vaccine, and continued mask wearing and social distancing that we might return to more normal activity,

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

only time will tell if this is realistic.

Therefore, stay tuned to these pages for further information. Based on the success of the virtual Bones Fest last year, it would seem likely that it will be repeated for 2021. Thanks to the Board for their hard work in producing last years Fest. And a happy St. Patrick's Day, many socially distanced pints to you, and a few tunes at a virtual session!  
*Steve Brown*

### (Danforth continued from Page 1)

His Bones Fest performances are unique. When he goes up, he whistles and plays his rhythm bones. It is almost a meditation.

Board Member Sharon Mescher looks at Jonathan's Bones Fest playing this way. "One of the talented musicians that I always look forward to is Jonathan Danforth. For me, when he performs, he brings calm and peacefulness, even if for a short time. During his performance, I bask in the silent, calm, quiet that is

all around us. Thank you, Jonathan, for these memorable, fleeting moments.”

Jonathan continues to be a part of Steve Brown’s NEFFA rhythm bones workshop by playing and teaching. One of the highlights was Jonathan and Rob Rudin marching in playing bones in unison and Jonathan switching to fiddle and using his rhythm bones like a bow,

His band, The Jethros, are something of a South-Coast secret, a cult favorite. Jethros’ music smacks of Memphis, New Orleans, and Nashville, with some Guadalajara, Paris, and Podolia thrown in for good measure. This unusual lineup, combined with the catchy, dance-able, and thought-provoking songs have helped the Jethros become a sought-after and well-recognized act on the South Coast. Jonathan does play rhythm bones as his band/stage name is Boney Jethro.

“There is a song that the trombone player in my band wrote specifically to highlight rhythm bones (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV-NopVYJCY>). It’s kind of too bad the intro was cut out which gets zanier every time we play it and makes it nearly impossible for me to keep a straight face when we do the song.

“It involves the trombonist these days going on at length about how I don’t only cycling shorts, carefully select a Bowie knife, and take down a buffalo after riding it down, in order to craft the rhythm bones which I’m about to play (which are usually, in fact, the buffalo ribs I got from Steve Brown), using all parts of the animal and donating the extra meat to orphanages. All this while I do qua-si-bones-playing-calisthenics in order not to bust up laughing. Any way I think the song is great.”

Being the grandson of Percy, he teaches rhythm bones at Bones Fests and elsewhere. “I participated in my very first official rhythm bones-playing workshop for children which was sponsored by the Acushnet Heights Neighborhood. Before I went, I picked Constance Cook’s brain for teaching tips (knowing I was supposed to take her place teaching a children’s workshop).”

By the way, Jonathan’s college degree is in Musicolinguistics, an interdisciplinary branch of cognitive science in which music, psychology and cognitive / generative linguistics overlap.

Board Member Bill Vits notes, “Jon-

athon Danforth is one of the calmest rhythm bones players you’ll ever meet. He is not about the flash and fireworks that impresses novices. He learned the basics as a child but didn’t ever intend to upstage his legendary grandfather who taught so many of us how to play. Instead he developed his musical skills (as a fiddler, vocalist, whistler) which then brought him back to rhythm bones.

“His approach is much older than his physical being and he has an intellectual calm that educates and inspires. At many Bones Fests you could hear a pin drop when he performed as Jonathon knows the value of space and silence. Percy Danforth would be so proud of Jonathon’s diversity as a musician and an ambassador of rhythm bones.

“Our organization is a Family Tree of rhythm bones players who can trace their roots to a handful of individuals. When I meet someone who also learned from Percy, one of the first things I brag about is that I know his grandson who is also a wonderful performer. The family tree continues to grow as rhythm bones playing becomes more diverse and international thanks to social media and the Internet. We are grateful for Jonathon being an eclectic performer and loving husband/father of maybe another rhythm bones playing Danforth?”

Board Member Kenny Wolin notes, “Jonathan’s playing has always stood out to me, especially at our Bone Fests, because of his contemplative and gentle approach to this instrument. Rhythm bones have a naturally bright, hard and crisp sound, and inherently great for fast rhythmic accompaniment, and yet Jonathan has a way of creating a very legato timbre to beautifully and hauntingly match his whistling performances. Coupled with his flutter technique of inverting rhythm bones and holding them from the center (fingers straight out), he’s made me rethink our instrument as more than just a limited mono-tonal rhythm machine, and more of a solo instrument in its own right. As far as “rhythm bones” innovators are, Jonathan is high on my list.

His uncle Malcolm “Mac” Danforth inherited a treasure box of Percy’s memorabilia: clippings, pictures, drawings and awards that Percy had received. One article quoted Fran, Percy’s wife, saying,

## Virtual All-Ireland Bones Competition

Looking for adult as well as bones players under the age of 18 to participate in the virtual All Ireland Senior and Junior Bone Playing Competition. At this time they are particularly in need of junior competitors, and all entries will be accepted. Do you love the jigs and reels? Can’t stop taping along to a polka? Does the prospect of playing along to a march or barn-dance excite your bones? This could be your chance!

Contact Martin O’Donohue  
[fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com](mailto:fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com)

“Percy is a musician like a bird is...but I’m a trained musician.” Mac gave this treasure trove to Jonathan.

Jonathan concludes, “If I were going to characterize a rhythm bones player including myself, I would say rhythm bones players love to have fun with their music. They typically take their music more seriously than they take themselves. I think we enjoy admiring each other more than ourselves. You will see everyone patting each other on the back not only because there are so many varieties of styles being played and so many superb players, but everyone is so encouraging to players who maybe haven’t come so far. And that is doubly important because the future of the instrument depends on new people learning it.

“The discovery of a community — which is what this really is, almost a family like community — brings a lot of joy into an instrument that I already loved a lot through my own family connection.” *Steve Wixson*

# Bones Through Space and Time

[An edited transcription of Jonathan Danforth's Workshop at Virtual Bones Fest XXIV.]

I am going to talk the about rhythm bones and how they spread, what they are, and then how we think about them. It is going to be more of a thinking session than a playing session.

I want to do something more than just the history of rhythm bones. We like to talk about how rhythm bones go back 3000 years, and how we sort of are a part of this continuing tradition of rattling. That sense of continuity is part of what I want to talk about.

**Connection** - How does playing rhythm bones make you feel?

I feel a connection with something **old!**

I feel a connection with something **exotic!**

I feel a connection with other rhythm bones **players!**

Cultural Diffusion



These are some important ideas that deal with how cultural artifacts track from people to people. Humans are complicated and do stuff for many different reasons, but every single culture in the world has music in the sense that they have pattern sound which is not a language, but usually has repeated patterns of some kind, and more specifically there is a lot of variety of what humans consider music. But ideas spread because humans spread. Humans call to each other and show each other stuff. Then they listen to each other.

So when we talk about how old rhythm bones are and how wide spread rhythm bones are, what we are talking about is the idea of these two pieces of material in one hand clacking together. This has been traded around between humans as an idea, and how we talk about that

depending on how we define rhythm bones. We already said all humans have music, and there is a lot of evidence for that. Nobody has come across people that didn't have some kind of music.

**How to Define Rhythm Bones**  
**Instrument**  
**Idiophone (shape)**  
**Concussion Idiophones (technique)**  
**Plaque Concussion Idiophones (shape)**  
**Stick Concussion Idiophones (shape)**  
**Two in one hand (hold)**  
**Between the fingers (hold)**  
**Long end pointed down toward the wrist (hold)**  
**Triplet as a rhythmic element (technique)**

Back in the 1800s when Europeans were starting to get interested in other people, even if it was in a colonial way, these two guys named Sachs and Hornbostel decided they were going to classify all the different musical instruments in the world. People still use this system called the Sachs-Hornbostel Classification System

They divided all instruments into four groups; strings, wind instruments where just the air is vibrating, membrane Idiophones where there is a thin sheet vibrating like a drum, Idiophones where there is a three dimensional something that is vibrating and when we play rhythm bones, these are Idiophones.

Within Idiophones these guys thought there are Idiophones that you hit something that vibrates with something else like a stick - think of someone hitting a cymbal with a drum stick. The thing that is vibrating is different from what you are holding in your hand - the stick.

But with rhythm bones there are two identical things or nearly identical things being hit against each other and they call those Concussion Idiophones - two like things hitting each other and vibrating.

After that they classified things by the shape of the thing being hit. They got into plaque Idiophones and stick Idiophones. Geometry is fairly precise, but humans are not so you can classify rhythm bones however you like.

Now there are a lot of things in the world that are two single things being hit together. If you think of the clave where

two cylinders made of wood are being hit against each other, but you are holding one in the left hand and one in the right hand and that's a little different from rhythm bones. It's different enough that we don't really think of those as being rhythm bones.

So one of the ways I think of the history of rhythm bones and instruments that are "like the bones" is we are holding two things in one hand and within that I think of the bones as between the fingers. We are not holding one in the palm and one some other way. We are sticking two long things between the fingers. The long end is pointed toward the wrist and I say that knowing that some of us play with one pointed up and one pointed down. But the canonical way is with one pointed down toward your arm.

And finally I think that the one thing that makes rhythm bones rhythm bones and different from other clappers is that we have triplets. That is a consequence as to how we hold them and how we move our arms. But there is this whole spectrum of precision between instruments at the most general end and something we do a triplet with at the specific end.

There are a lot of things you can hold in one hand and there are a lot of ways you can hold them. I want to look at several of these because there are a lot of amazing things, a lot of amazing instruments around the world and through time which are like rhythm bones even if they are not rhythm bones. I think there is a lot of inspiration to be taken from some of these grips and some of these techniques that we might be able to leverage in rhythm bones.

**Lozhki: A in palm, B between fingers, squeeze.**



There is one stick between the fingers, but the other one is being held against the palm. In the Russian sphere of influence; Russia Ukraine, Belarus and I don't know if these are played in Poland, the Russian word for this is Lozhki. You



could think of them as being played a little like castanets because there us a sound if a hand squeezing motion brings one spoon against another. A lot of players bring in a third spoon which can hit the other two.

**Castanets: A in palm, B pressed by fingers, squeeze.**



Speaking of hand squeezing motion, here's an instance where you have one piece held against the palm and the other being pressed towards it by the fingers.

Castanets have a really long history and in Spain there is a lot of overlap sort of conceptually between castanets and what we think of as rhythm bones, and as a folk instrument there is a lot of overlap as to how they been used historically. My understanding from reading is that a lot of the time when people play what we would consider rhythm bones they just get called castanets.

**Ghashogak, Zils: A on thumb, B on finger or fingers, pinch.**



Here is another way to hold them together. One on the thumb and one on the finger. Ghashogak are medieval, and I think have a modern decedent which is a little hard to tell from just reading from the Internet. But this is a medieval renaissance picture of them. Zils are pretty close related even though they are round.

**'ili 'ili: A between thumb and index finger, B in remaining fingers, squeeze.**

In Hawaii they use stones where one is between the thumb and forefinger and the other is resting on the fingers and you bring your fingers up a little like casta-



nets and you hit the other stone.

**Khartaal. A between thumb and hand, B in remaining fingers, squeeze.**



We like to talk about this as having an effect really similar to rhythm bones but the hold is quite different as you can see. One stick is being held sort of against the heal of the thumb and the other one is being brought up to hit with the remaining finger.

**Egyptian Clappers: A between thumb and hand, B in remaining fingers, Squeeze.**



This is a picture of some ancient Egyptian clappers that seem to look a lot like Khartaal, but holding them in the middle. If you are looking at the way people are holding the sticks where they are pointing up - if you try to play rhythm bones upside down with the long end pointing straight up in the air, you can sort of do it and I encourage you to try, but it is hard. The way we play rhythm bones relies to a certain extent on gravity pulling the loose bone down and into the tight bone. I think these are probably and usually played with the long ends pointing up.

You kind of press these together with your thumb something a little like Khartaal or a little bit like the Greek Krotola which were hinged at one end.

**Krotola/Crotola, Sumerian clappers maybe: A held in fingers, B tied or hinged to A, squeeze.**

krotola, sumerian clappers maybe?



You sort of press these together with your thumb and your finger and they make a ckack.

The Greeks have these and the Romans got them from the Greeks. All of these are like rhythm bones but not exactly like rhythm bones. And you could not do a triplet with these.

**Various clappers in China (and Korea, Vietnam, etc), (pai ban, kuai ban, etc.)**



There are a lot of clappers in Asia mostly in the historical Chinese sphere of influence, and some of them are even are played with a swinging motion of the arm - to swing one into the other. Although as far as I can understand even if you can do a triplet, the tradition of playing these in China does not involve triplets as we know them. But here again you have two pieces hit together usually with the long ends pointing down - so a little more like rhythm bones

**Orchestral whip: A held in fingers, B tied or hinged to A, swing/tap.**

Here is another set of hinged clappers used for special effects in classical orchestras or movie orchestras. If you hear the popular song on the radio that is pretty often played around Christmas time in

trial whip



the United States, there is a that has one of these in it. The sleigh ride song.

**Spoons: A between two fingers, B between two fingers, push/hit.**



Here is another concussion Idiophone that a lot of you are familiar with, but it is pointed the other way. There is not swing involved as much of hitting one against the other.

**Rhythm Bones: A between two fingers, B between two fingers, swing.**

It's like a salted (and cross fingers)



And of course our old friend. I picked Dom Flemons because he was the first link in a Google search for rhythm bones players. And I stuck a pair of Chleferly from Switzerland because they are played exactly like rhythm bones and probably derived from rhythm bones. They have a little different shape which is kind of interesting.

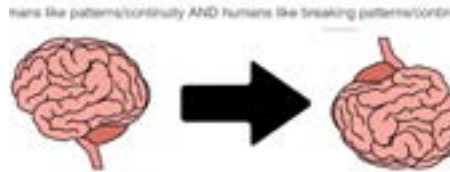
This is an instrument that was very wide spread though out Europe in medieval Europe and it left decedents in all kinds of places across Europe including Switzerland.

And the shape varies. If you look at what people played in Spain versus played in Brittany versus played in

England or wherever, the shapes vary but the idea and technique are similar enough. None of the references to these instruments go back further than medieval Europe in the strictest sense of having two plaques being held long ends downward, between the fingers with the triplet. It does not mean they could not be older per the available evidence

Almost all of these instruments are possible to find on YouTube if you do some searching to see how they are played.

### Identity and Exoticism (and Racism)



things spread because people like to keep things the same, and things like people like to have things different.

Next I want to talk about how musical ideas spread and why things get sort of catchy. Millions and millions of dollars get spent on what makes a piece of music catchy and there is a whole advertising industry that is partly based on that.

But how tools get spread from culture to culture is sort of dependent on a couple of things. One is actual culture movement like people move around, and ideas move with people. So that is one part.

You are going to see in a minute that there are instruments that spread as people spread. One totally irrelevant example of this is bowed string instrument - think violin and fiddle and all of the relatives across the world. As far as anyone can tell the idea of bowing strings started in central Asia and spread both to the east to China and Japan and southeast Asia and to the west to the middle East and Europe, and to the South to South Asia, India, and Pakistan.

As the people like the Huns and the Mongrels and various nomadic people ever so often would conquer these other areas, they brought instruments with them. It is very easy to associate sort of a timeline, like bowed instruments did not appear in Europe until after central Asian people made incursion and conquered places in Europe. And so it is very easy

to associate that movement of humans with the movement of this musical tool.

There are a couple of conceptual things going on that I want to mention because they relate to the questions I asked at the beginning. The thing that we do as people is relate to our identity. And if we think of ourselves as, I'll pick an example, Irish or a Southerner in the United States or a folk musician or any of these other cultural identities that we might associate with rhythm bones playing, they reinforce that sense of - this is who I am and I am expressing that by playing this instrument and that tends to let instruments stay the same and travel with people as people move around.

Oh! I was Scottish but I played rhythm bones, but now my landlord kicked me out of the country and I am moving to New Zealand which is a thing that happened quite a bit. So rhythm bones traveled to New Zealand with these Scottish and Irish exiles because they brought their own lives and identities with them.

The other thing that happens is music is a pattern and humans love to break patterns as much as they to keep patterns. We see this in all kinds of examples of how music spreads. The upper class takes on some style that previously was just music of the poor people, or the established population takes on some musical habit that was sort of an outsider phenomenon until someone realized that it was interesting because it was new. So these two things that seem to contrast are both really important when we look at how instruments spread around and how music spread around. That is going to matter later when the minstrel show, which was a world wide musical phenomenon, for better and for worse, appears.

#### A Few Patterns that have Spread

##### 1. Bamboo Clappers

China has the Oldest examples to Japan, Korea Vietnam and their Communities worldwide

##### 2. Krotala

Greece (and maybe Egypt) have the oldest examples to Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman

China has a very old established art music tradition and part of that tradition is clappers made of wood, made of bamboo and other things.

As China conquered other places, it had economical and cultural influence in places around it, and some of these instruments spread around. There are a lot of places that have clappers that are pretty easily traceable to the point where China conquered that place.

Krotalas are a similar thing There are some Greek hieroglyphics showing clappers with the hands on them, and those might have been played like these too. It is a little hard to tell how those were played.

But there are a lot of Greek illustrations of how these were played. And it is pretty clear the Romans played them in a similar way, and the Byzantine Empire had the same instrument played in the same way. And so did the Ottoman Empire.

Now you are all the way up to the 1800s. So that instrument really did have a spread of two thousand years, probably closer to three thousand years.

**Oldest direct evidence for hold + triplet seems to be medieval Europe**  
**European Renaissance: France, Spain, Germany, Poland, England**  
**English/Scottish/Irish colonial spread: U.S., Canada, Australia, N.Z.**  
**U.S. Minstrel Shows: Worldwide Phenomenon**  
**Rebirth in places in Australia and U. K.**  
**New spread to Africa and Asia with colonial cultural influence**  
**New spread with maritime commerce**  
**French Colonial spread: Quebec**  
**Combined 20th Century rebirth with focus on musical traditions**

And you have rhythm bones, and this is the very restricted sense of long things pointed down with the triplet. There is no real depiction that I am aware of for this strictest sense of rhythm bones before medieval Europe.

Now my personal opinion is that people have been hitting things together for probably as long as we have had fingers. So I am sure that somebody has played

rhythm bones before that. But in terms of the evidence that we have we do not really have much showing rhythm bones as we play them today before medieval Europe.

At that point there are references in writing and pictures especially from the renaissance all across Europe, and not just in the Roman Empire but across a much wider sphere places like Ireland and Scandinavia and eastern Europe. And because the evidence does not go back a lot before then, it is not 100% clear how or why they traveled.

The musical practices at the time involved traveling musicians - what we think of as jongleur or minstrels or things like that. So there is some possibility that is how they spread. But it is hard to tell.

The next biggest difference in the spread of rhythm bones has to do with European colonialism. The British Ilse, and for this purpose let us include Ireland, had a lot of colonies and rhythm bones show up in almost all of them. There are rhythm bones in Canadian traditions, there are rhythm bones in Australia, rhythm bones in New Zealand, and there are rhythm bones in the US. There are also rhythm bones in Quebec, and it is pretty easy to trace those back to the music from Brittany and other parts of France from which a lot of early colonists came from. I am not currently aware of any other major spread of rhythm bones from Europe throughout colonialism, but we are always learning.

In the US in particular, rhythm bones show up in a lot of places. From Appalachian music they have gone into contra dance music, they have gone into cowboy music, and they have gone into probably New Orleans music.

They have gone into the minstrel show, and minstrel shows deserve their own chapter. I'm not going to delve into too much the nature of it and how racists it was except in the sense that it was enormously popular. It was one of the earliest global musical phenomenas to the point where you see rhythm bones being mentioned again in Great Brittan, and in places you had not seen them mentioned for 100 years prior. People were playing rhythm bones again as part of minstrel shows where the British musical bones tradition had mostly died

out in some of these places.

It is easy to find references to colonial schools in Ghana and South Africa where minstrel shows were part of normal school entertainment. And we have already heard sea shanties with rhythm bones. They were such a popular instrument partly because of the makeup of the population that became sailors. Some of them came from these traditions that played rhythm bones, but also because this was the popular instrument of the day. Everybody knew about rhythm bones. So a lot of sailors played rhythm bones, and brought them with them.

You start to see minstrel shows in a lot of whaling ports and in a lot of the old maritime sailing ports. Rhythm bones spread around the world from this and at this point we are talking about the 1700s to the 1800s.

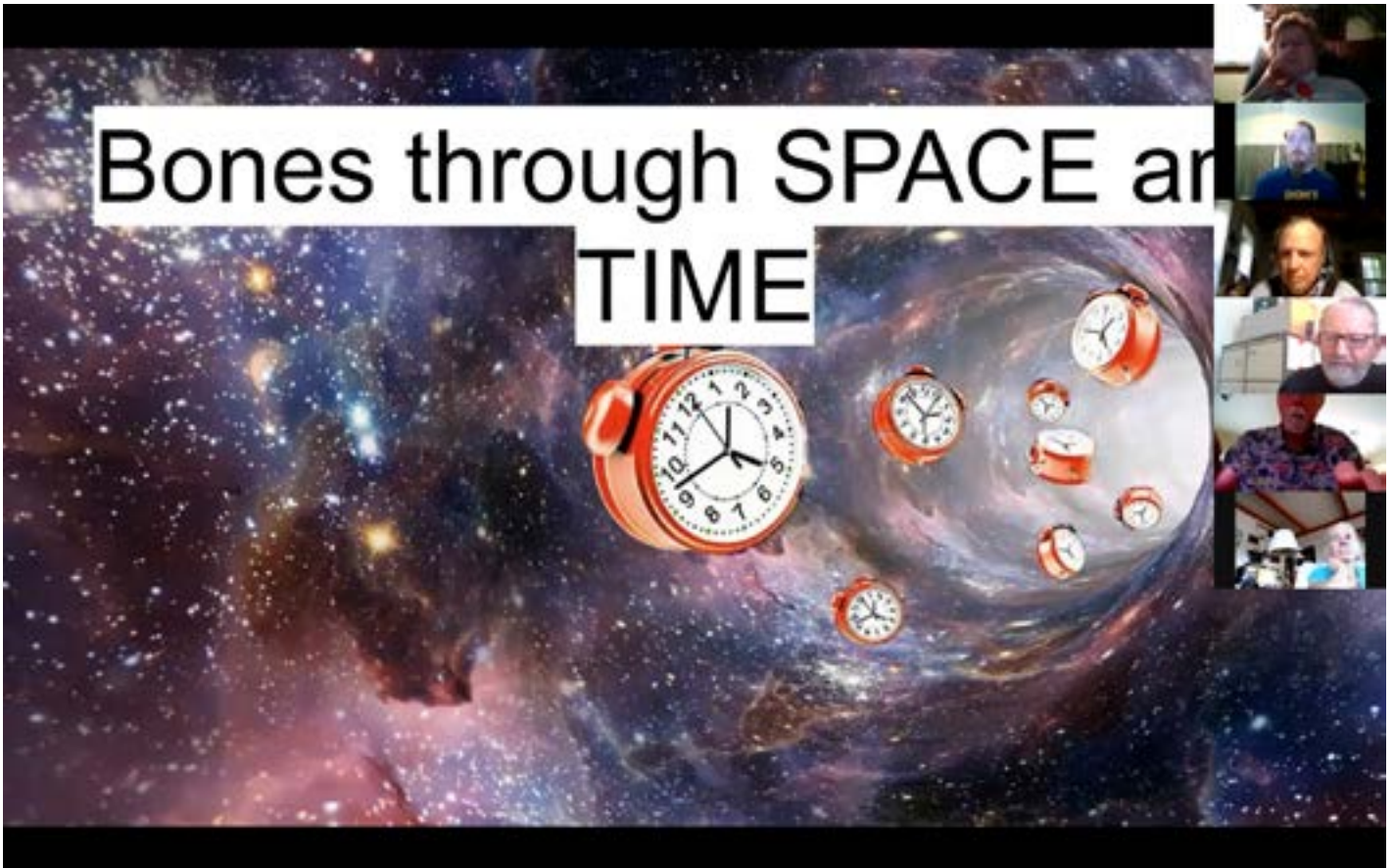
Now we are getting into the realm of - these are the conditions from which the 20th century revival is drawing its inspiration. And that is where a lot of us learn to play rhythm bones, and if it was not from our fathers or grandfathers or grandmothers or others. Then a lot of us have learned because of social scenes which are looking toward the past in one way or another like reenactments or military reenactments or renaissance fairs or folk music festivals, and things like that. There are these cascading re-spreading of the idea of this instrument.

We have a cool instrument and it is part of an enormous human tradition of hitting things together even if some of those things are not exactly what we play today, and it is not totally clear they are. I still feel enormous continuity going back to Egypt and all that.

That is the outline of what I wanted to talk about.

[Note: The transcription was edited, but not proofed against the audio recording to find errors. There are a few places with audio glitches caused by Zoom. Do not expect an exact transcription of the workshop.]





Jonathan Danforths's Virtual Bones Fest XXIV Workshop starts on Page 4

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*





# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 23, No. 2 2021

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*rhythmbones.org Updated*

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*Editorial*

## Executive Director's Column

Bone playing contests are few and far between, but in a true sign of the times, an innovation in contests in general occurred this year. With the All Ireland Bone Playing Contest going virtual it can be reasonably assured that nothing like this has ever occurred. Martin O'Donoghue's article in this issue will detail the contest and participants, but to contrast previous contests let's think for a minute. Forgoing the live contest means contestants can compete in the relative comfort of their own surroundings. On the one hand, contestants have control over their accompanists, music, and setting, on the other hand they are deprived from

experiencing the town and people which have nurtured the contest and bone playing over the years. Each contestant deals with the technical aspects of formulating a recording in their own way, some in highly technical ways, others simple recording with a cell phone perhaps, but clearly the playing field varies from person to person. The judge has the ability to replay the performance endlessly, as opposed to a one shot performance on a stage in front of a crowd and possibly compromising weather conditions. Having been on that stage as both a competitor

(Continued on Page 2)

## Virtual All-Ireland Bones Competition

Fleadh by the Feale is in its 27th year. Due to COVID-19, the Fleadh by the Feale Committee decided to host our Fleadh and the All Ireland Junior and Senior Bones Competition virtually for 2021. Last year we had very little notice of a lockdown and we didn't have any Fleadh.

Late 2020 the Fleadh by the Feale Committee decided to run a virtual Fleadh for 2021. We contacted our Irish bone players and they said they were up for it. I then contacted Steve Brown to see if he could help us get overseas players to take part.

The format we picked was that bone players would be prerecorded playing the bones to a piece of music of their choice. As our Fleadh is an Irish music festival and therefore our bones competition is an Irish music bone playing competition. The bones in Irish music are an accompaniment, they are not meant to take over the tune. All of our Irish players have this, whereas is American blue grass rhythm bones are kinda an instrument in their own right played to the max.

Back to the competition, Steve Brown and Steve Wixson were a great help to us through the Rhythm Bones Society. We set March 31st as our deadline for entries to reach us and we got 15 overseas competitors and 8 Irish players to compete. We had only 2 players in the junior competition which was judged by Steve Brown from the USA. Once we had the video we put them together into a show.

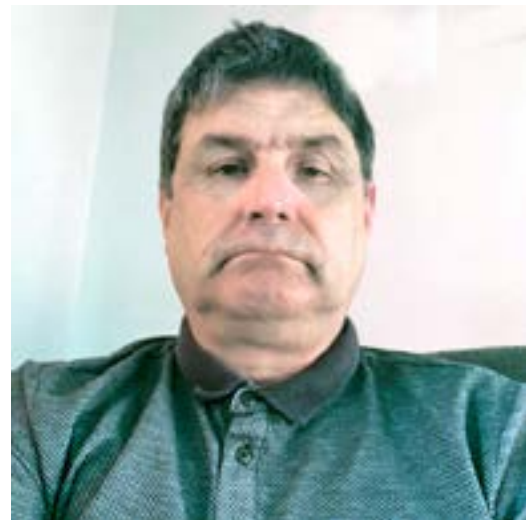
Then the videos were sent to Junior Davey who was our judge. Junior is based in Sligo which is a

three and a half hour drive from Abbeyfeale. We need our judge to be totally impartial, and we always strive to achieve this, never having a local judge. Junior judged the competition and that was added to the show and it went out on Monday May 3rd at 8pm.

We only have 3 places and 23 competitors so there is always players disappointed, but there is always the next year. Sure what doesn't kill you makes you stronger as they say.

First place received €300 and a trophy and their name on the Fleadh shield.

(Continued on Page 2)



Martin O'Donoghue

## Editorial

I hope you find this issue interesting. It begins with the Page 1 story where Martin O'Donoghue writes about the Virtual 2021 All-Ireland Bones Competition. A companion article on judging the Bones Competition by Junior Davey is on Page 7. While it was very successful, they hope for an in-person event in 2022.

Timothy James attended virtual Bones Fest XXIV last year after writing a story about Dom Flemons. After our Fest, he wrote a nice companion piece for our newsletter.

Ter Wolin had to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic and she reports on her experience teaching rhythm bones.

Our old website of maybe 20 years was out of date and did not work well on smartphones. With a suggestion from Skeff Flynn, we have an updated website using the Word Press platform.

### (Editorial continued from Page 1)

and a judge I can assure you anything can happen. How great that players from all over the world could compete, and yet how it changes the nature of a contest held more than 20 years. Congratulations to Nic Dupin for his championship performance, John Ford, and our own Skeffington Flynn, and all the participants. But I hope for one that the contest reverts to it's original form, so that the participants experience the thrill of performing in front of a crowd, and experience Abbeyfeale, and Ireland and all that they are!

Another sign of the times, we are again deprived of seeing each other in person, and sharing in the fellowship that defines our organization.

Last years Virtual Bones Fest was joyful, but how I miss the hugs, and electricity of the in person bones fest. But for all our safety we do the best we can. Once again we will share in the retelling of our own personal bones story, and participate in a variety of activities from Kenny Wolin's workshop on Independence to lively discussions on bone playing style. I hope to see you there, Virtually of course! *Steve Brown*

### (All-Ireland continued from Page 1)

Second got €200 and a trophy

Third gets €100 and a trophy.

For most players it's not about the money it's competing and doing your best and trying to win. Nicolas Dupin won the competition, John Forde from Abbeyfeale came 2nd, and Skeffington Flynn was 3rd. John Forde is in his 3 year senior and was a multi winner of the junior bones. He actually won the junior title when he was 4 years old back in the day and many times after that. Sarah and Laura O'Donoghue are my daughters and they completed this year and are cousins to John Forde, Jackie and David Murphy (David in Juniors). Adrian O Leary are all cousins to each other and all grew up within 1/4 of a mile of each other in Ballaugh Abbeyfeale, Pat Forde, who was also a competitor, is John Fords dad. The great David Murphy is Jackie's and David's dad. David senior is the best one handed bone player in Ireland and taught all of the above players how to play bones. As ye can see Bones are big in Abbeyfeale. David senior doesn't complete anymore having won the competition numerous times. So hopefully in 2022 we will be back to a new normal and have our Fleadh and competition live in Abbeyfeale.

We hope to have a lot of the overseas competitors in Ireland for 2022 competition. So all the best from Martin O'Donoghue, a committee member, and the other organisers of the competition.



## Bones Fest XXV Silver Anniversary Fest

Virtual on Zoom  
Saturday, July 24, 2021  
Preliminary Information  
in column on right

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Bones Fest XXV Preliminary Program

Bones Fest XXIV is a Virtual Bones Fest using ZOOM teleconferencing technology. The exciting aspect, like last year, is that people who cannot attend an in-person Bones Fest can attend, and that means we will again have rhythm bones players from around the world in virtual attendance.

The Virtual Fest is scheduled for July 24, 2021, and will begin at 1 PM, GMT which is 9 AM Eastern Daylight Time, the time used in the program details

**Technical Details.** Prior to the 'Practice Workshop' described in the next section, attendees will receive an email with the technical details needed to attend the Fest.

**Saturday, July 17, 12:00 to 3:00 PM**  
**Practice Workshop – Moderator: Skeff Flynn**

This Pre-Bones Fest Workshop is for attendees to practice how to use Zoom. It will cover how to sign in, basic controls, microphone placement, video camera placement, lighting, screen sharing, chatting and more so all of us get the most out of the Fest.

**Legal Backup Music Required.**

Since BFXXV is online and we respect copyrights, legal music is required. We have a library of legal music that you can download and use, and attendees will be emailed a link to the library. If you have legal music, you can certainly use it.

**Bones Market Place** During break periods, attendees can show the rhythm bones they make or sell. Sign up on the Registration Form.

**Tentative Schedule**

**9:00 AM- Opening Session** - Meet and Greet with Steve Brown

The session begins with opening remarks from Rhythm Bones Society's Executive Director, Steve Brown. During this session in a somewhat controlled way, attendees can say hello or chat with old friends, and we can find out what parts of the world are represented.

**9:30 AM – Individual Introductions** – Moderator: Steve Brown

Each participant gets an allotted time to introduce themselves, talk about how they came to the bones, and demonstrate how they play. This is the hallmark of the Rhythm Bones Society, including everyone, no matter level of play.

12 noon - **Special Presentation - Jerry Mescher and his impact on rhythm bone playing**, Join Mel Mercier's presentation over the luncheon hour.

1pm Concepts in **Independence Workshop** - with Kenny Wolin. For two-handed rhythm bones players.

1:30pm **Workshop - How to improve your playing** with Bill Vits and Junior Davey.

2pm **Workshop - Essence of Irish bone playing**. A panel discussion with Tommy Hayes, Junior Davey, Mel Mercier, and Nickolas Dupin (winner of 2021 All-Ireland).

2:30pm **Workshop - Essence of two handed bone playing** with Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Brad Dutz, and Graham

(Continued on Page 7)

## rhythmbones.org Updated

The website of the Rhythm Bones Society finally gets an upgrade. It turns out that the old navigation did not work on some of today's mobile devices, and that much content could not be viewed.

Skeff Flynn suggested we use the WordPress platform which will make it easy to pass it on to a new webmaster when that is needed. It gives us lots of tools as well as it works on all devices including smartphones. It also gives us the ability to enter blog-like posts.

The new layout is shown in the images on Pages 4 and 5. There is a Homepage section shown on Page 4 and a Rhythm Bones Museum section shown on Page 5.

The Homepage is leaner and cleaner, but with enough information that someone can look at this page and go away with a fair understanding of what rhythm bones are about.

If their curiosity is aroused they can click on one of five rhythm bones pictures to get a more complete description.

'What Are Rhythm Bones' is pretty much what Jonathan Danforth included when he took over the website from its creator, Martha Cowett.

'Where to Buy Rhythm Bones' has a long list of people who sell rhythm bones. It is way out of date and it is not clear how to format it. This will be updated over the next few months.

'Learn How to Play Rhythm Bones' has a new focus - get people hooked quickly, and it does that with Dom Flemons' short instruction YouTube video. Dom has a great personality and has taught many people how to play rhythm bones. For those who want more, they can view Dr Fred Edmunds basic instruction or they are directed to Percy Danforth's and Aaron Plunkett's instruction videos that they can purchase. And if they like Fred's teaching, they can continue with his entire "Bones Unlimited" videos free on our website.

Of course, we hope they will 'Join the Rhythm Bones Society' which they can do by mail or online.

While the left side of the page is a repackaging of the old Homepage, the right sidebar is all new, and gives us the ability

to post anything of short term interest. These posts will be entered by the Board and not individuals who have our Facebook Page for individual posts. We may try letting individuals post comments to Board posts, and see if it is useful.

The list of post shows the most recent 10 posts, and if one of them is clicked a new page shows the entire post. Posts are saved unless deleted by the webmaster which will happen if the post becomes not relevant or is moved to the Museum.

Posts can be assigned a Category and/or one or more Tags, and below the recent post list are two search options, one for Categories and one for Tags. Clicking a Category or Tag will show a page with a list of all requested posts. This is a big step up from our previous Homepage.

The online virtual Museum is entered using the navigation bar at the top of each page or clicking 'Visit the Rhythm Bones Museum' picture on the Homepage. Hopefully it is clean, but it is not lean housing almost 25 years of rhythm bones information taken primarily from the 'Rhythm Bones Player' newsletter. Newsletter stories are not organized and the Museum is sort of an index to stories in the newsletter. This is a work in progress to include all these stories as well as add new stories from future newsletters.

The Museum has two ways to access information, global search and fixed exhibits. On the navigation bar at the top of the page is a search icon. Click it and a search bar forms at the very top of the page. Enter one or more search terms and 'hits' are summarized on a new page. Global search means that every Post and Page is searched

Fixed Exhibits are collections of related material, and each exhibit is advertised with an image on the lower part of the Museum page.

Percy Danforth, Ted Goon and Freeman Davis are three players who made major contributions to rhythm bones in the 20th century. Percy and Ted each have a fixed exhibit, and Freeman, known as Brother Bones, will eventually have one.

Want to know about other rhythm bones players, then check out the 'Player Profiles' exhibit where there are over 100 profiles to date mostly of players who have been written about in the newsletter. The content in these profiles was taken





Most everything on this page is clickable

## What Are Rhythm Bones

Save Brown Cow Skin Bones

Rhythm Bones are one of the oldest and made musical instruments. They are simple. Two sticks are held between the fingers and clicks are made with wrist and arm movement. They can be played one handed or two handed. As the name suggests, they are made from animal bones, but also other materials like wood shaped like a bone.

## WHERE TO BUY RHYTHM BONES

Check for Neale Rhythm Bones

The Rhythm Bones Society does not sell rhythm bones, but we have where to buy from. Animal bones are frequently made from cow skin or leather. Wood bones are made from real and hard wood with being producing a deep and rich but loud sound. You can also find instruction on how to make your own. Click to find a site.

## LEARN HOW TO PLAY THEM

Shooting Star Rhythm Bones

If you have rhythm, rhythm bones are easy to play when compared to other musical instruments. Click and find out for yourself with instruction from our website or on the internet!

## JOIN THE RHYTHM BONES SOCIETY

Preservation Rhythm Bones

The Rhythm Bones Society was formed in 2006 as a educational society to preserve and pass on rhythm bones and have fun doing it. We have this website, publish a quarterly Rhythm Bones Paper newsletter and host an annual Bones Fest. We invite you to join and help us.

## Visit the Rhythm Bones Museum

Visit the Rhythm Bones Museum where you will find a wide variety of information about rhythm bones including history, important players, players of today, the Rhythm Bones Paper newsletter, audio and video on the website, YouTube videos, and more.

### LATEST POSTS



ALL-IRELAND BONES COMPETITION RESULTS  
04 MAY, 2021



ALL-IRELAND BONES COMPETITION VIDEO  
04 MAY, 2021



BONES FEST XIV PRELIMINARY INFORMATION  
07 MAY, 2021



DOM FLEMONS IN OLDTIME-CENTRAL.COM  
07 MAY, 2021



JONATHAN DANFORTH PROFILE  
07 MAY, 2021



JONATHAN DANFORTH WORKSHOP - BONES IN SPACE AND TIME  
07 MAY, 2021



KENNY WOLIN BFKXIV WORKSHOP - GALLOP RHYTHM  
04 MAY, 2021



KENNY WOLIN'S BFKXIV WORKSHOP - OSTERATO PATTERNS  
04 MAY, 2021



KENNY WOLIN'S BFKXIV WORKSHOP VIDEO - 16TH NOTES  
15 APRIL, 2021



PERCY DANFORTH PORTFOLIO UPDATED  
26 APRIL, 2021

### CATEGORIES

CONTACTS

EVENTS

HISTORY

NEWS

NEWSLETTER

PROFILE

UNCATEGORIZED

WORKSHOPS

### TAGS

BonesFestXIV, BonesFestXV, Danforth, Dom, Duain, Flynn, Ford, Jonathan, Wolf



from the newsletter to make it look like a profile, but if your profile is there you are invited to submit a better photograph, up to date words, and audio and/or video that you would like to share. If you are not included, please feel free to submit a profile. Check out our Executive Director, Steve Brown, for a good example.

Bones Fests are an important part of our society and each Fest is briefly summarized in the 'Bones Fest Highlights' exhibit. For more detail and photographs, click the Summary link at the top of the page or for the original story click the 'Original Story' link.

You can search the newsletter in the "Search the Newsletters" exhibit. All of the newsletters are in an Adobe pdf file which is a large file that takes time to download particularly on mobile devices. Search using the Adobe Find function (cntl + F).

The 'Bones Through Space and Time' exhibit takes its name from Jonathan Danforth's great workshop at virtual Bones Fest XXIV where he shows how ideas, like rhythm bones, spread around the world. Many historical rhythm bones stories are in this exhibit.

The 'Published Articles' exhibit includes some of the major published articles on rhythm bones that can be read online.

The 'History of RBS' exhibit tells our society's history and includes profiles of all current and former Board members.

The 'Rhythm Bones' Media exhibit has a rich assortment of rhythm bones audio and video that are online on our website or on YouTube or Vimea.

The Rhythm Bones Art and Images' Exhibit presents images and photographs that appeared in the newsletter.

The 'Rhythm Bones Book of Knowledge' Exhibit is a work in progress idea that could be a published book for the 25th Anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society in 2024. In theory it would contain all of the information found on this new website in book form. This exhibit has a few pages to preview.

As we all continue to research and learn more about rhythm bones, these exhibits will grow in size or new Exhibits will be added. We hope you will be a contributor.

A lot of the text you see is temporary and hours of editing are ahead of us.

**Rhythm Bones Central**  
Friends of the Rhythm Bones Society

HOME ABOUT CONTACT US Q

## Rhythm Bones Museum

Whaling Museum, New Bedford, MA

**You Can Search This Website**  
Click the Search icon in the navigation bar and a search bar will appear at the top of the page. Enter one or more keywords in the search bar and press Enter.

The Rhythm Bones Society knows a lot about rhythm bones, and the Museum has fixed exhibits and the ability to search the Rhythm Bones Website. Here are some fixed exhibits.

- The Percy Danforth Project
- The Memorabilia of Ted Goon Mr. Goon-Bones
- Player Profiles
- Bones Fests Highlights
- Search the Newsletters
- Rhythm Bones Through Space and Time
- Published Articles
- History of the Rhythm Bones Society
- Rhythm Bones Art and Images
- More Exhibits To Come

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# An Instrument Both Ancient and Modern: An Interview with Dom Flemons

*Dom Flemons is a songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, producer, actor, music scholar, historian, and record collector. He is considered an expert player on the banjo, guitar, harmonica, jug, percussion, quills, fife and rhythm bones. A Grammy Award Winner, two-Time EMMY Nominee, 2020 United States Artists Fellow, Dom Flemons hails from Phoenix, Arizona.*

*In 2005, Flemons co-founded the Carolina Chocolate Drops who won a GRAMMY for "Best Traditional Folk Album" in 2010 and were nominated for "Best Folk Album" in 2012. He left the group to pursue his solo career in 2014.*

*As his website notes, "He has branded the moniker 'The American Songster' since his repertoire of music covers over 100 years of early American popular music." Flemons released his third solo album titled Prospect Hill: The American Songster Omnibus on Omnivore Recordings.*

**Timothy Jones:** You have spent a lot of time studying the roots of traditional music. That exploration includes the minstrel era. I'm struck by how minstrelsy was not just about music but also theater. Do those roots account for the flourish and flair with which I think many bones players approach their playing?

**Dom Flemons:** I believe in some ways yes. The minstrel show was theater of course and everyone loves a bit of flair in their theater. I know that for me when I first saw photos of the old minstrel shows I was struck by the way the bones players always had their hands up in the air. When I first saw bones being played in real life they were always played close to the chest. I myself tried to experiment the way I played bones by giving them a bit more body movement and I was glad to find that it worked well for me. The bones truly respond to the player's every move and I think that is very liberating when you learn to play the instrument

because there aren't many instruments like that.

**TJ:** The ethnomusicologist Greg C. Adams talks about the roots of bones playing in dance. Any connections you see?

**DF:** Of course. Rhythm is rhythm. When you heard bones they are not always played like a dancer but the rudiments of where you land your rhythm can be traced to the way the dancer dances to the music. If you dance to a certain type of music, you yourself learn what makes the music tick. Once you have that in your mind, you can translate that over to your audience. The first blackface minstrel to make an international following was Daddy Rice, the creator of the "Jump, Jim Crow," and he was a dancer. Dancing was what started the craze and then the bands came in later.

**TJ:** If you were to characterize the accented beats when you play bones, would they typically fall on 2 and 4?

**DF:** What really matters is the song. When you reach into the world of percussion the playing gets a little more complex. It is the rhythm version of melody and harmony. When one sings a melody, the harmony is a perfect part that matches the notes of the melody and can transform the overall sound and feel to any piece of music. Percussion works the same way. While a rhythm may land on the two and four, the percussion can play a variation of that rhythm that will change and alter the feel of the whole of the music based on what parts are being played alongside the main rhythm.

**TJ:** Do you still use both wooden bones and bone bones?

**DF:** I still pull out wooden bones for recording sessions as bone bones tend to be very sharp coming back on a recording. With that being said, I still play shows with natural bones. I keep a wooden set around just in case I need a different tone. This usually happens when I'm jamming with a big group.

**TJ:** I have Dena Epstein's book, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, about the African American connections to early minstrelsy, and to bones themselves, and I'm fascinated. Can you say a little more about that?

**DF:** I learned to play bones from a lot of people, black and white. The fact that I can understand how the instrument

works as both an ancient and modern musical instrument and play music that can transcend time by being both old and new, means that I try to employ all of my influences in my playing. I can reference in my playing Brother Bones, a black man who was the Harlem Globetrotters mascot, and have an urban feel like he did. I can also play western swing and sound like a snare drum doing a drag-roll beat. I can sound like a washboard. I could sound like a trap drum set or I could sound like a dancer. That is the beauty. I make my references in the context of the song I'm playing. There are cues and sounds that demonstrate this heritage from the African Diaspora. I can read a book like *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* and immerse myself in the references to inform the way I approach the material itself. *Timothy Jones*

Timothy wrote a longer article that can be read at <https://oldtime-central.com/gimme-that-old-time-rhythm/>.

[We met Timothy at Virtual Bones Fest XXIV and videos from that Fest have a photograph of him at the beginning just above the letters A-J.]

Photo by Timothy Duffy



## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXV.** July 24, 2021, Virtual on Zoom.. Check this newsletter for the preliminary program.

**NTCMA Festival,** Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Assume canceled.

**(BFXXV continued from Page 1)**

Hargrove.

3pm **Workshop - Bone Tone** with Mardeen Gordon and Brad Dutz. Exploring tone quality and various materials.

3:30 **Workshop - Classical Bones Performance** with Annika Mikolajko, coloratura soprano, musician, multi-instrumentalist, pedagogue, sailor, Master of Music Arts and rhythm bones player

4pm **Workshop - The Quadruplet** with Graham Hargrove. Learn how to do the "true Quadruplet" based on Aaron Plunkett's one handed momentum technique.

4:15 PM **The Goat Bone Story** with Tom Connolly. Tom Connolly's journey of trying to make goat shin bones over the last 10 years involving a butcher named Billy, an Island off the coast of Cork, and an interesting find in an antique store.

4:30 **Workshop - Making Bones** with Steve Brown. Watch the process from beginning to end.

5:30 **Individual Introductions** continue to the end of Fest.

## Junior Davey on All-Ireland Judging

"First and foremost, I would like to thank the Committee for Fledh by the Feale and especially those associated with the Bones Championship for inviting me to adjudicate. It is an honor and a privilege for me to do that. And this was not easy task. We had 23 of the best exponents of rhythm bones playing in the world incorporating the best two-handed players and the best one-handed players. It meant for a serious competition and I think not only befits the All-Ireland Bones Competition, but indeed a World Bones Competition.

There were some great players and it was so fantastic to see players from so many places, from overseas, from North America, from Canada, and from Poland. You had the best and such a mix of styles especially among the two-handed players, some very extravagant technical playing.

It was amazing and a joy for me to sit and listen to which I did many times - I had to - to separate the standards and listen to the finery. Also we had so many

great single-handed players - exponents from pure traditionalists to some willing to take a little risk with improvisation and stuff like that. Really everybody brought their 'A' game.

Just to say at the outset as well, I'm involved as people know with bones as well. I know a lot of the players and this had absolutely no influence on the result. So I had to listen to the finery and the technique and make sure that people kept within the four minutes to play the two pieces and played with good, solid traditional music. So I listened and listened five times over to narrow it down to the final three.

The result is as follows for the 2021 All-Ireland Bones Championship. In third place we had Skeff Flynn and Skeff played lovely in a highly unusual style, but fantastic playing. In second place we had John Ford with wonderful traditional solo playing - fantastic player. And in first place, Nicholas Dupin with textbook, class playing, almost identifying every little twist and turn in the melody that he backed. So the All-Ireland Champion for 2021, Senior Bones, is Nicholas Dupin from France. Second is John Ford from Ireland and third place is Skeff Flynn from North America. Congratulation to all involved, and hopefully for 2022 we can all meet up and share ideas and approaches, experiences and everything because it is so great to have world participation in events like this. To have players from North America, France, and Poland is brilliant. OK, thank you very much and continue playing wonderful rhythm bones. See you all later.

## Teri Wolin Taught During COVID-19

Update from previous Newsletter Article - go to <http://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP.pdf>, page 162.

WOW - How time has flown! I've been teaching bones in the school now for 14 years and my (then) 5 year old daughter Emily is now going to be 20 in March. Some of you may recall that Emmy and I performed at the DC Bones Fest that Kenny & I hosted here 10 years ago. I still have pictures of that performance and recently came across another one with her (then) toddler brother Aidan

also playing rhythm bones. Aidan's 17 now by the way. Boy do I feel old all of the sudden.

OK, coming back from my trip down memory lane...In reading over my grip thoughts from the previous Newsletter, I suppose I've changed my grip a bit and now I use the "Yankee" grip in my left hand and the "Irish" grip in my right. That's just something that developed over time and I wasn't even aware I was doing it. I generally use 2 different types of rhythm bones when I am playing 2-handed to get that "drum set" sound. I suppose that's the reason for 2 different grips and 2 different bone types.

This year has been especially challenging as a music teacher because our school chose to go Hybrid. That means I'm teaching In-Person as well as Virtual. The Diocese of Arlington has asked us not to sing at all in the classroom (or at Mass for that matter). We've also been spaced 6 ft. apart and wearing masks. It's very, very difficult to sing with a mask on anyway so the no-singing rule was just as well I suppose. So, what in the world is a music teacher to do now?

Luckily, I still have a large assortment of late Jim Lohmann's rhythm bones that I can carry in a small tote from class to class (yes, I even lost the use of my classroom so it's music-on-a-cart). Thank goodness for rhythm bones!!!!

OK, well that works very well for those that are sitting in front of me but what about those that are Virtual at home? While I'm able to supply my students with rhythm bones, I know that no one at home will have access to them. That is where I am blessed (many times over) to be living with a man who plays the spoons in addition to rhythm bones. Everyone has spoons! I made recordings of Kenny giving basic spoons instructions and delivered them to the students via their online school platform. We made 3 videos so far and he gives tips and techniques to further each student along in their spoons-playing progress.

In mid-January, our school chose to go Virtual for 2 weeks. I was teaching music from my kitchen table and had Kenny join in with rhythm bones and spoons while I played and sang some of the kids' favorite songs. It was a rare opportunity for the kids to see Kenny playing both of those instruments & they loved it! *Teri Wolin*



# All-Ireland Bones Competition Winners and Adjudicator



The winners of the 2021 All-Ireland Bones Competition are; Nicholas Dupin from France, First Place (left column), John Ford from Ireland, Second Place (middle column), and Skeffington Flynn from North America, 3rd Place (upper

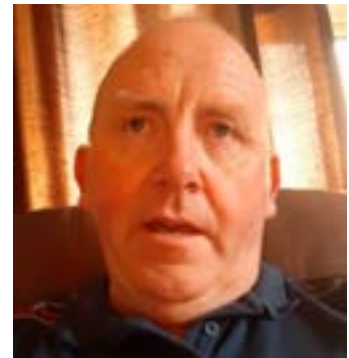


right column).

The Adjudicator was Junior Davey from Ireland (lower right column).

These images were taken live from the Facebook video of the event.

The story of the event by Martin O'Donoghue starts on Page 1, and includes a photograph of him. There are comments on how the competition was judged from the Adjudicator on Page 7. He notes how difficult a job it was to pick the winners from such great players.



## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 23, No. 3 2021

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*Teaching Rhythm Bones To Kids*

*Website Update*

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*Editorial*

*Letters to the Editor*

## Executive Director's Column

Once again I've come face to face with the power of rhythm bones to fascinate and entice people. This time it was at the Eastern Mass Rhythm Festival, a yearly gathering of hand drummers from a variety of traditions. Now I will tell you I have had marginal success with hand drummers. After all beginning drummers are quickly rewarded when hitting a drum with the sound of their drum, while rhythm bones players must work to achieve the beginning sound of their instrument, and eventually to control and shape it to music. I recall a hand drummers festival I attended and had a booth at a number of years ago where drummers, though fascinated with rhythm

bones, would give them a full 30 seconds of attention before moving on to the next booth. I imagined myself and Jeremy by ourselves, while all the festival participants attended the multitude of activities around the festival.

Much to my surprise when we arrived at the workshop site, there were a number of people gathered around waiting for the workshop to begin. There were several drummers, dancers, and curious attendee's all ready to start their journey on rhythm bones! It soon became clear that I had a group of willing and  
(Continued on Page 2)

## Bones Fest XXV Highlights

Bones Fest XXV, our Silver Anniversary Fest, was to be this gala event near the United States' capital city, but was again a virtual Fest held with Zoom teleconferencing technology. It is remarkable that Bones Fests have been around for twenty five years. Quite an accomplishment due to the talented people who have banded together to preserve and pass on this unique and old musical instrument and gather annually to celebrate it.



While we want to be together in person, teleconferencing has its good points. First, in some ways, it is more intimate as we feel like we are only four to six feet away from each other. Second and more important people from around the world can attend. The Board of Directors doesn't yet know how to do it, but there will be a Zoom component to future in-person Bones Fests.

The format like last year was individual introductions and workshops. However, there was only one meeting room instead of the three last year, and this meant that attendees were together for all sessions.

A composite Zoom Gallery screenshot is on Page 8, and a key to attendee names is on Page 3. Not everyone turned on their video, and the screenshot on Page 8 shows the attendees who did use video.

Following are a few points to remember from each of the workshops. Videos of several workshops

will wind up on our website and be announced as Posts on our Homepage.

**Making Rhythm Bones: Steve Brown:**

[This Workshop is in three parts, Introduction, Shin Bone Making and Wood Bone Making. It was a video for college students at a technical college in county Galway, Ireland.]

"Welcome to this little introduction to rhythm bone making. Today we will focus on making them, the kinds of materials they are made out of, and a little bit of their history. We assume the very first rhythm bones players used rib bones. We don't know how old that was, but the technique was passed down from one person to the next."

(Continued on Page 3)



Steve Brown, Emcee and Bone Making Workshop leader

## Editorial

I am always excited after a Bones Fest, and this year is no different even if it was again a virtual Fest. I am disappointed that we could not celebrate the 25th or Silver Anniversary of Bones Fests, but we have another chance as we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the *Rhythm Bones Society* in 2024. Let's blow it out in '24. And hopefully, we will meet next year in-person.

The BFXXV Highlights start on Page 1, and thanks to workshop leaders for the information they share. There are a few Letters to the Editor with reflections from the Fest and Dave Boyles passing. There is an update on our website update.

And new Bones Fest attendee, Matt Maise, shares his technique for teaching kids how to play rhythm bones. Thanks, Matt.

## Letters to the Editor

I was very impressed and honored to be included in the Bones Fest. Always have great questions and comments from so many good rhythm bones artists. It is a great learning experience for any player at any level. I think we should really look forward to a great live event next year and hope this silly virus dies out. Rhythm bones sound so much better live than through a computer speaker. Cheers. Thanks again. Braddutz.bandcamp.com

As a new member, I don't have the depth to comment, based on how past Fests compare, and I wasn't able to attend the zoom on the day that the Fest took place, but I sure appreciated the postings of some of the components on our website as they were very useful and encouraging. All I can really comment on is how much I appreciate the amount of work it is to put something like this on, how many people are involved and how many moving parts need to come together to bring such an undertaking to fruition. Thanks to all those whose energy made this possible! *Thomas Ferkel*

As I have found since joining RBS, rhythm bones are not just a musical instrument. They magically draw people

together and bring out the best in us. I feel privileged to have been part of RBS and look forward to many more years of fun in great company. The highlight of BFXXV for me was right at the end, when Parker Waite with tears brimming through a joyful smile said "I love this." Slán go fóill, *Tom Connolly*

Thanks so much for a most wonderful day of learning and inspiration about rhythm bones. It felt so good to just immerse myself in rhythm bones information and sounds. I haven't yet found someone here in Chicago to learn from so I learn from inside my percussion soul and go by feel. I would love to learn some of the technical things we talked about today. I especially enjoyed learning the two-handed ideas and exercises.

I hope to be able to join you all next year in person and possibly get some ideas from other people. *Lisa Ornstein*

I only had contact with David Boyles at the Orlando Bones Fest when I was very new to bones playing and all you great folks. I remember sitting with him at BB Kings after the performances and talking about how I didn't think I would ever be able to do some of the things that others had done. His comments to me were not to worry about it, but to develop my own style and have fun with it which I guess I have. Sadly that was the only time I got to meet him. *Gerry Hines*

I can not recall which Bones Fest it was, but it was one of my early Fests. I was shy about playing and David some how picked up this and asked me to come up and play with him. I will always remember his kindness. *Mitch Boss*

## Executive Director Column Continued

enthusiastic students anxious to learn rhythm bones and more than interested in them. Serves me right for pre-judging drummers and underestimating rhythm bones themselves! We had a most enjoyable hour teaching, playing, and learning rhythm bones, and a number of them even took rhythm bones home themselves. Rhythm bones can adapt and be used in a variety of music, is there

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

a future for them in drumming events? Could we see them at Drum circles, belly dance performances, and in a variety of drumming traditions? Stay tuned!

Dave Boyles was a charter member of the RBS, excellent musician, and the Black Bart behind the Black Bart Bones company. He brought rhythm bones and rhythm bone playing to many people in Wisconsin and around the country. He was a fixture at musical events around Milwaukee, and brought Bones Fest to Wisconsin, and the Milwaukee Irish Festival. He was a larger than life character who brought his enthusiasm, and passion to rhythm bones. Dave passed away in June from a rare disorder, and will be sorely missed in our little organization, and events.

This issue of the News Letter has a couple of nuggets, a review of the second virtual Bones Fest, and an article on teaching rhythm bones to kids by Matt Maise. I hope you enjoy it! *Steve Brown*

Each part of this Workshop is a separate video that can be found on Steve Brown's Player Profile page in our Museum.

**Concepts in Independence: Kenny Wolin;** "I started with some of my own exercises as a percussionist that I've converted from the snare drum world to rhythm bones, and that I use as morning exercises. These are hand dependent exercises to work on and smooth out the transition from hand to hand. Example: rhythm in one hand, rhythm in both hands and rhythm in other hand and back to both hands.

"This was followed by hand independence ideas. I started with a simple rhythm in one hand and showed how to spice it up using the other hand. The example rhythm was; 1 and [2] and 3 4 (no click on beat 2) and it helps to count it out. Then I added the other hand playing on beat 1 and 3. It really helps to speak that rhythm out loud. If you are struggling with this break it down into the first two beats and slow it down. I added off beats, triplets and more in the other hand. You can take any rhythm you are comfortable with and move it from hand to hand and then add to it with the other hand."

#### **How to Improve Your Playing:**

**Junior Davey:** "The best thing for improving your technique is to get them in your hands as often as you can doing your single taps or triplets or whatever. When I am practicing triplets I try and get them as crisp and as sharp as possible." [He demonstrated several of his favorite patterns, some influenced by his bodhran playing, and then brought in former student Noel to demonstrate an off-beat pattern."

Junior was the adjudicator in this year's All Ireland Bones Competition, and he explained his process to everyone including this year's winners, all in attendance, whom he feared (jokingly) might be hostile.

**Bill Vits:** "If you can play two or three times a day that is better than one long period cause our mind resets, our body resets.

"Another thing I do is go for long walks and practice, and I know I look stupid but I don't care. I'd really like to do a study of how rhythm bones playing affects your heart rate - I bet it cranks

it up another 5 to 10 beats per minute. And you can practice with a metronome which has the range rate of our heartbeat. Find your sweet spot that lets you do what you can do." [Bill demonstrated some rudiments]

#### **Essence of Irish Playing:**

**Tommy Hayes:** "The knowledge of the melody is important when you try to work and play Irish music with rhythm bones or the bodhran. One of the first things I tell beginning players is you need to have at least 50 melodies in your head, and know the tune and where the tune goes. Irish music is really simple. It is 4/4 or 6/8 with variations on the same." There were demonstrations of these.

**Junior Davey:** "If I were playing a three hour session, I would use rhythm bones periodically. The musicians who like rhythm bones don't like the rattling for two or three hours. It is nice to add the dynamic of percussion to a session." Junior demonstrated his style.

**Nicolas Dupin:** "I can add a few things. It is not the grip that is the essence because even Irish players use different grips such as Tommy Hayes and Junior Davey. To me the one handed grip is more Irish than anything though now you do have a few younger players playing double handed. Also in my experience, 95% use bone bones. The sound of Irish bones playing is connected to rib bones. There's a strong connection between Irish bones playing and bodhran playing. And most players prefer playing in 4/4 time. If you search YouTube for Irish Bones you will find mostly reels."

#### **Essence of Two-Handed Playing:**

**Bill Vits:** "I like playing quarter notes in one hand and filling in with the other hand. Work using one hand to keep the pulse and fill in with sixteenth notes using the other hand." He demonstrated with many different rhythms from simple to complex in the other hand.

**Brad Dutz:** "I play with slate, rib bone, and wood and almost never play with the same two pair. As a two-handed rhythm bones player, I might play the A-section of a piece on slate, the B-section on wood and maybe the bridge or C-section on both of them. That way you have different sound textures or colors. Another really helpful thing is to know

(Continued on Page 6)

## Website Update

The [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org) website continues to mature with new posts, a 'When and a Where to Play' and a 'How to Use This Website' pages added to the Homepage. There are two new Museum Exhibits; 'Rhythm Bones Contests' and 'Odd and Ends' which has items that are not significant enough to have their own exhibit. It starts with a dedication to rhythm bones players known to have passed away since the RBS was formed.

Links to the *Rhythm Bones Players* newsletters now work on mobile devices, however, most mobile pdf readers cannot jump to a page within a pdf meaning you have to scroll to the referenced article which is a maximum eight page scroll.

There are about 300 pages created in a fairly short time so expect errors and let us know when you find them. Thanks

And PLEASE check out your Player Profile page. Update or give information to create one.

## Key to Photograph on Page 8

**Top Row:** Kenny Wolin, Steve Wixson, Sharon Mescher, Graham Hargrove, Noel from Ireland, Hans Weehuizer, and Ellen Stern.

**2nd Row:** Dennis Riedesel, Parker Waite, Jim Runner, Nicolas Dupin, Norman Nickols, Brad Dutz, and Lisa Ornstein.

**3rd Row:** Teri Wolin, Mardeen Gordon, Stan Von Hagen, Judy Wolin, Tom Connolly, Andy Riffin, Jeremy and Steve Brown.

**4th Row:** Tommy Hayes, Skeffington Flynn, Mary Lee Sweet, Randy Gordon, Brian Sheehan, Tommy Cowett, and Heidi Hess-Bynum.

**5th Row:** Ron Bruschi, Annika Mikolajko-Osman, Dano Schultz, Bill Vits, Michael Ballard, Arleen Krupa, and Ann Coulter.

**6th Row:** Junior Davey, Jonathan Danforth, Dean Robinson, Steve Litsios, Medl Mercier, Gerry Hines, and Matt Maise.

**7th Row:** Aaron Plunkett and Clair Schiller

# Individuals



Michael Ballard



Ron Bruschi



Tommy Cowett



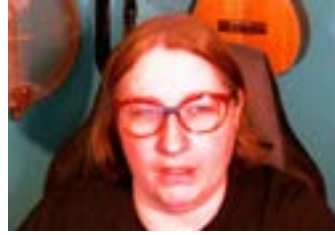
Jonathan Danforth



Dennis Devine



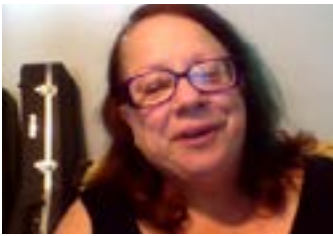
Randy Gordon



Heidi Hess-Bynum



Gerry Hines



Aileen Krupa



Steve Litsios



Matthew Maise



Sharon Mescher



Norman Nichols



Lisa Ornstein



Aaron Plunkett



Dennis Riedesel



Dean Robinson



Jim Runner



Claire Schiller



Dano Schultz



Brian Sheehan



Ellen Stern



Mary Lee Sweet



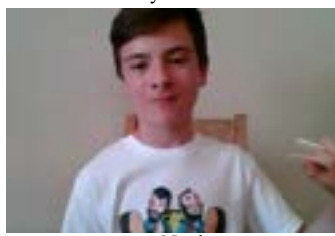
Stan Von Hagen



Parker Waite



Hans Weehuizen



Noel



Teri Wolin



(Continued from Page 3)

when to lay out and maybe not play the B-section. I think it is super important to leave space so there is room for the music. I'll also change rhythm bones." He demonstrated some of the different types in his collection.

**Graham Hargrove:** "I want to a slightly different tack on this subject. For me the essence is counterpoint; it's a single rhythmic line against a single rhythmic line, and even rhythmic counterpoint against your feet because your feet are two very useful percussion instruments. I like to get a holistic, whole body approach to this stuff.

"I want to look at two walking patterns that I use all the time when I am practicing rhythm bones. I use a straight back and forth walking pace that has all kinds of music that is going to work with it. If you have the language in your body, no matter what the complexity of the rhythm is, you can figure a way to put it into your body." He demonstrated the other walking pattern and lots of rhythm bones playing using them.

#### **Bone Tone:**

**Brad Dutz:** "There are so many different ways to change tone. For me, the easiest and quickest is changing from one finger between the bones to two fingers. Another way is to turn the stationary bones using the thumb and first finger so it strikes the moving bones on its edge. For me it works good using slate and wood rhythm bones. Still another way is to use two fingers on the stationary bones. There were demonstrations that may not sound as distinct over computer speakers."

**Mardeen Gordon:** "The easiest way to get a deeper tone is to slide you stationary bones up and it doesn't matter whether you are using one or two fingers between the bones, that deepens the sound. You can find a sweet spot where it is the deepest. [she demonstrated her standard grip.] You can also change the tone by changing the size of the sound chamber formed by the two bones and your fingers. With two fingers between the bones, lift the middle finger to open the chamber and the tone rises.

"I took a wooden spoon and cut the handle off and place it as the stationary bone with the bowl shape on the inside of the chamber which makes a larger

resonating chamber. When I lift my middle finger it changes the tone more than with regular bones giving me a deep, soft tone. If I do that with two different woods in the right and left hands I can get four different tones.

"I also designed a hollow bone with an opening on the side that I thought by placing my finger over the hole might change the tone. Unfortunately the 3D printer could only print with a thin plastic that has little tone. Someday I'll try to do it when I can 3D print using ceramics."

**Classical Bones Performance: Anika Mikolajko-Osman:** "The aim of the concert is to show that rhythm bones are "multipurpose" and can be used in various music styles. They fit with ethnic, film, pop, jazz and even contemporary music as well.

"You will see a new music video made especially for the Bones Fest. I use mostly instrumental music, and you will also hear a premiere with piano, soprano, and rhythm bones.

"It is also very interesting, that there is so much difference in sound between each pair of bones. Another grip, material or just another handmade pair means a completely different sound. That's why bones are a one of a kind instrument."

This video is online at [youtube.com/watch?v=EFa5a2w\\_1E0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFa5a2w_1E0) or play it from her Player Profile page in our Museum.

**The Quadruplet: Graham Hargrove:** "This is a technique lesson and it doesn't matter if you are a one handed or two handed player and works with the American or Irish Grip. The technique is a momentum technique like the triplet with its three bounces. [He demonstrated it.] My fingers are very relaxed and I can go from a reasonably slow tempo to a fast tempo. This is a very versatile technique and I am biased as I think we all should be doing it." [It is difficult to describe the technique in words, but a video of this Workshop is on Graham's Player Profile page in our Museum. Graham got the technique from Aaron Plunkett's instructional video and Aaron, who was an attendee, provided a few additional comments on the technique.]

#### **The Goat Bone Story: Tom Connolly**

"Almost as long as I've been playing rhythm bones I've been looking for goat bones. I started my search in earnest

about 10 years ago, and have looked in all corners of Ireland! I got some at one point from an environmentally conscious butcher called Billy Grene but they were too small. Eventually I did get to make some shin bones. They are completely different in tone, weight, look and action to any of the beef bones I've made. It was a bitter-sweet success as the source was a 5 year old buck belonging to my son-in-law Joe, the beautifully gentle Rug, who died prematurely earlier this year. In my workshop I summarized my quest and paid tribute to Rug. Slán go fóill."

#### **Jerry Mescher and His Impact on Rhythm Bones Playing: Dr. Mel Mercier:**

"I first saw Jerry on the stage at Bones Fest IV, and it was the usual format of everyone getting up and doing their stish. When Jerry got up he just blew me away. At that time I was thinking about a PhD, and I had more or less decided that I wanted to write it about bone playing and especially about two-handed bones playing. I knew nothing about it and the first person I had met who played two handed was Percy Danforth. Later I met Everett Cowett and Russ Myers and saw the blossoming of rhythm bones in North America.

"When Jerry got up he told his story which was tied up with his father, Albert, who had taught himself how to play the bones sitting at his player piano. Jerry learned to play from his father and how to farm. When Jerry played, I was really taken back by what I saw, heard, and felt. So at that point I decided that I had to write about Jerry Mescher.

"So I did write my thesis primarily about Jerry and his dad and sister Bernie [who later learned to play] and that farm and the passing on of practices and traditions."

[A link to an abstract of the thesis is on Mel's Player Profile page in our Museum and it has a link to the thesis. If you want to learn to play Mescher style, Mel has transcribed the Mescher Tradition into sheet music.]

With returning and new rhythm bones attendees and a great group of workshop leaders, this was another memorable Bones Fest. *Steve Wixson*

## Teaching Rhythm Bones to Kids

[Charleston, SC based percussionist, Matt Masie, has gained a love and appreciation for the rhythm bones over the last three and a half years. Here he shares some of his techniques behind teaching them to kids. You can contact him at [mattm.7819@gmail.com](mailto:mattm.7819@gmail.com).]

Most of my students come to me to take orchestral percussion lessons or to learn to play the drum set. It's my secret goal, however, to turn all of my students into rhythm bones players!

What I'm going to share with you in this article are techniques that have worked best for me when teaching kids how to play rhythm bones.

With a few exceptions, most of my experience with teaching rhythm bones has been in the format of a private lesson. I always begin with a quick demonstration of the rhythm bones for my students in their first lesson. First I'll play a few taps between my hands. Their eyes usually widen just from watching that, so you can imagine their surprise when I start throwing out triplets and other combinations!

I have found that a good age to start teaching rhythm bones is around eight years old. It can be challenging (but still possible) to teach rhythm bones to kids younger than that. It's difficult for younger kids to hold rhythm bones correctly, let alone apply different amounts of pressure to each bone. In those cases it's best not to push it. It's better to come back to it at a later date when they are a little older and have developed the fine motor skills to properly hold and play them.

### The Tap

I don't set my goals too high for my students at the beginning. The first lesson is usually just seeing if they can hold the rhythm bones correctly. I teach my students to hold rhythm bones on both sides of the middle finger. If they are able to do that, I may show them how to play a Tap.

Kids can get frustrated quickly trying to play the Tap, so I only work with them on it for a few minutes each lesson. I try not to push them to the point where they want to give up playing rhythm bones entirely out of frustration.

The classic example that I use in

regards to explaining how to play a Tap is to think of turning a door knob. I also like what David Holt says in his folk percussion instructional video, Folk Rhythms, about imagining you have a spider on your hand and you are trying to twist your hand quickly to fling it off.

There are several reasons why kids may not be able to produce a Tap right away:

1. They don't bring their hand all the way back (the skin should wrinkle at the wrist).
2. The rhythm bones are touching each other or are too far apart.
3. The rhythm bones are too loose or tight in the hand.
4. The Tap movement is too slow.

There is a lot to think about when trying to play a Tap. Again, I have found it best to only work on it for a few minutes each lesson with my students. They are usually able to play consistent taps after several lessons.

### The Triplet

Watching their little faces light up when they play their first triplet never gets old! Some students can play them almost immediately, others can take as long as a month or even more. I'll spend a little more time on this technique in our lessons, usually up to ten minutes. I find that they will grow impatient with trying to play triplets if we go any longer than that. The key is to work on it a little each week and to stop before they get frustrated.

One of the best ways I have found to get a student to play triplets is to have them imitate a windshield wiper. Another is to imitate the hand movements of a flapper dancing (or at least my interpretation of a flapper dancing). We will actually stand up and dance like a flapper in lessons. Best to keep things as fun and light as possible! Also, moving both hands even if the rhythm bones are only in one hand helps to get the motion of the triplet down faster.

I've noticed that my students have a tendency to not look at their hand when they play (even if I keep nagging them about it!). I've realized that having them play in front of a mirror is the fastest way to get them to play the triplet. I'll usually have them sit down while I stand behind them so they can copy my movements as they are looking in the mirror.

### Combination Exercises

Once they are able to play the triplet we'll then play exercises combining triplets and taps. I'll start with four beats of triplets followed by a tap. If they can do that I start subtracting triplets: three triplets and a tap, two triplets and a tap, and finally the most difficult to loop over and over, a triplet and a tap.

After they can play several combinations of triplets and taps, I'll play a two measure pattern and try to have them play the same pattern back. Eventually we trade four measure patterns back and forth, trying to get a "conversation" going between ourselves with both of us improvising off of each other.

From there I may pick a song (it can be from any genre) to have them play along with. I'll come up with a couple of patterns before we play the song and then off we go. In no time we are playing rhythm bones to music!

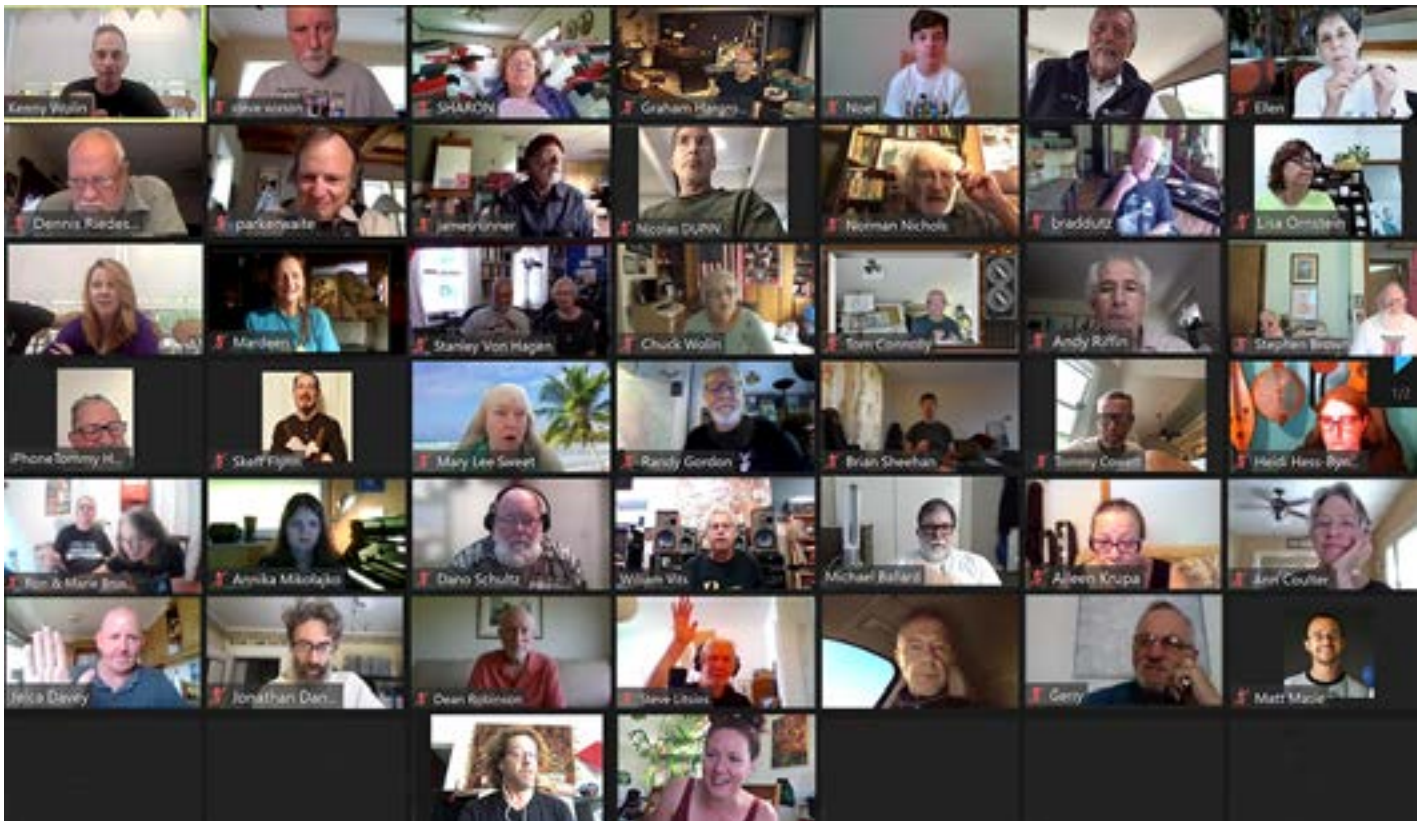
Once they learn how to play taps and triplets in their dominant hand, it's usually easier for them to learn the same techniques in their less dominant hand. They're always surprised when I tell them that it will not be nearly as difficult to play a triplet in their other hand. In fact, it's not out of the ordinary for them to be playing triplets after just a few minutes.

### Closing Thoughts

I've come to realize over the last few years that not all of my students will share my passion for rhythm bones. Of course I feel sad about this, but I also understand that my students are on their own unique musical journey to discover how best to express themselves.

I am grateful for the students that continue on their rhythm bones journey with me. I always love when they tell me stories about how they brought their rhythm bones to school and gave a demonstration to their class, or how they showed their uncle the rhythm bones when he came to visit over the summer. They might not realize it, but by doing so they are helping to keep an ancient musical instrument alive for another generation.

*Matt Masie*



Bones Fest XXV attendees with their video turned on are shown above. See Key on Page 3 for their names. Without Video: Mitch Boss, Andy Cox, Scott Craig, Johnny Fennell, Sam Gould, Tod Roush, Michael Sakarias, Daniel Schiller, and Sander Slomovits.

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 23, No. 4 2021

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## Executive Director's Column

It's New Years Eve 2021, usually a reflective time, of the good and not so good times of the last year. But this year I find it difficult to reflect. It is the hardest year of my life, one that has seen my oldest son steadily decline from Alzheimers and an undiagnosed medical condition effecting his physical abilities.

Jennifer and I struggle with providing him the care that he needs, while trying to get him the medical treatment we hope might improve his condition. As difficult as it is for him, he never stops saying thank you when we give him a drink, kissing our hands, and giving us that bright smile he has always been

known for.

I admit there are times when I'm not capable of really doing anything. But as Jennifer reminds me, "sink or swim" and as we push on we gain strength from each other. And I am reminded, we all are dealing with the most difficult issues that we have faced in our lives, loved ones passing, and serious illness. That's why it's so important to carry on, be the person we have always been, and for the most part, he is doing that. So I will too, I will play rhythm bones, play the drum, find delight in rhythm

(Continued on Page 4)

## Steve Brown

As I look back on my life it always amazes me how certain things effect and change your life. Having Jeremy, a person with Down Syndrome, at 21 did that. And getting a package from Percy Danforth containing two pairs of rhythm bones also changed and impacted my life far beyond my expectations.

I played drums throughout my childhood, and into high school. I took a private course at the Berklee School of music, and even dabbled in piano and violin. I played rock and roll, Jazz, blues, and bought a doumbec and started playing belly dance music. I went to Folk festivals, and even attended the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in 1969.

But my music playing had to be put aside when I married and had a child. I had to focus supporting them, but music was my passion. I had developed an interest in a variety of traditional music, and began attending fiddle contests in the middle and late 70's, but it wasn't until my brother introduced me to Percy Danforth that I made a true connection with rhythm bones. My brother Denny had done some work with Percy transcribing rhythm patterns for him. Denny gave me Percy's address, and three weeks later a package wrapped in brown paper arrived at the door.

When I opened that package, it was the first time I had seen rhythm bones, and nearly drove the whole house crazy trying to learn them. But a couple of months later, after an evening spent with Percy and his wife Fran in a Boston hotel, it all started to gel. Soon I was sitting in with all types of musicians, and driving anyone who would listen crazy with my

enthusiasm.

I also began my lifelong search to connect with other rhythm bones players. I found John Burrill "Mr. Bones of Boston" and spent time with him at his apartment in Brighton, I found Johnny Muise, a Cape Breton rhythm bones player who lived in Boston. And I was always on the search, contacting any players I heard about or saw, Mance Grady, Sandy Davis, Rod Fuller, Hank Tennenbaum, and anyone I heard about.

Fiddle contests became my addiction and I attended and jammed at as many as I could. In September of 78, I sat (Continued on Page 3)



Stephen Brown by Catherine Kingcome



## Editorial

In April, I lost my wife of 60 years of marriage. Some of you knew Janet from when we hosted Bones Fests IV and IX and the evening meals were in our home.

Now I am figuring out how to live as a widower. Projects help and the upgrade of our website was a big one. I also do similar things for my church and my barbershop chorus, and this Christmas season had deadlines that interfered with getting the newsletter completed and on time.

Mitch Boss passed and his obituary is in this issue. Sad indeed.

Our Executive Director, Steve Brown, has not been profiled until this issue due in part because we know him from the large number of articles he has contributed to this newsletter. His time has come and his profile begins on Page 1.

Mardeen Gordon's part of the Bones Fest XXV Bone Tone Workshop presented some ideas that were new to me. She summarizes her workshop in this issue and I hope this leads to further discussions.

Rowan Corbett found time in his performance schedule to attend a few Bones Fests and also lead a workshop. He shares his rhythm bones story.

We heard about Nicolas Dupin in the last newsletter after he won the All-Ireland Bones Competition. He shares his rhythm bones story.

I have talked to Sule Wilson on the telephone a few times over the years, and appreciate his talent. He has not attended a Bones Fest, but he did contribute his profile for our website and for this issue of the newsletter.

John Meader, from the 'Birthplace of Country Music Museum,' attended Bones Fest IX. I checked in recently and learned of DeFord Baily who would at times play rhythm bones on Grand Old Opry.

We had our first General Membership Meeting using Zoom technology, and the minutes of the preceding Board meeting and the membership meeting are in this newsletter. Our Bylaws authorize the Board to set the time and place for meetings and allow members to be notified electronically, so holding a meeting electronically seems within the spirit of our Bylaws.

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Executive Director, Steve Brown, using Zoom teleconferencing technology called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM, EDT as the Nomination Committee for 2022 Board Members. The current Board Members have agreed to serve for another year, and a motion to that effect was approved by acclamation. The Nomination Committee meeting was adjourned but discussion continue.

Since there needs to be a General Membership Meeting before the end of 2021, the Board selected the date of Saturday, November 11, at 2:00 PM Eastern Standard Time for this meeting using Zoom. The agenda will consist of election of Board Members as well as any new business to come before the group. There will be a discussion about the location of Bones Fest XXVI next year. There will be an open forum where attendees can ask questions about leadership and technical issues. The meeting will conclude with the Jerry Mescher Tribute video that was scheduled but not shown at Bones Fest XXV.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:41 EDT. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

A General Membership Meeting was held using Zoom teleconferencing technology on November 11, starting at 1:00 PM, EDT. There was a quorum as members present is a quorum.

This meeting is normally held at the annual Bones Fest, but this year we ran out of time.

Steve Brown, Executive Director, opened the meeting presenting the slate nominated by the Board acting as the Nominations Committee. He opened the floor for further nominations, and being none Gerry Hines moved and Jim Quiram seconded that the nominations be closed. The motion passed.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

Elected Board members for 2022 are:

Steve Brown, Executive Director  
Bill Vits, Assistant Director  
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer  
Skeff Flynn  
Sharon Mescher  
Dennis Riedesel  
Kenny Wolin

There was a discussion on the location of Bones Fest XXIII and the hope of an in-person Fest. Kenny and Teri Wolin are interested in hosting this Fest, but they have not formally committed.

A general discussion of various subjects followed, and the meeting adjourned about 2 PM. The Jerry Mescher video was not shown as planned. Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

(Steve Brown continued from Page) in with an Irish band, the Green Castle Band, and became their permanent percussionist, later making two records with them and opening for my favorite band, DeDannan. During the week it was the day job, but on the week ends I played as much as I could, contra dances, festivals, coffee houses, and of course fiddle and banjo contests.

Irish music became my focus and I started attending the regular sessions in Boston, and anywhere I could. Soon I was playing in several bands, had begun playing Bodhran, and listening constantly to the music.

I had always sold wooden rhythm bones for Percy, but after purchasing bone bones from Nicholas Driver, I started thinking about making them. While hanging around a traditional music shop in Cambridge called Sandy's Music, Sandy Sheehan convinced me I could make real bone rhythm bones. I kept looking for bone, ribs at first, but I had heard from Nicholas Driver that he used the leg bones of cows.

I was selling wooden rhythm bones at a fiddle contest, when I ran into an eccentric old man who asked, "do you ever make them out of bone?" This was Milton Shapanka, a retired merchant marine sailor who often worked in bone. Milton invited me over to his workshop, and I started advising him on what the bones should look like, and he showed me how to work with bone, and how to finish them. Soon I was making bone rhythm bones on my own. The early ones were terrible, and it took me years to get the process right.

A good friend, Doug Reiner, who played banjo was asked to make wooden rhythm bones for the Music Emporium in Cambridge, and Doug asked me if I would come over and advise him. Soon I was helping Doug sell rhythm bones at the New England Folk Festival, and later was asked to do workshops on rhythm bones and other percussion instruments.

I always thought it important to connect with the older players, and would often invite them to the New England Folk Festival to help teach the workshop. This became a regular tradition and in my 40 years of attending the folk festival I have had help teaching from: Percy Danforth, John Burrill, Ev Cowette, Russ

Myers, Johnny Muise, Shorty Boulet, Ernie Duffey, Sky Bartlett, Skeffington Flynn, Bruno Giles, Dean Robinson, and many more. Over the years we have taught many hundreds of people to play the bones both adults and children..

Somewhere in the mid nineties I began to get invitations to attend what they called "Bones Fests" from Fred Edmunds. I somehow had made it onto his mailing list and began getting his newsletters. I started buying wooden rhythm bones from him as Percy had died, and Doug was no longer making them.

The first "Bones Fest" was held all the way in North Carolina, and the idea of traveling all the way to North Carolina to play rhythm bones didn't appeal to me much.

It was around this time that I was contacted by Ev Cowett whose daughter Martha had given him a website on rhythm bones as a Christmas present.

When Everett heard about the New England Folk festival and the workshops, he had to come. In the spring of 1999, he and Russ Myers, and Martha came to the festival and were floored with the number of people we had learning rhythm bones.

Ellen Stern from Arkansas also attended that year, and discussion about starting a rhythm bones players organization was hot and heavy. But it wasn't until September of that year that talk became reality as the Rhythm Bones Society was born at Bones Fest III in Brightwood, VA. I was nominated to serve on the Board of Directors, and have ever since.

Being a regular attendee at Fiddle contests, I was well acquainted with competing, though there was little opportunity to compete on rhythm bones. I did compete two years in the Unique and Unusual Instrument contest at the Watatic Mt. Country Music Festival, coming in third the first year, and winning it the next year.

I had heard about the Bones and Spoons contest in Avoca, Iowa, was intrigued and competed in 2002. Yirdy Machar came in first, but I only came in 5th.

Through the Rhythm Bones Society newsletter we began to hear about a contest in Ireland called the All Ireland Bone Playing Competition. Several rhythm bones players who met in Avoca

all agreed to go to Ireland and compete, though as it turned out only Yirdy Machar, the winner at Avoca, and myself actually went.

I was lucky enough to win that year, 2003, and 2004. Since that time I have competed three more times, and have been the only American to Judge both the senior and junior division. Abbeyfeale is like a second home to me now, with multiple friends there.

A great joy to me has been how my son Jeremy has connected with the rhythm bones and rhythm bones players. He learned to play in his way from sitting at my booth at the New England Folk Festival, and has played at numerous Bones Fests and endeared himself to everyone in the organization.

My association with Steve Wixson has been a most amazing experience. He is without a doubt the hardest working person I have ever known and is responsible for the high quality newsletter we produce, and the running of the organization. I have written numerous articles for the newsletter, including interviewing Ronnie McShane, Paddy Moloney, Beniot Bourque, and under Steve's tutelage written many historical articles, for that I am eternally grateful.

Here I am at 71 years, young in comparison to some, but feeling like I want to continue to make a contribution. Thanks to all the membership, the Board, and of course, my wife, who without their support and help my work would not be possible. I leave you with Ev Cowett's timeless response, "May your bones be with you!" *Stephen Brown*

[See Steve's Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

Catherine Kingcome, who did the Page 1 drawing, is a noted artist throughout the UK, Ireland, and the world for her paintings depicting traditional Irish musicians. See [catharinekingcome.co.uk/](http://catharinekingcome.co.uk/)

## James Yoshizawa Facebook Video

A nice Facebook video of member James Yoshizawa accompanying Eimear Arkins ([eimeararkins.com/bio-1](http://eimeararkins.com/bio-1)) singing an Irish tune. [facebook.com/james.yoshizawa/videos/4200258873395964](https://www.facebook.com/james.yoshizawa/videos/4200258873395964)

**(Continued from Page 1)**

bones players, and other musicians, and be thankful that we still have him. If you're struggling with your personal situation, take heart, stay in touch with what you love the most, and do those things that bring happiness into the world, Jeremy does, and I will too!

Just received the sad news Mitch Boss has passed away. I received a phone call from him last week telling me that he was very ill and about to enter hospice. "Tell everybody I love them, and miss seeing them at the bones fests!" I've never had anyone call me to say good bye, and as difficult as you might think it to be, I loved the fact that I could tell Mitch how much I loved him, and enjoyed our friendship. He was one of a kind, great player and performer! I will miss his humor, and his smile.

How delighted I was to read the profiles of rhythm bones players in this issue (myself not with standing). Two players I was not familiar with, Sule Greg Wilson, and Deford Bailly and two who are good friends. Rowan Corbett has been a delight since he showed up in Alexandria, Va., and Nicholas Dupin and I go back many years to our running around Ireland together. These folks are the heart of what we are, a living , breathing organization that continues to grow, despite these difficult times! Do me a favor, pick up those rhythm bones and rattle them loud and clear, just let people know we are here, and we're not going anywhere!

## Rhythm Bones Tone

Ever since I got my first triplet, way back in 1983, I have been experimenting with ways to alter the tone of my bones while playing them.

I discovered very quickly that the easiest way to get a deeper tone is to slide your stationary bone up into your palm, changing the point of contact without changing the weight and motion of the active bone. It doesn't matter whether you are using one or two fingers between the bones, the sound will change. No matter what material your bones are made of, with a little experimentation you can find a sweet

spot where it is the deepest. You will also notice that as the stationary bone gets shorter, the tone also gets softer, which makes it possible to mute your playing for small, intimate jams.

It is very difficult to slide the bone into different positions while playing, however, so the most variation I could get was to use two different kinds of wood in each hand and position one for the lowest tone and one higher, to get two different notes. Lifting the active bone farther from the palm in a "scissor" motion also changes the contact point slightly, which raises the pitch of the tone, and can be done while playing. I experimented with different combinations of wood and worked on my scissor technique, but never really achieved the melodic quality I was looking for.

When Mickie Zekley of Lark in the Morning invited us to sell the bones through the incredible booth they set up at the back of the Music Meadow at Strawberry Music Festival, with free admission in exchange for helping with tear down, we jumped at the chance. They created a display near the front of the booth where I could teach people to play during the breaks between bands. It was during one of those lessons that I met a man from Ireland, whose name I do not remember, and he showed me how to hold the bones in such a way that it is possible to change the shape of the sound chamber while playing, creating higher and lower tones. With two fingers between the bones and the ring finger holding the active bone, lift the middle finger to open the chamber and the tone rises. If you use two pairs with different tones, and can change the tone with both hands, you can get four distinctly different "notes".

In the quest for a richer, deeper tone, I tried making the bones thicker, drilling holes in them, changing the shape and length, but nothing made a big difference. I thought if the bottom of the stationary bone was hollow, it would work, so I got a large wooden spoon, cut the handle off and placed it as the stationary bone with the concave shape facing the active bone, which makes a larger resonating chamber. When I lift my middle finger it changes the tone more than with flat bones, giving me the deep, soft tone I

was seeking and a wider range of notes. This has become my preferred technique, combining spoons and bones to create the "spones".

I also designed a 3D print file of a hollow bone with an opening on the side that I thought by placing my finger in different positions over the hole might change the tone. Unfortunately the free 3D printer at the library could only print with a porous plastic that has a very flat tone. Someday I'll try printing my file with hard plastic, ceramic or metal and test my theory for real.

Meanwhile, I am playing my spones with both hands, improving control with the tone changes, and following the baseline with my four notes to create melodic rhythms. I hope this inspires boners everywhere to explore the boundaries of bone tone. *Mardeen Gordon*

[See Mardeen' Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

## NTCMA Founder Bob Everhart Obituary

The National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests is no more. Tom Worrell (member Bernie's husband) reported that its Founder and Director, Bob Everhart, passed away on August 20, 2021. The festival attracted a large number of performers including Bernie and her brother, the late Jerry Mescher, and one of the many contests was the Bones Contest that Bob called the World



Bob Everhart from RBS 1999 NTCMA Video

Bones Contest (early on the All-Ireland Bones Competition had not yet come into existence).

I attended the Festival in 1999 to video it for Bones Fest III, and the first person I met was Bob. He gave me an overview of the Festival and said I should meet Jerry Mescher. I attended the Bones Competition where Jerry was the emcee, and it was the contest where Bernie won. I met Jerry who introduced me to his family and many others, and I went to Jerry's well attended Bones Workshop.

The COVID pandemic had stopped the Festival and Bob's passing means it is no more. Many of our members have competed in this contest, and it is sad to see that competition go away.

The All-Ireland Bones Competition has higher standards, but maybe we still need a competition for non-Irish style players. If you have thoughts on this issue, email them to me and I will print them in the newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

## Sule Greg Wilson

Born and raised in Washington, DC, I learned to play rhythm bones from my dad who learned as a kid growing up in Philadelphia in the 1920s and '30s. I've played rhythm bones for the Carolina Chocolate Drops string band, with



Sule Greg Wilson with his Clif Ervin rhythm bones

Ronstadt Generations, behind blues and swing performers, and the Repeat Offenders R&B band, as well as my own CDs—The Drummer's Path, Runaway Dreams, Colored Aristocracy (Sankofa Strings), and The Uptown Strut (Sankofa). I've also played 'em in Latin ensembles and more.

I'm offering a monthly series based upon my book, The Drummer's Path. Entitled A Year on the Drummer's Path: Proficiency, Community, Integrity, it goes in-depth on each of the 12 Principles outlined in The Drummer's Path. By the way, I discuss rhythm bones history in that book, too!

My prized rhythm bones are two sets of Clif Ervin teak rhythm bones, made from the same piece of wood, and notched like the ones in the William Sidney Mount painting titled, 'The Bone Player.' See Sule's Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.

## DeFord Baily

DeFord Bailey, born December 14, 1899 and died July 2, 1982, was an American country music and blues star from the 1920s until 1941 (see his photograph on Page 8). He was the first performer to be introduced on Nashville radio station WSM's Grand Ole Opry, the first African-American performer to appear on the show, and the first performer to have his music recorded in Nashville. Bailey played guitar, rhythm bones, and banjo in his career, but is best known for playing the harmonica, often being referred to as a "harmonica wizard." [Abstracted from Wikipedia.]

David Morton was a friend, wrote a

biography about DeFord, and gave us permission to reprint his rhythm bones story.

"DeFord also experimented with various means of accompanied his music... At other times, he clacked sticks or bones together with one hand while holding the harp with the other." [From page 99]

"Another venerable instrument was the bones. 'We'd take the two low ribs of a steak, beef ribs. We'd cut 'em so long and dry 'em out in the sun or in the oven, and sandpaper them till they got nice and smooth. Then we'd go out and see who could beat them the best: You can make a pretty good sound clappin 'em between your fingers.'

"Years later, when DeFord was a star on the Grand Old Opry, he would run across some polished commercial bones in Chattanooga - one pair made out of ivory, one of ebony - and for a time used them in his Opry act." [From Page 21]

[DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music by David C Morton, 1993, University of Tennessee Press.]

David made one recording of DeFord playing rhythm bones. There is a new Player Profile Page for DeFord, and when we get a copy we will post a link to it on his Page. *Steve Wixson*

## Bones Calendar

**NEFFA**, April 22-24, 2022. It is a virtual event this year.. See [neffa.org](http://neffa.org)

**All Ireland Bones Competition**, May Bank Holiday, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. See [feadhbythefeale.com](http://feadhbythefeale.com)

**Bones Fest XXVI**. Summer, 2022, Washington DC area. When details are available there will be a Post on our website.

**NTCMA Festival**, Bob Everhart, the director passed away this year and that likely marks the end of this Festival. See the story on Page 4.



## Nicolas Dupin

My name is Nicolas Dupin, I'm a Frenchman, born in 1961, near Paris, where I was raised and did my studies (in English and American language and literature). I have been living in Brittany for a long while now.

I have always loved music and listened to a lot of it, in all genres. My father and sisters played piano, and I started off playing classical guitar when I was a kid, then moved on to folk guitar, then electric, playing rock and reggae music in teenage bands. As an adult, I also studied jazz tenor saxophone for a few years, but then had a kid, got a job, and stopped playing music altogether.

In 2001, I went to Ireland for the first time. A few years before that, wishing to take up music again, I had started studying bodhran, rhythm bones and spoons on my own, thanks to various VHS videos (like Mel Mercier's and Tommy Hayes,' among others). I had been introduced to Irish music by a French friend of mind, who was married to an Irish dancer, and who played the fiddle. I ended up joining his traditional Irish music band playing bodhran. I first went to Ireland because I wanted to improve my bodhran playing.

At the time, wanting to seriously get into traditional Irish music, I was totally convinced that a « real » Irish percussionist HAD to be able to play bodhran AND rhythm bones AND spoons! Which is what I tried to do. So I kept going back to Ireland for years, and still do. I've been playing rhythm bones for over twenty years now.

In 2001, I went to Inisheer, where a bodhran summer school had just started, mostly to improve my bodhran playing, but as it happened, some of the Irish tutors on the island, who were there to teach bodhran, were also legendary bones players, like Mel Mercier, Tommy Hayes and Johnny McDonagh. That's where I began to realize that there was much more to bodhran and rhythm bones playing than what I had thought before.

Later on, also on Inisheer, and elsewhere in Ireland, I got to meet other fantastic bones players, like Junior Davey, a mutiple times bodhran and rhythm bones

champion, who soon became a mentor and great friend. In Ireland, over time, I got to meet many Irish bones players, and some two-handed American bones players like Steve Brown. I had heard of Steve Brown from Mel Mercier and some Irish friends, and I later got to meet him. We became friends and I have been using his rhythm bones since then.

In 2005 or 2006, I'm not sure exactly, at the invitation of Steve, I went to Abbeyfeale where the Irish Bones fleadh was being held. I even competed there (Ronnie McShane was the adjudicator at the time), but I didn't even get placed!

Over the years, I learnt from a lot of people. Mel Mercier, Johnny McDonagh, Tommy Hayes, Junior Davey, but also from Steve Brown, David Murphy (a rhythm bones champion from Abbeyfeale) and other American and Irish players. I also practiced a lot on my own, playing mostly to traditional Irish music. I've also played in quite a few traditional Irish bands, and still do. I've tried two-handed bones playing, but never managed to amount to anything. I still play and practice a lot, and with the Internet now, I can steal plenty of chops from all sorts of players !

In 2021, I was the first Frenchman (and the only one, to my knowledge) to become "all-Ireland Senior Bones Champion," after a competition adjudicated by Junior Davey. It was a great surprise for me and a fantastic honour !

My style of rhythm bones playing, I believe, is closely linked to my bodhran playing, even though bodhran playing has evolved a lot during the last 20 years, much more than Irish rhythm bones playing, I think. Still, I try to play both rhythm bones and the bodhran as much as possible in an Irish style and find one-handed rhythm bones playing better suited for that.

I think my style of rhythm bones playing is a bit different from the style of a lot of other one-handed players, in the sense that I use a lot of single strokes in between triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets and longer rolls. I think it comes from my bodhran playing: when I play the bodhran, I often fall back on a basic structure of single beats, to keep a rythmic continuum going, which creates a simple pattern to go back to, and I add various ornamentations on top of that,

instead of relying mostly on various connected rolls, with few single strokes, like a lot of other players do.

There aren't many rhythm bones players in France, and I play the bodhran more often than I do rhythm bones, the bodhran being a more well-known instrument here. But I'm still very fond of rhythm bones, and keep trying promoting rhythm bones playing in France as much as I can, and I keep discovering new possibilities with rhythm bones all the time.

I'd like to thank all of the wonderful people I've met along the way, especially Mel Mercier, Junior Davey and Steve Brown, who have been a great inspiration to me since day one. *Nicolas Dupin*

[See Nicolas' Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

## Rowan Corbett

Bones Fest XIV was my first introduction to the Rhythm Bones Society in July of 2010. It was incredible to see so many different styles of play of an instrument that I'd become so in love with. I would attend again for Bones Fests XIX, XX, and virtually for XXIV. But that initial event would flood me with so much knowledge about an instrument that I'd pursued for so many years with very little connection to any other of it's players.

When I first encountered rhythm bones, I didn't have much frame of reference for them musically or culturally. In 1994, I was just a month away from graduating high school and had joined my first real band. That group, the Greencastle Minstrels, at the time played primarily at the Colorado Renaissance Festival and had a repertoire of Irish, Scottish and English songs and tunes.

By that point in my musical journey, I had sung in a few choirs and was a very bad guitarist at best, so in a group that played as many instrumental pieces as vocal songs, I quickly needed a way to make myself more useful. They already had a guitar player who was far better than myself, but they did have something that they thought I might try. My band mates handed me a set of inexpensive rosewood rhythm bones and showed me how to do a roll. So, for those first two months, I became very handy for any songs in 6/8 time.

That might have been as far as it went for me, but for the fact that Ren Faires tend to have large musical communities that get together several times a day to play in large groups. And many festivals encourage performers to have impromptu shows throughout the day. So I was given lots of opportunities by some very patient and kind people to jam and experiment in a live setting and learn the idioms of the traditional folk music scene.

In addition to the music, I was also fascinated by rhythm bones in and of themselves. I practiced constantly in those first few months, mostly on my 45 minute walk to and from work. But again, I still didn't have much of a model for what the instrument could do, so I played triples over and over again. Until I chanced upon Michael Ballard.

Mike, visiting from California, was walking through the lanes of the Colorado Ren Faire while playing rhythm bones. My encounter with him showed me how much more was possible with the instrument. From this point I really began my exploration of the instrument.

Soon after, I saw a performance of Artis the Spoonman: the first example I had of someone playing bones outside of traditional folk music. I was already a fan of the band Soundgarden, who featured Spoonman in a music video in a song inspired by him. That a folk instrument could hold its own while sharing the stage with electric guitars was an exciting prospect.

Over the next few years I would become aware of rhythm bones' relationship to the banjo and through that it's connection to early African American music. Though I am a native of North Carolina and lived there on and off for many years, I hadn't encountered many other Black people who played traditional music.

In 1997, I began my long musical partnership with Brooke Parkhurst when we formed Tinsmith. Initially an Irish band, we eventually began including Brooke's Old Time banjo playing as well. With my guitar playing much improved, we added modern sounds and textures to traditional music. My rhythm bones playing also became funkier with the influence of rock music.

I met my other long-term collaborator, Rob Hinkal of the band iYAIMY not

long after moving to Washington DC in 1999. His acoustic-rock guitar playing style and love for off-kilter rhythms brought out a whole new dimension for my rhythm bones to mesh with.

Through both bands and working at the House of Musical Tradition in Takoma Park, MD, I became a member of the wider folk music community and finally started to learn more about the place of rhythm bones in African American history. I met other rhythm bones players that looked like me such as Mike Baytop and Dom Flemmons, which led to my eventual association to the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Rhiannon Giddens asked me to join the Chocolate Drops in 2013 and I would tour with her across the US, Canada, and Europe, through 2016. Our mutual friend and fellow bones player, Greg Adams, was instrumental in my education about rhythm bones in early African American music and its place alongside the banjo. Now a banjo player myself, my rhythmic sensibilities are deeply informed by the phrasing that is inherent to rhythm bones.

Now, almost three decades from when I first picked up the instrument, rhythm bones continue to teach me. They influence my technique and approach to every other instrument I pick up. And as I work with others, trying to relay what rhythm bones have taught me, I discover new ways to think about music. New ways to think about my connection to history and new ways to show people just learning the bones for the first time what instrument can show them in turn.

*Rowan Corbett*

[See Rowan's photograph on Page 8 and Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

## Mitch Boss Obituary

We lost another true spirit who lit up the lives of people around him both on stage and when standing next to you.

Mitchell Boss died on January 1, 2022 peacefully with his family at his side.

Mitch was profiled in the newsletter in issue, Vol 20, No 1, and you can read it by going to the RBS Museum, clicking on the Player Profile Exhibit and selecting Mitch Boss. There are also audio and video of him performing.

His performances were high quality and quiet and frequently combined with humor. Notable examples are duets with the late Walt Watkins, Steve Brown, and Ernie Duffy.

His humor was contagious. Here are samples. "I have been playing rhythm bones since I was seven and I'm starting to get the hang of it. I usually wear my bee suit when I play rhythm bones to protect myself from flying debris. My sweetheart, Annette, says she been listening to me play for 61 years and she will be glad when I get the timing right, which means, when she's off shopping."

[Note: Annette attended every Bones Fest with Mitch and we all got to know her.]

To recognize his contributions, musical and otherwise, the Board created the Community Enrichment Award and presented it to Mitch at Bones Fest XX. You can read his hilarious remarks from that presentation by clicking on 'Award Thanks' on his Player Profile Page.

To say, "Mitch, rest in peace," just doesn't seem fitting. How about, "Keep everyone up there entertained and laughing." *Steve Wixson*

## Mitch Remembered

Just saying the name "Mitch Boss" brings all sorts of images to mind. The reactions that come to me are a smile, a belly-laugh, and the knowledge that my life has been enriched by this once-in-a-lifetime friend. There is no more appropriate expression than, "God broke the mold when he created Mitch." But, when I think of Mitch, Annette is always there, too. I cannot separate the two spirits.

Mitch blessed the RBS with his perfect-timed humor, his love for rhythm bones and the Society, and his pervasive fun-loving presence. Thank you for all the irreplaceable memories, Mitch.  
*Sharon Mescher*

In 2005, I discovered the Rhythm Bones Society. That was because Frank and I perform music and tell stories dressed in 19th century clothing. He plays banjo and guitar, I bought a pair of rhythm bones at a Civil War reenactment and needed help playing them.

(Continued on Page 8)



Nicolas Dupin by Emmanuel Boitier  
(Story on Page 6)



Rowan Corbett (Story on Page 5)  
Photo by William Petruzzo



DeFord Baily (Story on Page 5)

(Continued from Page 7)

In 2006 I discovered Mitch and Annette Boss. Sometimes you just feel a connection to someone, even though you just met. Frank and I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with Mr. and Mrs. Boss!

Mitch was very good at playing

rhythm bones and always dressed in clothes that left no doubt that he would be on stage. When he took the stage, you just knew the show was “gonna” be good!

He especially liked sharing the stage with a friend. The two of them would

really ham it up and have everyone laughing! He enjoyed performing and his joy was contagious!

I will miss the quiet, gentle, Annette and the fun-loving entertainer, Mitch Boss. *Mary Lee Sweet*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 24, No. 1 2022

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## Executive Director's Column

It's been almost 3 years since our last in person Bones Fest. I can't believe that it has been that long though the memories of that weekend still burn bright in my memory. It started me thinking, what makes those in person Bones Fests so special?

Though I was invited, I didn't attend the first three Bones Fests, thinking to myself, who in their right mind would drive all the way to North Carolina to play the bones? I got the answer to that question in 2000 when I flew off to Chattanooga to attend Bones Fest IV. One of the more inspiring week ends I have attended, and solidified Bones Fests in my mind and body.

What made it so special? The easy answer of course is the people, the brotherhood and sisterhood I never knew I had, the indescribable bond that we all felt that weekend and has endured at every Bones

Fest I have attended (21 in person fests).

But there is one interesting moment I always reflect upon when I think of that weekend. It was early evening and the party was just getting under way at Steve Wixson's house. Steve lives in the most amazing house literally built into a mountain, with a view off the deck looking into Georgia. Steve and his wife Janet had arranged a plentiful buffet, and people began to gather around the living room and dining room.

There was one room set by itself, with almost no furniture, and a stereo blasting many types of music. I poked my head in, only to see a number of rhythm bones players all playing at the same time, not in unison but seemingly doing their own thing. "That's ridiculous," I thought to myself. I would (Continued on Page 2)

## Michael Baxter

I've no exciting story to tell here, nor do I come from a legacy of great players. That said, I've loved Irish music since I was young. I went to see my first of many concerts with The Chieftains, back when they were all with us. That was the first time I took notice of rhythm bones. Martin Fay and Seán Keane had been fiddling throughout the night, when Martin lowered his fiddle, raised his hand, and started rattlin' the bones. I was too far away from the stage to see what exactly he was doing, but I never forgot that sound. I'm so glad I took my children to see them before Paddy Moloney passed away.

Gaelic Storm was the first Celtic band I followed from their beginnings. During the autograph session, my son, Sean got to sit on the shoulders of Pat Murphy. I was more excited than he was, as Pat thanked me for bringing my kids to experience Irish music. Pat played spoons, in addition to harmonica, accordion, and who knows what else.

Over the years, I listened to so much Irish music that the rhythms got embedded in my mind. I really think that laid the foundation for me, though it was some 20 years later that I actually played rhythm bones myself. Now it seems inevitable that Irish music leads to Appalachian, Bluegrass, Country Blues, although for some folks, it may lead the other way.

Some years later, I discovered that we have an Irish Cultural Center in the heart of Phoenix, AZ. That lit a fire under me, as now I was around people who loved their ancestry, music, and culture. I discovered that my family name is an Scottish/English border name, while my great, great-grandparents Joseph Baxter and Catherine Clare, both emigrated from Ireland. I started taking the (Continued on Page 4)



Michael Baxter



## Editorial

This is an unusual issue - only 6 pages. In the last issue, I mentioned that my wife passed and due to COVID a Celebration of Life service was not held. A window is opening up now, and I am spending time and energy preparing for that event. As a result, the newsletter has been compromised though it still has some good content. Hopefully that window stays open such that we have an in-person Bones Fest. The All-Ireland Bones Competition is in-person this May.

The Page 1 story is about new member, Michael Baxter. I don't usually run stories about new members, but Mike has made some unique contributions to RBS including the two stories on Page 4. I hope you will contribute to his BFX XVI Promo Ensemble Project.

The Abner Jay story began in 2000, but only now could I find enough about him to write the story.

Though not related to the Abner Jay story, new member, Dennis Devine, found a very good 1977 recording of Percy Danforth.

Art Sands passed away recently and his rhythm bones obituary in on Page 5. He attended three Bones Fests, and took great photographs, some of which were published in the newsletter.

## Letter to the Editor

My father played rhythm bones with Al Jolson (singer, comedian, actor, and vaudevillian). He was one of America's most famous and highest-paid stars of the 1920s, and was self-billed as "The World's Greatest Entertainer) on the street in DC in front of the burlesque houses for the lines going in. Pennies, nickels, and dimes. They rarely saw quarters. Jolson sang and whistled, and my father played rhythm bones and did sand dancing. Jolson taught my father his style of whistling and my father tried to teach me but neither of us was any good at it. *Hank Tenenbaum*

(Continued from Page 1)

never just play in a room like that!

A little while later, after a beer or two, I found myself slipping back in that room. It was crowded now, and everybody was playing away. The atmosphere was intoxicating, and soon I found myself dragging out my rhythm bones, and wailing away. We were separate, but together, in joyous chaos! We began to refer to the room as the "Bone Pit" like the mosh pits of punk rock. We reveled in it despite previous feelings, and realized we were forging a bond.

The next day at the Opry stage, we were a little more hesitant. Each one of us was to perform a short introduction piece. When my time came, I nervously approached the mic. After my presentation, I started off stage, and suddenly realized people were clapping, and Dave Boyles, who I didn't know at the time, ran up to me and gave me a big hug! I felt utterly at home, unconditionally accepted, and totally amazed. That, I think is the essence of the in person bones, the feeling of a family reunion of a family you didn't know you had. Let's hope they return soon!

Update on Jeremy: My son Jeremy continues to recover from Surgery and several bouts of Pneumonia in the Gardner Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. He's making slow progress, but progress nonetheless. Thank you to everyone for your concerns and kind words of support! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXVI Preliminary Information

The Board is trying to make a decision about Bones Fest XXVI. After two years of Virtual Bones Fests due to the danger of Covid infections, we are in a period of declining infection rates that may allow us to safely hold an in person Fest.

A survey was mailed to current members asking for their input. About half of the current members responded with 10 saying they would attend an in-person Fest, 12 might come if infection rates continue to drop, 19 would attend virtual and the rest would not attend.

After much discussion the Board leans towards a fairly unstructured event in Kenny and Teri's backyard on August

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

5-7, 2022 for the 12 who said they would attend plus as many as 12 more who might attend if the infection rate continues to drop.

Part of the reason not to go to someplace like Alexandria at this late date is the problem of traffic and parking.

The end result of the conversation is I sent out a save the date email. During the next few weeks the Board will prepare a preliminary program that will include outings to places that welcome our group of talented rhythm bones players.

We have learned something valuable from our Virtual Bones Fests - people who cannot attend an in-person Fest for whatever reason will attend a virtual Fest. For example, we had people from as far away as Europe and Australia attend the Virtual Fests.

The Board will include a Virtual component for future Bones Fests. It will require a audio/visual system so that everyone can hear and see each other no matter where they are. *Steve Wixson*

## The Abner Jay Rhythm Bones Story

In 2000, Abner Jay came to Chattanooga for a concert. He was an itinerant musician who played several instruments including rhythm bones. I was unable to go to that concert, but started researching him for a story. Unfortunately I could not find much about him then.

Recently I ran across a BBC podcast by a Laura Barton titled, *The True Story of Abner Jay*. She said, "Abner traveled in a converted mobile home which opened out into a makeshift stage, and he was possibly the last performer of the bones." [Author note: I sent her a link to our website.]

In the intervening years, people have recognized his talent and written articles and posted videos about him. Some of that information is on his Player Profile Page in our online Museum. To find it go to our website, click Museum, Click Player Profile Exhibit, and scroll down and click on Abner's name. The phrase 'Abner's Page' below refers to that page.

Here is a brief summary from Abner's Page. He was born in 1912 and died in 1993. He traveled and performed with many gospel and quartet groups in the 1930' to early 1950's. Most of his music reflected the Suwanee River, Southern life and gospel. He traveled the world, and performed for 'Juneteenth Day' in Texas, an annual holiday celebrating the end of slavery in the United States. He traveled in a small trailer that opened out into a makeshift stage. There is a great photograph of that stage on Abner's Page - click 'Another Story' and scroll down to the Jon Sievert photograph.

Sherry DuPree was a friend of Abner and she collected his gospel singing history (you can hear her in the 'Laura Barton BBC Story' on Abner's Page). She is a librarian and historian whose research focuses on African-American gospel music. She includes Abner in her 'Sherry S. DuPree Collection' housed in the Smithsonian Institute.

I found his gospel singing mesmerizing and call attention, even though it has no rhythm bones, to the last song on the *Backbone of America* album which starts at 40:40 into the recording (click

the image of the album on Abner's Page). His albums can be found in the Library of Congress.

There was another side to Abner Jay where he was successful in several show business ventures including working in a radio station, being an Agent and Promoter, producing records and some call him the grandfather and patron saint of Independent Record Producers.



Photograph of Abner Jay playing his rhythm bones. From the Sherry S. DuPree Collection

His daughter, Brandie, says he learned to play rhythm bones from his grandfather, and he made his rhythm bones from fresh bones bleaching them out in the sun.

She said you might find him in a Kmart parking lot where he set up his trailer house. Folks would come out of the store and come over and listen to his music and give him a donation. He could stop anywhere along a country road and play and get him some gig money and then move on. He was a frequent performer at Underground Atlanta.

Abner like to educate people on the origins of American Music. Here is a transcript a performance from the Florida Folklife Festival at the Stephen Foster Center. Thelma Bolton gave this introduction, "Folkways, always, right here in our very own park we have Abner Jay with his little daughter, Brandie. So rattle the bones - Abner Jay."

"You ask them educated people, school teachers and others, about original American music and they start telling you about jazz, j, a, z, z. How far can you go back with jazz, 1890, that's not far at all. They will tell you about ragtime. How far can you go back with ragtime, 1897, that ain't much older than I am.

"I'm the same to American music as John Dean was to Watergate. I'm uncovering 270 years of American music, and

nobody's doing anything about it except me.

"The first form of American music, and I am so sick and tired of people not knowing about American Music, the first form of American music was rattlin' the bones. The original American band was made up with bone players, 15 and 20 playing at one time - that is all the instruments they had. To modernize I added this harmonica.

"And this song dates back to 1620, that's how far rattlin' the bones goes. These are real bones. Bones come from the bone yard. When a cow gets stuck by lightning, you don't eat that cow unless you eat it at McDonalds. You heard what I said, didn't you. You take the cow to the bone yard and the possum eats the meat and we eat the possum.

"There ain't nothing better for you than baked possum with them baked potatoes around it. [Amen from the audience.] That's why I am 65 years old and I'm not bald headed or grey headed cause I grease my hair with possum oil.

"We're going to play you a little bit of *Rattling The Bones*.

"[Singing] Rattle, rattle of the bones, all the way home. Refrain repeats

"In 1620 we took a boat ride, when we got on the other side, and we were surprised. And late in the evenin' when the dark is start to grow, Every body rattles, they rattle of the bones. Refrain."

Abner continues with daughter, Brandie, singing and playing the jaw bone. Then comes hambone playing, and finally more stories.

There is an audio recoding and a video of Abner singing a longer version of this song on Abner's Page.

What a shame I was not able to talk to Abner about his playing and the history in the above performance. Beth Lenz' Master's Thesis says rhythm bones came to America by way of Europe, and that they came to Africa in the modern era by way of traveling minstrel shows that Abner called the American Band. There is more Abner Jay historical information out there to find, and maybe it will prove him right. Who knows? *Steve Wixson*

(Continued from Page 1)

family to the Irish Faire and the Highland Games. To top it off my wife is a red-head named Heather McCann. I've always felt the music is in my blood.

So where do rhythm bones come in? One day I stumbled across some videos of Dom Flemons, and was absolutely amazed. It turns out that we have a mutual friend in Phoenix, though I've never met him. That got me interested enough to order a set of real rhythm bones.

It wasn't until I found Brad Dutz's tutorials, that things started to click (pun intended). His two finger grip was essential for my success. After that I was hooked.

My informal education continued with an hour long conversation with Scott Miller, who shared more techniques with me, along with Barry Patton. I've found these folks to be very generous with their time and knowledge.

I bought several more sets and even had a woodworker friend, Dusty Travis make me some from Purple-heart and Osage Orange. He steam bent and fashioned them to my grip, so they play smooth and sound amazing.

I was working in Redwood City last year, so I drive up to Lark in the Morning and tested every set of bones they carried, before buying several more sets. My wife and kids ask me, "How many sets of bones do you need?" Well, we all know the answer to that.

I've found a passion for sharing the rhythm bones and Old Time Music with kids. I've played for my daughter's school, using a format that gives the kids a brief musical journey from Ireland & Scotland, across Appalachia, and down to the Mississippi Delta region. This really gives them a fun introduction to different styles of music that are all linked historically. It's the music of America to me, and it needs to be preserved. I'm honored to be part of the Rhythm Bones Society. *Michael Baxter* [Read his 'The Sound of Rhythm Bones' in the next Column]

## The Sound of Rhythm Bones

This video project began out of necessity, I suppose. I made it for folks like me, that have no idea what one wood sounds like over another, as well as natural bone. When I was searching online for my first set of rhythm bones, I was disappointed that I couldn't find many audio samples. Most rhythm bones players know it's just a matter of time, until you own multiple sets. Even so, it's nice to have some samples to help find the specific sound you're looking for. It also helps to avoid pairing two sets that are similar. In fact the only time I was able to "try before you buy," was at Lark in the Morning. If the store manager was annoyed he didn't show it, as I rattled every set he had in stock, repeatedly.

What really made this project fun, was the support shown by other RBS Members. I spoke at length with Scott Miller (Bone Dry Music) who is an authority on rhythm bones, and an amazing player as well. The next call was to Mardeen Gordon (Shooting Star Bones), asking her to make two sets that would be unique to my collection. She crafted a fine pair of Padauk/Vermillion and Vero-wood which are so comfortable to play. I then journeyed to Ireland to meet Tom Connolly (Irish Bones). Well, we actually met over a Zoom meeting, but "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." Tom was generous with his time and craftsmanship, demonstrating several sets of rhythm bones in real-time. He sent me a set of cow ribs, shins, and shibs (split cow shins), but my favorite are the vintage ribs that he gifted to me. Steve Wixson even sent me a box of rhythm bones that I didn't have on hand, to help round out the collection. He let me keep the old cow ribs, which I've wanted for some time now.

After gathering all these rhythm bones, the next step was to produce the video. I really wanted to capture the difference in tone among the sets, which took some experimenting. Of course, I needed some good tunes to play to. I reached out to David Bragger of Old Time Tiki Parlour, who I had seen play with Dom Flemons. David is a brilliant

player on both fiddle and banjo, and was kind enough to let me use his version of *Cripple Creek*. Friends Tom and Susan played guitar and fiddle for the intro.

During my music search, I reached out to the Boston-based Celtic Rock band Sláinte. After showing the video to Jon Harrington (the band's fiddler & manager), I was invited to play rhythm bones on a track called, *The Musical Priest*. I needed an expert, so I reached out to Percussionist Extraordinaire Brad Dutz, who gave me some great techniques for recording rhythm bones, and the band was happy with the result.

The feedback from everyone on the video was positive, so I proceeded to do a follow-up called *Tuning Your Rhythm Bones*, as suggested by Scott Miller. There are far better rhythm bones players than me, but this project was a good match, since I've been working in Audio/Video Production for over 30 years. I hope these videos will help buyers find what they're looking for. Perhaps they will find the elusive answer to that question of "How many sets of rhythm bones do you need?" The answer of course is, "Just one more set." *Michael Baxter* [The videos are on our website. The *Sound of Rhythm Bones* is on the 'What are Rhythm Bones' Page with a link from the 'Learn How to Play' Page. *Tuning Your Rhythm Bones* is on the 'Learn How to Play' Page. These videos are also on Mike's Player Profile Page in the Museum.]

## The BFXVI Promo Ensemble Video

Everett Cowett at Bones Fest I included this in his opening remarks, "I was hoping we could get together and do a little bit of bones synchronizing, harmonizing if you will."

Micheal Baxter has done this in a way that would amaze the late Ev. He invited members to download a music track of *Turkey in the Straw* by Matt Whyte, take a video of them playing along to that track using ear buds or earphones, email the video to Mike where he put it together into one video with all sorts of combinations of one or more players.

There is a sample image on Page 6, and look for a website Post announcing the premier of the finished video.

## Art Sands Obituary

Member Arthur Sands, III, was born on October 15, 1945, and passed away on February 20, 2022. He was a longtime independent insurance broker and an avid gardener.

Art was passionate about his Irish traditions and culture. He played rhythm bones in the traditional Irish band, TISPC (Traditional Irish Pub Song Club) shown in the photograph below. They performed in various Irish festivals including marching in five Baltimore Saint Patrick's Day parades. They also played in a local Pub not far from where he lives and became the house band for over 20 years. Originally Art was the spokesman and singer. Art knew a wealth of Irish songs because he was a fan of Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers.



We knew Art from Bones Fests at Shepherdstown, Homer and Lincoln. His short Bio in the Fest Program reads, "I am a neophyte bones player, having watched videos of Percy Danforth and imagined hundreds of minstrel bones players on stage. I became enthralled with rhythm bones, and I can't wait to



meet real rhythm bones players at this Bones Fest."

He and his wife, Linda, are shown on the front row at the Lincoln Bones Fest taking photographs (another hobby) of performers as he had at the other two Fests. Some of these were published in our newsletter and you can find a sampling of the best, enhanced with Photoshop (another hobby), on his Player Profile Page in our Online Museum

## 2022 All Ireland Bones Competition is In-Person

Hi to everyone who took part in our virtual bones competition in 2021. This year 2022 we are having the competition live in Abbeyfeale on Monday 2nd May. This is a call out to let everyone know that we are proceeding. Music will be supplied. Each competitor can play 2 tunes from this list. Reels, hornpipe, jig, slip jig, polka, slide barn dance, and march. Any questions please email them to [fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com](mailto:fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com) and I will answer them. We have 2 overseas competitors so far as well as 8 Irish competitors. We would love to see as many of ye in Abbeyfeale soon. *Martin O'Donoghue*

## Dennis Devine Finds Old Percy Recording

New member, Dennis Devine, saw Percy Danforth play at the 1977 Florida Folk Festival, and said he did not realize his importance at that time. He found a great recording of Percy playing at the Festival on the website of the State Library and Archives of Florida. Gamble Rogers, a legendary folk singer, is playing guitar and doing the emcee introduction and playing with Percy. Go to our website and click on the Post. Eventually it will be moved to the Percy Danforth Project Exhibit in our Online Museum.

## Wixson's Drum Bone

I took part in Michael Baxter's BFXX-VI Promo Ensemble Video, and using one of my two 'Drum Bones.'

The first is a tambourine with the jingles removed and a notch cut out so the thumb can hold it as the stationary bone (Jim Lande demonstrated his version at last year's Virtual Bones Fest.)

The other as shown in the photograph on Page 6, consists of a hairbrush with the brushes cut out and a drum skin epoxied to the brush frame. The handle has the shape of a rib bone and fits neatly as the stationary bone either between the thumb and index finger or between the first and index fingers.

You can use many items as the movable bone, and I have two favorites. The first is a regular drum stick cut to about 6 inches with the patented Joe Birl groove so it won't slip out of my hand. The second is a regular drum brush cut to about 6 inches with many turns of black tape on the end so it won't slip out of my hand. I like the brush a lot and use it in Mike's Ensemble video.

The brush has an interesting characteristic - it is flexible and behaves a bit different than a ridged rhythm bone. It can easily generate an extra click making a traditional quadruple easy to play.

We do not teach beginners much about the ring finger, however we use it to finish the tap, keep the movable bone aligned, adjust the movable bone so it strikes on the edge making a quieter sound, adjust the tension on the movable bone depending on the weight and length of the bone, to name a few.

Now there is one more use. It can move the brush from side to side on the drum bone skin much like the brush is used on a regular drum.

Recently I went to the dentist and used a mirror to watch the Dentist work on my tooth. The shape of the mirror was three times wider than the one in the photograph on Page 6. I need to look for bigger sizes and try to come up with a Base Drum Bone. *Steve Wixson*





Compressed image from Michael Baxter's sample BFXXVI Promo Ensemble Video. See Page 4.



Wixson's 'Drum Bones.' See Page 5.

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 24, No. 2 2022

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*Editorial*

## Executive Director's Column

I've been writing this column for close to 18 years. How lucky I have been to be given a forum to write about anything on my mind, and yet difficult to come up with things that I think people want to read about.

Not so hard today, as this will probably be my last column. The stress and responsibility of living in the rehab center and taking care of our son, Jeremy, every day has taken its toll, and with no real end in sight, I have decided to step down from my position as Executive Director. It has been my great privilege to contribute to an organization that is so close to my heart. I have met some amazing people, and learned

so much about the instrument we all love. But it is time for me to Move On, although I hope to be a part of our organization for a long time.

Jeremy continues here in the rehab center. we hope to move him home soon, but we need to overcome several obstacles before that can happen. I so appreciate everyone's concern and support for him. Over the years this organization and the people within it have enriched his life beyond words, and for that I thank you. We hope in the near future to move him home where we can care for him the

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## Dennis Riedesel

### INTRODUCTION

Early in my college career, one of my professors emphasized the quote, "Be a Whole Man, Not a Specialized Splinter." That statement struck a chord and highlighted my desire to be more than a "Jack of All Trades but a Master of None." Throughout my life as I migrated from one profession, avocation, and hobby to another I realized that I could not be panurgic, a "Jack of all Trades but Master of All" . I could identify myself as "Renaissance Man" (but Leonardo da Vinci would probably turn over in his grave!) I never saw myself as that type of a polymath. I finally found a relatively new movement when I discovered that I could identify as a multi-potentialite ie., one who has many different interests and creative pursuits in life. Multipotentialites have no "one true calling" the way specialists do.

I think parents and our educational system continually strive to focus our students into one path, one profession, usually starting in middle school, through high school, and more specifically throughout college. They become a "specialize splinter". As I run my mind's eye through many of the members of the Rhythm Bones Society, I think I can intuit that many of us are in fact multipotentialites who have many different interests and creative pursuits.

### BIOGRAPHY

My Great, Great Grandfather immigrated from Erndtebruck (Aunt-te-brook), Germany in 1848 and settled in Yorktown, TX. Even after my family had been in Texas for five generations, my first language

was German.

I grew up on a small farm near Yorktown, TX and graduated from High School in 1966. On the last day of school in 1966 we held our graduation, prom and by 3:30 the next morning I was in Victoria, TX where I spent most of my adult life. My wife and I lived in Victoria until 2014 when we moved to the Boerne, TX area to be near our one daughter and two granddaughters.

My childhood and young teen years were spent doing the necessary farm chores, such as chopping wood for the box stove, filling Mom's cooking stove with kerosene, making sure there

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Dennis Riedesel

## Editorial

This issue of our newsletter has profiles of Board Member, Dennis Riedesel, and Irishman, Tom Connolly. We own thanks to Dennis for serving on the Board and numerous contributions to this newsletter, and to Tom and the Irish for what they did to keep rhythm bones alive during the last century. We have profiled some of the Irish and will profile more.

The 26th Anniversary is a different kind of celebration. You have been together for a quarter of a century or 9,490 days or 227,760 hours or 13,665,600 minutes which is over 819 million seconds! There is no flower or gem associated with this anniversary, however, there is one tradition - YOU want MORE! And RBS wants more even if it cannot be an in-person event for everyone. Check out the next column for this year's unique Bones Fest.

The Center For Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) has been a resource for your Editor. I made a quick visit recently, and check out what I found out shown on Page 8.

Periodically I make Internet searches for new rhythm bones items. One recent find was a video by Dr. Mei Han on Chinese Clappers. She is the Director of the Center for Chinese Music and Culture and to my surprise, it is also at MTSU which is only a two drive from my home. Check out the story of my visit to MTSU on Page 4.

New member Michael Baxter recently visited me and our story is on Page 5.

## Bones Fest XXVI Preliminary Information

It has been a difficult time for RBS during the pandemic, and this year is no exception. A survey was sent by email to current members and past Bones Fest attendees to see if people would attend an in-person Fest, and the result is 12 people would attend an in-person Bones Fest, 44 would not attend though several of those said they would attend a virtual Fest (thanks to all who responded).

With this result, the Board approved a

one-day in-person event hosted by Kenny and Teri Wolin in their backyard at their home in Virginia on Saturday, August 6, and preliminary details are below. This event will be streamed. The Board also voted to hold a third Virtual Bones Fest on Sunday, August 7, patterned after our two previous Virtual Fests including a short Membership meeting to elect a Board for 2023. These two events comprise Bones Fest XXVI.

### Greetings from In-Person Hosts:

Teri and I would like to welcome you to Virginia for a relaxing backyard Bones Fest at our home. We'll kick things off about noon for a post-COVID social. A short while later I'll be teaching a beginning/refresher rhythm bones workshop for friends, neighbors, family, etc. who'd like to join us. Afterwards, we can have a gather round and take turns with personal introductions and a little about your playin' style.

Once the formalities are done, we can spend the rest of the afternoon into the early evening playing together in an eclectic live music session with Old Time, Irish, and Sea Music. If you play other instruments we'll have to insist that you bring them and give us a tune! Our daughter Emmy is planning on hosting a rhythm bones-friendly, jazz jam session inside the house after dinner, so even though masks are not required, soft-position rhythm bones are!

We'll provide dinner, light snacks and refreshments. You provide us with your good company and yer rhythm bones.

12 years ago Teri and I hosted Bones Fest here and were married during our festival, surrounded by our rhythm bones family. We're looking forward to spending our BF anniversary with you, giving hugs, sharing stories, and playing music.

If you are interested in this In-Person event, let the Wolin's know using our Contact Us webpage. There will be a nominal fee to cover food.

The Virtual BFXXVI Registration Form will be sent in early July. A Program Booklet will be made with the Program and biographies of attendees. There could be a t-shirt. After 25 years, a quarter of a century, of Bones Fests, the motto is, "We Want More!"

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Exec Director (Cont)

best, and where there is less stress and pressure on us to provide his care.

I want to thank each and every member of the organization over the years I have served, especially Steve Wixson whose passion for rhythm bones and expertise and so many areas has vastly contributed to the success of the organization. Again I hope to continue to be involved in the organization, as my life calms down and allows me more leeway. Thank you again for this opportunity, and as Everett Cowart, our former Director would say, "May Your Bones Be With You!" *Steve Brown*



# Tom Connolly

Hello!

My name is Tom Connolly. I was born in 1959 and raised in Galway, Ireland, and had a magical, privileged childhood in a rural place called Horseleap about 20 miles North-East of Galway city [Tom's photograph is on Page 8].

I graduated as an Industrial Engineer from University College Galway in 1980. My first job was with Apple, for which I moved to Cork in April 1981. I have lived in Cork since then.

In 1988 I got a lucky opportunity to work in California in the Fremont manufacturing site where the first Apple Macs were built. It was a terrific experience, and my daughter Rebecca started school there, going off every day in the yellow bus.

Returning to Cork at the end of 1988, we had three more children – Daniel, Adam and Nathan. Sadly we lost Adam in 2004 in a road traffic accident just before his 14th birthday. I will never forget him.

In 2008 my marriage split up amicably and since 2009 I have lived with my soulmate Bríd and continue to have a lucky, magical life. We married in January 2020.

One of the great joys in my life has been rhythm bones – or just simply “bones” as they are called in Ireland.

I learned about bones in my native Galway in 1979 from Joe “Strokes” Stevens (brother of Padraig Stevens of a very well-known band founded in Tuam called The Saw Doctors).

I have a keen interest in music and as well as bones I have been playing bodhrán since the early 1970s. I am self-taught on mandolin, banjo, piano, and piano accordion and I have an ambition to learn ukulele.

I had a set-back in 2002 when I had an injury to my right hand, but I have figured out different holds and techniques to overcome it and re-learn my instruments.

I am a member of the Rhythm Bones Society and I love the richness it has brought to my life by all the members I've met.

I competed in the annual All Ireland Bone Championship in Abbeyfeale in

2010 and 2012. My style was classed as “unusual” by the judge “Junior” Davey, who won it himself in 2016. He is a 5 times All Ireland bodhrán champion and runs a bones/bodhran summer school in Sligo.

In 2011 I began to market and sell Irish Bones online at [www.irishbones.com](http://www.irishbones.com). I've sold bones in 26 countries so far, including the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, Moscow in Russia, Ukraine, Australia, Japan, Brazil and New Caledonia.

I generally sell one or two pairs of bones per month, mostly to people who know about bones and love them and have found my website through their own efforts. I created a type of bone that I call “Shib.” They are made by splitting thick rib bones and sanding down the marrow side until it is smooth to the touch. A guy in Japan loved them so much he bought 8 pairs!

I have developed my own methods of making rib and shin bones from Irish beef, helped and guided by Steve Brown, Steve Wixson and Scott Miller. I have customers interested in goat bones, but it took ten years to find a source – I told that story at the Bones Fest XXV which was held virtually in July 2021.

I have recently created a range of wooden bones made from a local Elm tree that had to be felled as it was blocking light from a neighbour's garden. I call them Glounthaune Elm, and each pair is serial numbered and comes with a certificate.

The lady who owned the tree is called Hazel and because of her love for nature she was in tears as she listened to the chainsaw. I went in to her and suggested I make bones from the tree and she loved the idea of bits of her tree flying all over the world to make music. I told that story at Bones Fest XXII in Lincoln New Hampshire which Bríd and I had the privilege of attending back in 2018.

Every single pair of bones I make is tested by my soulmate and wife Bríd. She rattles them, looks at me, and I know if they are good.

As well as making rhythm bones, I have supplied 25 full ribs for an artist to use them in a sculpture he is creating; I've cut pieces from a thick shinbone for a musician to use as the keys of a melodica he is designing; and even selected and supplied lamb ribs to a lady in France

who wanted to recreate a human skeleton!

I also make jig dolls, and I have created two characters, Reeling Ray and Jigging Jill.

Reeling Ray is based on my dad, and on a dancer called John Conneely who appeared on the Late Late Show in the 70s <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2v2911>.

Jigging Jill was created for the late and very dear Art Sands. Art was the first Reeling Ray customer and he ordered Jill as she reminded him of a lady he knew! There are now 6 Reeling Ray's in existence one of which has made it all the way to Brazil.

Jig dolls are much easier to learn than bones but very time consuming to make so one of my projects this year is to create a 3-D printed version.

Outside of making and playing instruments, I have written a number of original songs, tunes and slow airs, and have put lyrics to a tune composed by my brother to remember my late son Adam.

Once again I want to say what an honour, privilege and joy it has been for me to discover the Rhythm Bones Society, and to be part of such a wonderful, mad, beautiful group of people.

Bríd often says “Would you rather be mad, bad, or sad?” I'll take mad every day of the week! *Tom Connolly*



Selection of Tom Connolly's bones, 2018



## Visit to the Center for Chinese Music and Culture

One day while surfing the net for new rhythm bones information, I ran across this video - <https://youtube.com/watch?v=Ay7qtHL86P8> with Dr. Mei Han demonstrating several types of Chinese clappers including the paiban, the closest clapper to our rhythm bones and thousands of years old.

Dr. Han is the Director of the Center for Chinese Music and Culture at Middle Tennessee State University which to my surprise is only a two hour drive from my house. She invited me to the Center where I spent the morning with her.

When I showed her my collection of rhythm bones she figured I knew what I was doing and called her husband, Randy Raine-Reusch, who is a musician with credentials of his own who also plays rhythm bones to join us. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/user/ZaDiscs> to view videos of their various performances that includes Chinese bluegrass.

My interest is in the musical history of the paiban. There is a tradition even today called kuaiban where a storyteller uses them as a noisemaker between parts of the story being told. Dr Han has a contact at the Minhang Museum in Shanghai that exhibits Chinese musical

instruments, and she gave me the email address of an English speaking curator. I await the reply to my email.

Dr. Han plays several instruments including the zheng shown in the photograph below. She demonstrated playing the zheng and she and her husband played it together with one on one side and the other on the other side.

As shown in the photograph below, I got to play along with her and one of her students playing a hammered dulcimer. This was completely unrehearsed and I know nothing of Chinese percussion, but I did all right. Expect a website video Post. *Steve Wixson*

## Visit to the Center for Popular Music

There are two places that receive the Rhythm Bones Player Newsletter; the Library of Congress (for which the Editor is quite pleased) and the Center for Popular Music at the Middle Tennessee State University. That Center has many resources related to rhythm bones and I have visited them on multiple occasions.

The latest visit was a quick one following my visit to the Center for Chinese Music and Culture also at this university. To my surprise, they showed me how they bind the newsletter and a photograph is on Page 8. How very nice! *Steve Wixson*

## A Note From Italy

I discovered Paolo Casini in 2007. In 2011, he produced a CD titled *Nacchere Toscane*, the Italian name for rhythm bones, and was preparing for a CD release event. He asked me to join the event live via Skype which I did.

Paolo wrote a detailed historical article on the *Nacchere Toscane* that appeared in the Vol 9, No. 4 newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

Here is a recent email from Paolo Casini: "What a pleasure to hear from you. I visited your new site and found it well done, simple and with lots of resources for *Nacchere Toscane* enthusiasts. Here the tradition continues even if there are no specific events that, sooner or later, we will be able to do!

"It's true, people are still very scared, but it can't go on like this! Here the situation is almost normal with traditional concerts and events with thousands of people. The mask is still mandatory only in theaters and cinemas.

"Meanwhile, there is a Facebook page called "crotala | κρόταλα"; here you can see some videos. At this moment a particularly significant one of the piece "TIRIZZUMPELARILLALLERA" by Morbello Vergari is visible; training his nephew Marco. Check homepage Post.

"What do you say if we put our video of ten years ago on my YouTube channel? Then maybe, we will try to do some initiatives together, since the technical means have remarkably improved from 2011 onwards when we did our online connection! A greeting and see you soon." *Paolo Casini*

## Want to Be a Board Member

Sharon Mescher has asked to leave the Board, and the Board is looking for a replacement. The business and affairs of the RBS are managed by its Board of Directors. Board members, who must be RBS members, serve for one year, and can be re-elected. The Board meets at least once a year, typically at the annual Bones Fest though as a result of COVID also meets via teleconferencing. The Board is particularly interested in adding young members to the Board. If interested, reply using the Contact Us Page on our website. *Steve Wixson*, Secretary



## Two Sides of a Coin

Michael Baxter had a photo shoot in Chattanooga and stopped by for a visit. If you do not know Mike, he was profiled in the last newsletter, and contributed two videos to our website using his professional skills and love of rhythm bones. The following is how the two of us saw the same visit.

**Steve Wixson** - I knew Mike was coming so I laid out much of my Rhythm Bones Society Collection such as newsletters, historical documents, and donated rhythm bones (the most recent being Walt Watkins' collection donated by his widow, Joy). I had my working sets of rhythm bones (10 pair) that I take to jam sessions and Bones Fests, and a second collection with rhythm bones I play with occasionally.

Mike arrived at lunchtime, and I showed him all that I had set out, and played videos of the different ways I play.

After lunch what Mike really wanted was to play together. He set up his video camera while I located some legal music, and we started trying different combinations of lead/follow, solo/accompany, etc.

Mike has learned a lot about RBS members, and I was able to show him videos of people he had heard of like Joe Birl playing slow. Since Mike has not been to a Bones Fest, I showed him video highlights from several Bones Fests.

He left after 5 hours of trying lots of different rhythm bones, playing together, and talking about most every aspect of our instrument that we could think of.

Wouldn't a Bones Fest in Phoenix be great!

**Michael Baxter** - Any doctor worth his salt, knows there's a connection between bones. But what the doctor may not know, is that there's also a connection between rhythm bones players. Recently I had the privilege of



meeting Steve Wixson after a couple of years of emails and phone calls. I was in Chattanooga on business, and he was kind enough to invite me over. I was treated to a wonderful lunch, including some fresh sourdough bread, gumbo, and homemade apple sauce. I highly recommend Steve's if you're ever in the area.

But seriously, I was amazed at his knowledge of the history and key players of rhythm bones. From his mountain-side home overlooking Chattanooga, we watched historic performances, poured through his extensive collection of rhythm bones, then did some playing ourselves. For me that was the best part. To get to play bones with the 2003 World Bones Champion was a great experience, and the closest I've come to experiencing a Bones Fest. We really had fun offsetting our rhythms and taking turns in the lead.

After hearing about Steve's experiences with legends like Joe Birl and Mel Mercier, there's a part of me that feels like I'm a couple decades late to the party. It's similar to how I felt when discovered the Clancy Brothers music after they were all but gone. For this reason, I took my own children to see the Chieftains while they were still with us. Someday my kids will understand that they witnessed history in the making.

That said, it also reinforced my passion for sharing rhythm bones with the next generation. Before I left, Steve gave me a Bones Fest IV ball cap and another pair of cow ribs. You can never have enough rhythm bones. While it won't show on an x-ray, there's a strong connection between bones players, and this was a real honor for me. Thanks Steve!

*(Continued from Page 1)*  
was enough Sears and Roebucks catalogs or soft corn cobs in the two holed out-house, tending to the farm animals and assisting with the planting, husbandry and harvesting of the farm crops. (Note: I was the slowest cotton picker one could ever find!)

As a freshman and sophomore in high school, I got my first "job" with a neighbor as an equipment operator for his hay baling service and finished out the last two years working for another neighbor as a ranch hand and carpenter's helper. After graduation I worked the summer as a roustabout at a Cadillac dealership and then used a music scholarship to start college in September of 1966. In January of 1967, I realized that I could not rely on my parents to supply necessary funds, so I started working afternoons at the nearby YMCA as a lifeguard, youth activity program Instructor and also worked evenings at a restaurant as a fountain attendant and cashier.

In September, 1968 of my Junior year, I realized I needed to make more money (I was also going to get married in November) so I secured a construction job as a welder's helper and pipe fitter's helper. After I received a Reduction In Force (the construction was completed) I went to work for the Texas Department of Transportation as an inspector.

An active duty requirement as part of my Navy Reserve enlistment occupied my time as a Signalman aboard the USS Luzerne County (LST 902) freighting supplies in all the rivers of the Mekong River Delta and the eastern coast of Viet Nam. When I got back from my one year of active duty requirement, I went back to work for the Texas Department of Transportation as a construction inspector and survey team member.

In January of 1971 I was asked to come back to work at the YMCA as a Health Club Director, then the Y's Aquatic Director, and when I got a degree in Physical Education I was asked to serve as the Y's Program/Physical Director and later as the Acting Executive Director. When the Y selected a new Executive Director, I was asked by the owner of a car dealership to work as a car salesman. This was another "Cotton Picking" job that I was not good at.

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I was asked to work as a Substitute Teacher—Extended Duty for the local school district for several months and then went back to work in the construction industry as a pipe fitter’s helper, then pipe superintendent’s assistant. I would have received a pipe fitter’s journeyman’s card if the reduction in force would have come two to three weeks later.

In 1979 I was asked to go to work as a teacher and coach in a local middle school where I held the following positions until 1996. Physical Education Teacher: 1979 to 1983; 7th Grade Coach: 1979 to 1991--7th Grade Athletic Coordinator: 1980 to 1991; Science Teacher: 1983 to 1995--Science Department Head: 1990 to 1994--Science Department Safety Trainer: 1990-1994; Title One Teacher/Team Leader--Reading & Math. (1/2 time position): 1995 to 1996; Teacher in Residence/Technology Director--Center For Professional Development and Technology, (1/2 time position): 1995 to 1996; Co-Teaching Inclusion Team Leader: 1993-1994; Effective Schools Leader: 1987 to 1992; Site Based Decision Making Team Chairman: 1992 to 1994; Victoria ISD Communication Committee Chairman: 1993 to 1994--Victoria ISD Communication Committee Member 1992 to 1993; Victoria ISD District Education Committee (SBDM)--Chairman: 1992 to 1993; Victoria ISD District Education Committee (SBDM)--Co-Chairman: 1991 to 1992.

Durning 1995-1996 I served as a Visiting Instructor at the University of Houston-Victoria: and then was asked to apply and serve as an Assistant/Associate Professor until I retired in 2004, but then I served under a Voluntary Reduced Assignment: 2004 to 2012. Tenure was awarded September 1, 2002. During the 18 years as a professor of education I also served as: Director, Center for Professional Development and Technology: 1996 to 1998; Director of Field Based Experiences: 1998 to 2002; ExCET Coordinator: 1999 to 2004; Interim Director of Field Based Experiences and Interim Certification Officer 2008 to 2009

I also served as the Interim Education Coordinator for the Museum of the Coastal Bend, at Victoria College from Sept 2011 to September 2012.

I am currently retired after spending

seven years as a YMCA professional, 18 years teaching/coaching in middle school and 25 years as a university professor training school teachers.

#### EDUCATION

University of Houston: 1977 to 1989; Education Doctor: Curriculum and Instruction; Specialization - Teacher Training and Certification; Dissertation: Effects of a “Co-Teaching Inclusion Model” on the Achievement Levels of Regular Education Students in a Middle School; Dr. Howard Jones, Committee Chair

University of Houston-Victoria: 1979 to 1981; Masters of Education: Educational Administration: Specialization: Mid-Level Management

South West Texas State University: 1971 to 1973; Bachelor of Science: Education: Major: All-Level Physical Education; Minor: History; Second Teaching Field: Middle School Earth and Life Science

Yorktown High School: 1962 to 1966

#### PUBLICATIONS

DISSERTATION: Effects of a “Co-Teaching Inclusion Model” on the Achievement Levels of Regular Education Students in a Middle School: Dr. Howard Jones, Committee Chair

ARTICLE: Professional development school: Teachers at one middle school tell their story: Published in the Journal of the Texas Middle School Association; Spring 2000, Volume 8, Number 2, pp. 12-18--With Dr. Trowbridge, Tina Herington, And Eloy Chapa

Book: Isaac Hamilton: Surviving Amidst the Texas Revolution: 2012, AuthorHouse, Bloomington, ID. ISBN: 978-1-4772-6946-6

#### MILITARY

United States Naval Reserve: NOVEMBER 1967 TO DECEMBER 1988:

US Naval Reserve Active Duty Component: United States Navy (Viet Nam Conflict) April 1969 to May 1970: Crew member aboard the USS Luzerne County (LST 902); Positions: Signalman; Operations Department Damage Control Petty Office.

Diving Navy: Member of Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 1 Detachment 110; Rank of: Signalman First Class (Second Class Diver); Duties: Unit’s leading petty officer; Unit’s diving supervisor; Unit’s leading enlisted diver as a certified

Second class diver; Unit’s training petty officer; Unit’s underwater photographer..

Awards: United States Naval Reserve Readiness Command Region 10: “Naval Reservist of the Year 1981”; “Naval Reservist of the Year 1983”; Secretary of the Navy: “Navy Achievement Metal: 1983”.

#### COMMUNITY SERVICE

CHAIRMAN: Victoria County Historical Commission 2009 to 2012; Vice Chairman ? To 2009

Charter Board Member: Victoria County American Heart Association.

#### INSTRUCTOR/INSTRUCTOR

TRAINER: YMCA & NAUI SCUBA Instructor; YMCA Underwater Photography Instructor; YMCA SCUBA Accident Management and Lifesaving Instructor; YMCA, American Heart Association & Red Cross: CPR Instructor Trainer; American Red Cross Instructor Trainer: Swimming, Water Safety, Life Saving, Life Guarding.

LIVING HISTORY: Re-enactor for over thirty years.

MAGIC: Children And Adult Magic Shows where I have used magic as a manipulative in my science classes as well as teacher training courses. CONS,

SCAMS, AND GAMES OF LITTLE CHANCE PRESENTATIONS: Magical illusions; Pin the Garter, Three Card Monte, Pea and Shells; SALOON/TAVERN GAMES: Brag, Keno, Black and Red, Spanish Monte, Faro, Chuck-A-Luck, Grand Hazard, and Hazard (Crabs-the precursor of Craps); JEFFERSON RANDOLPH (SOAPY) SMITH’S SCAMS: Soap Sales, “Baby Amber” (version of Soapy’s Petrified Man), Telegraph Station; TINY TANNER SCAMS: Air and Space Museum, Squirrel Barker, Comb for Bald Men, Advice Books “All That Men Know About Women” and “All That Women Don’t Know About Men”.

ART: I have sold 2 landscape oil paintings, won local awards for my “Horseshoe Nail Art” sculptures, and have sold many of those sculptures.

#### MUSIC

CHOIR: Starting around the sixth grade (I think) I started singing in the church choir and here learned notation, singing in “key”, and performing.

CORONET: I started my instrumental musical career under Mike Fassino’s tutelage by learning to play a cornet when I

was in the fourth grade. In my small high school, 7th and 8th graders performed with the high school band so budding musicians received instruction while in the 4th through 6th grades.

**TUBA:** Jim Vanlandingham, my 10th grade band director, realized that he needed more tubas and than my embra-  
sure did not fit the cornet mouth piece. So during the summer between my 10th and 11th grades I taught myself to play this instrument.

**BASS VIOLIN:** I received a partial scholarship to Victoria Junior College and participated in the college band program with Wilber Collins and the coral program with Ruth Williams during 1966 to 1968. Mr. Collins wanted to add the sound of a “string bass” to his band so he purchased a yellow Kay bass violin and asked me to learn to play it. I remember that the only “lesson” I ever had on that instrument was when he and I sat down at a piano to find out where the notes were on the fretless keyboard.

After a one-year stint on active duty in the Navy, Mrs. Williams asked me to play a string bass part for one of her choir’s performances. Dr. Harry Lyall, director of the Victoria Symphony, was in the audience and asked me to play with that organization which I did for its first ten years of its performances.

**CURRENT INSTRUMENTS:** The living history hobby produced the interest in 1800’s instruments and music when I was at an 1840 event and saw someone playing a harmonica. Research revealed that the harmonica was invented in the 1820’s and the accordion soon after, so off I was to the following list of instruments.

When visiting during my childhood, my father and Uncle Edo Heopkin would take turns playing Uncle Edo’s Hohner button accordion after dinner. Uncle Edo made his last visit to Germany during the 1960’s and brought back a newer accordion for my dad. When it could no longer be repaired, my siblings and I gave him another--purchased from Henry Hauschild’s Music Co.

When I discovered that the harmonica was an 1800’s instrument, I replaced the aluminum covers with wooden ones and learned to play several songs. While accompanying my dad’s accordion playing of Muse Dem with the harmonica, I noticed that the pattern of notes was the

same, so I transferred the songs I knew on the harmonica to the accordion. It took about a year and a half of work to get the left hand to play the polka and waltz bass line.

Dr. Steve Trowbridge had a lap dulcimer and I learned several songs while we were attending living history events. I purchased a dulcimer kit from the Dulcimer Factory in Fredericksburg, TX and built one for my self.

Dan Overpeck from Corpus Christi brought a hammered dulcimer to the living history events and I could transpose songs I knew on the dulcimer to the hammered dulcimer--another kit from Fredericksburg.

Jimmy Driftwood’s troupe of performers held a concert at the Victoria College Auditorium. His bass player had a washtub bass with a lever at the top to change the notes. Since there were no galvanized tubs during the 1840’s I was stymied on building this instrument until I discovered a wooden dry goods barrel, bovine rawhide, and artificial sinew.

During the filming of the I-MAX Thirteen Days of Glory, one of the re-enactors was playing “bones” so Lark in the Morning provided the Percy Danforth’s instruction book along with a cassette tape and his set of “bones.” The curved slats from the back of a broken captain’s chair provided my other set of “bones”.

I wanted to play Come to the Bower on the fife while re-enacting Sam Houston’s diversionary tactics of holding marching drills the morning before the afternoon battle at San Jacinto, so I taught myself to play that instrument. When research indicated that the soldiers in Fannin’s command played tin whistles the night before their execution on Palm Sunday, March 27, 1836, I added the “Clarke Penny Whistle” to the fife.

Information on making Stone Age instruments came from: Carolyn Arrington, Victoria, TX--Mouth bow; Internet--didgeridoos; and I purchased a concert quality Indian Courting Flute from Butch Hall, Weatherford, TX.

Betty Bireley had a five-string banjo in her antique shop that I purchased and then built a fretless five string with a wooden head. Then I constructing a gourd five-string banjo and have built several others on consignment. I have also constructed a bass banjo.

Many people say bad things about where accordion players can go so to offset any chance of this happening’ I built and play a few songs on the angel’s instrument--the Greek Lyre.

I demonstrate how fifteen or so different instruments are played (many of which I have built) at various club meetings, museums, schools, county fairs and conventions--the latest being at the Daughters of the Republic of Texas’ state convention.

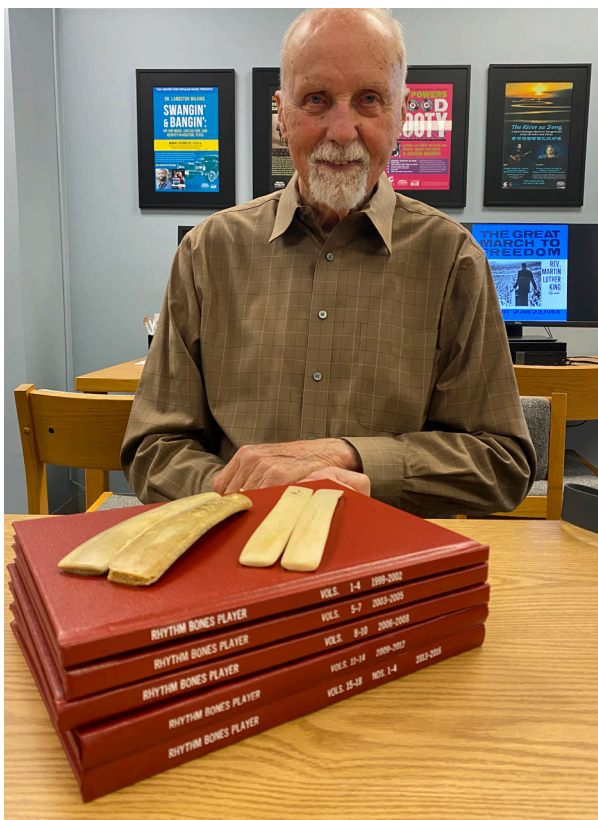
**RHYTHM BONES:** During the filming of the I-MAX Thirteen Days of Glory, one of the re-enactors was playing “bones.” I saw the instrument a few months later at the Texas Folklife Festival and asked the performer about the instrument and where I could purchase it. Following his advice, I purchased a set along with Percy Danforth’s instruction manual from Lark in the Morning and taught myself to play right handed. One day a thought occurred to me that I might be able to play left handed and after I was able to roll out a triplet on that hand another light bulb went off where I asked myself if it was possible to play both hands at the same time? The curved slats from the back of a broken captain’s chair provided my other set of “bones”.

I wondered if I and the one player on the movie set and festival were the only players in the world. That question was answered when Steve Wixson saw my university vita online and called me to ask if I would join the Rhythm Bones Society which I did in 2005! Currently I have hosted two bones festivals in San Antonio and serve on the society’s board of directors.

During 2008 my wife and I were enjoying an Alaskan cruise when I saw a 10” long piece of Mammoth Ivory in a tourist trap in Skagway. Soon after arriving home, I was able to carve out the only (as far as I know) double set of the Mammoth Ivory Rhythm Bones in the world!

I currently play bones and the “One String Bass Banjo” professionally with the “Tanner Family Minstrels.” *Dennis Ray Riedesel, Ed. D.* (<R>eat’-a-zul)





A copy of the Rhythm Bones Player is sent to the Center For Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University. I was thrilled to see how they bind and display our newsletter.



Tom Connolly and his workshop - Doing what he loves most. See his Profile on Page 3.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 24, No. 3 2022

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## Executive Director's Column

My little rhythm bones business has had several interesting contacts over the last few months. Professional percussionists have been contacting me for sometime, but lately I've had contact with percussionists from a variety of touring bands. Jerry Pentecost of the old Crow medicine show bought a couple of pairs from me, and is playing them as a regular part of the show. I recently gave a pair of rhythm bones to Robin Rapuzzi of Tuba Skinny, so maybe we will see rhythm bones with that amazing band.

Of course, Dom Flemons has had a great impact on the popularity of rhythm bones not only from his audience but also fellow musicians that he encounters along the tour. Ted "Mr. Goon-Bones" Goon lamented that rhythm bones never became a very popular instrument in the popular music of his 1950s day. Maybe things will change. Mardeen Gordon has

a rhythm bones rap, maybe the next step is hip-hop rhythm bones (see Mike Baytop story)!

Kenny and Terry Wolin hosted the first In-Person Bones Fest since the pandemic began, a review of it is within the newsletter. When Bones Fest began they were similar small gatherings in backyards with lots of rhythm bone playing and camaraderie. Although it was on the smaller side, it had all the ear markings of a great Bones Fest, rhythm bones players and rhythm bones playing! Thanks to Kenny and Teri for putting the extra effort into getting it together, I wish I could've been there!

Virtual Bones Fest which began to avoid personal contact during the pandemic are probably always going to be with us in some form. It does give people who live on other side of the

(Continued on Page 2)

## Highlights of Bones Fest XXVI

### THE IN-PERSON EVENT - August 6, 2022

Teri and I (photograph below) were delighted to host the first In-Person Bones Fest since 2019.

Long-term planning leading up to the event proved to be too challenging on the heels of COVID regulations and work schedule. However, we still managed to pull together an intimate one-day backyard Bones Fest gathering reminiscent of the early Bones Fest I and Bones Fest II days.

We spent the first few hours hanging out inside the house catching up. One of our first out-of-town

(Continued on Page 3)



### THE VIRTUAL EVENT - August 7, 2022

It is often said that a Bones Fest is like a family reunion with a family that you didn't know you had. This virtual event was no different. I saw old friends, newer friends, and friends I was meeting for the first time. This event was lovely, it was intimate. Going forward, we will always include some virtual component, but it is my sincere hope that we will be meeting again, in person, in 2023.

Sandor Smolovits started off the day with a

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## Editorial

Bones Fest XXVI is over and was unique having an In-Person event followed the next day with a Virtual event, and as shown on Page 1, there are two Fest Summaries, one by hosts Teri and Kenny Wolin and the other by Skeff Flynn.

Note that most of the BFXXVI attendees have a Player Profile Page in the Museum part of our website that includes links to stories and media. When you visit the Museum, check your Player Profile and email text changes, images or your media. If you are not there, why not email us your profile with images and media.

In Steve Brown's Editorial, he mentions that a virtual component will be part of future Fests so people from around the world can attend (such as Bob Vickory from Australia at Virtual BFXXV). For that to be effective we will need a large screen monitor and an audio system with enough power so virtual attendees can be seen and heard as if they were there in person. Let's make it happen.

Michael Baytop, who could have been a Founding Member of RBS, attended the In-Person event with his wife. Scott Volles talked with him and Mike told some interesting stories about himself and Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas, who also could have been a Founding Member of RBS, that unfortunately were not recorded. I called Mike and found out more information that is now in an article in this issue. Mike, thanks for sharing. Scott, thanks for getting the story about Mike started and for most of the still photographs in this issue.

## Executive Director Continued

world an opportunity to get together with us, what could be better!

And this year's Virtual Bones Fest was also a little smaller than years past, but did not lack for enthusiasm. Thanks to Skeff, Steve Wixson, and all those who put effort and energy into getting it together!

I think we all want to get back to our In-Person Bones Fest. Virtual Bones

Fests have been great, but there's nothing like sitting around a group of rhythm bones players and spending a weekend trading tips and information.

Now is the time I think that we need to really start Thinking about next year's Fest. I'm calling on all of you who might have an interest in sponsoring a Bones Fest to contact me, Steve Wixson, Skeffington Flynn, or any of the RBS Board of Directors to discuss it. There is a host guide available through Steve Wixson that will give you ideas about what it entails to host a Bones Fest. And I would love to go to an area we haven't been to before such as California, or any of the far western states, but returning to one of our previous Fest sites would also be fantastic! I would love to talk about it, feel free to give me a call. May your bones be with you! *Steve Brown*

## Minutes of Board Meeting

The Board Meeting was held on July 27, 2022 using Zoom technology, was called to order at 7 PM by Assistant Director, Bill Vits with all members present except Steve Brown and Sharon Mescher.

The first order of business was to elect a replacement for Sharon Mescher who resigned from the Board. As provided by our Bylaws, the Board elected Dean Robinson to serve until the next General Membership Election.

The Assistant Director then call the Board to order as the Nominating Committee. Steve Brown asked to step down as Executive Director due to family health issues, and Skeffington Flynn was nominated as the third Executive Director. (see General Membership Minutes for nominees) The Nominations Committee meeting was adjourned.

There was a discussion of Bones Fest XXVI details.

Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary.

## Meeting of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was held on August 7, 2022, using Zoom technology as part of Virtual Bones Fest XXVI. It was called to order by Assistant Director, Bill Vits,

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

noting a quorum is members present.

Steve Wixson, Secretary, moved that the minutes as printed in the newsletter be approved as written, and this was seconded and approved. As Treasurer he gave an informal report.

There was an election of Board Members for 2023. The Report of the Nominating Committee is as follows, Skeffington Flynn, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board members at Large, Steve Brown, Dean Robinson, Dennis Riedesel, and Kenny Wolin. The floor opened for further nominations, and there being none, a motion was made, seconded and approved to elect the nominees by acclimation

Skeff Flynn gave a summary of the In-Person event hosted by Kenny and Teri Wolin on the previous day.

There being no Old or New business, the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary.

(In-Person Continued from Page 1)

Massachusetts with a back pocket full of rhythm bones and Ukulele in hand.

We were most grateful by the presence of legendary blues man and rhythm bones player, Mike Baytop (and his wife, Ernestine), who shared some great stories with us; Hank Tennenbaum, who we were very happy to see again, was on cloud nine! Mike is a founding member of the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation and learned to play rhythm bones from Richard "Mr. Bones" Thomas (who recorded "Blues and Bones" and was a crowd favorite at the DC Blues and Smithsonian Folk Festivals). Mike told us that "Mr. Bones" learned to play bones from Sammy Davis Jr. Many thanks to Kate Barfield who was instrumental in bringing Mike and his wife to Bones Fest.

Meanwhile, Spike Bones (who drove from Missouri) was giving pointers to our newest bones players (future members?) Darren, Jeff, and Aaron, with the help of our sons Aidan and Ben.

Eventually, we all adjourned to the backyard deck for some play-along tunes and songs with Ben Denny on banjo and mandolin, Justin Kline on cajon, Mary from the Shedhoppers on vocals and guitar, Skeff on harmonica and tenor guitar, Kenny on concertina, and Scott Volles on whistle. It was also great to see Mike Baytop play bones when Teri picked up her guitar and sang some blues.

A Bones Fest would not be complete without bones, so I took the liberty of smoking nine racks of ribs for dinner. In hindsight, I should have gone for the beef ribs so we could all play them after dinner:)

Afterwards, our one "formal" performance was by our very own Tim Reilly, which he pre-recorded so we could all watch on the TV. Later, some of us moved inside to the music room where Jeff and I took turns playing some ragtime music on marimba with rhythm bones accompaniment.

Another highlight was when our friend, Tam Tran showed up later with his fiddle to play a Gypsy Jazz version of "All of Me" with Aaron on piano and Ben on banjo. This was followed by Emmy singing several Jazz and Latin standards before ending the evening.

Kudos to Ben Denny for sticking around for a short, after-hours jam session with Teri, myself, and our son Ben, who was playing spoons.

We'd also like to thank Scott Volles for helping out and chronicling the event with beautiful photography. Fun fact, Scott graciously provided sound for the DC Bones Fest XIV we hosted (and got married at!) 12 years ago.

Thanks to all in attendance for making this a truly memorable event. - *Kenny & Teri Wolin*

(Vital Continued from Page 1) discussion of how he makes Percy Danforth bones. San met Percy Danforth in 1975, and believes that Percy made more than 30,000. San's made a few thousand himself, and currently he focuses on Oak, Cherry, Pine and Mahogany rhythm bones. He uses a CNC machine, and he is able to consistently replicate the Danforth shape using interesting materials such as salvaged floorboards and salvaged cabinet doors. His daughter now plays rhythm bones.

San delighted us with a wonderful rendition of "I've Got Rhythm." We were delighted to hear that San got to play with Percy, at 92 years of age, just weeks before he passed.

Annika Mikolajko-Osman talked about using different materials in her bones playing. She's working on her PhD and she showed off her technique of using the bones while using her mouth as a resonance chamber. What a cool way to get pitch out of an instrument that doesn't normally have a note!

Hans Weehuizen was up next. Hans is steeped in the Sea Shanty tradition. He is a maker, and has produced something in the neighborhood of 2,000 bones over the last few years. One of the biggest distinctions of Hans in his manufacturing process is that he uses a steam bending technique, as opposed to cutting, or sanding. You can find out more about Hans, his bones, and his approach to teaching, at <http://howtoplaythebones.com>

Ron Bruschi give us a sample of his tigerwood rhythm bones and others. Ron was recently at the Irish Festival in the Catskills where he received a wonderful compliment. He was told that his bones "didn't reorient the music." What

a wonderful way to say it! Ron is very conscious of volume, which is crucial to being accepted into any session.

Steve Hamilton is a percussioy-ist based out of Minneapolis, he had responses for several earlier comments, and I absolutely love that level of engagement! First, he demonstrated the mouth bow, and then showed us his Hurdy Gurdy - 1 of 4 he owns. Big welcome to Steve!

Mark Shelton was the next to offer an introduction. Mark is based in the Dallas / Fort Worth area, who's been playing since roughly 1985. Mark is a freelance percussionist that can be reached at <http://marksheltonmusic.com>

Heidi Heiss-Bynum is based out of Kentucky, and is primarily a fiddle and banjo player with an Appalachian focus. Heidi loves playing with rhythm bones players, so is delighted to join!

.Ellen Stern loved San's comment about playing relaxed. 'If you can't relax, you're not going to do too well.' She mostly learns tunes on long car rides. Ellen told a story of rhythm bones players sitting around trying to guess what tune the other was playing! The important thing here is really trying to learn the tune!

Mike Baxter spoke up next. The Chieftains really inspired him. The pandemic was really the catalyst for him to put his nose to the grindstone and learn how to play!

Mike did a collective video and was absolutely blown away by the range of different techniques. And I absolutely love it! Scott Miller was apparently a reluctant participant, but turned in a great performance. This looks to be an annual feature, and I am personally grateful to Mike for his commitment to this. We look forward to creating the next one! Input is appreciated, so let us know your thoughts.

Stan Von Hagen was sporting a really cool BFXIX shirt! (Tongue in cheek, I hosted that festival.) Stan has a diverse musical background and is really excited to see global participation in our virtual festivals. One of these days we'll get together and knock out "I've Been Everywhere"!

Steve Brown was able to join. Unfortunately, he had a case of Covid.

(Continued on Page 6)



# The In-Person Bones Fest XXVI



Host Kenny Wolin and Darren Lin



In the Backyard



Hank Tennenbaum and Host Teri Wolin



Ben Denny and jammin' on the Back Deck



Small Bones Marketplace



Spike Bones and others on back deck



Emma Davies and Aaron Green



Hank Tennenbaum talking to Mike Baytop



??? Wolin and



Bruce Strong



Jammin' to Kenny on Marimba



Kenny teaching



Play to Emma Davies singing



Scott Volles taking these photographs



Skeffington Flynn teaching



# The Virtual Bones Fest XXVI



Kate Barfield



Mike Baxter



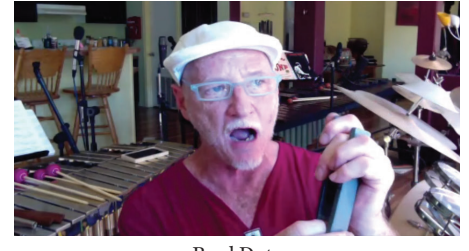
Steve Brown



Ron Bruschi



Tommy Cowett



Brad Dutz



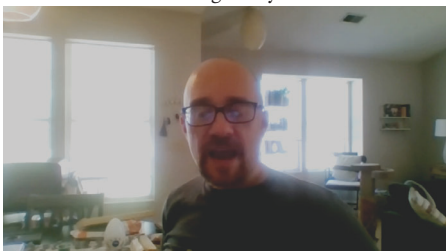
Skeffington Flynn



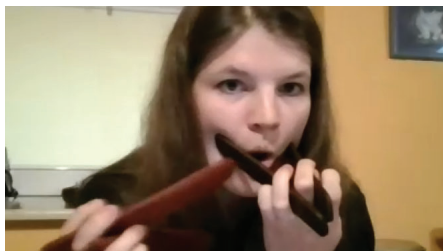
Steve Hamilton



Hiedi Hess-Bynum



Mike Maise



Annika Mikolajko-Osman

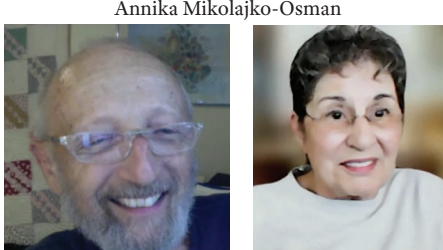


Dean Robinson

Dennis Riedesel



Mark Shelton



Sandor Slomovits

Ellen Stern



Bill Vits



Stan Von Hagon



Hans Weehuizen



Steve Wixson

(Continued from Page 3)

Our fearless leader over the years, he immediately recognized almost everyone in attendance. His skills in relationship building are absolutely incredible.

Tommy Cowett has been with us (off and on) since Bones Fest I! He showed us several rhythm bones artifacts. As the son of Ev Cowett, his family made a lot of noise with rhythm bones. Nonetheless, he's sensitive to the notion of making things quieter.

Mardeen Gordon got her first exposure to rhythm bones from the Renaissance Fair. Needing something to do in between dances, with her husband Randy already playing the spoons, someone suggested rhythm bones. Somewhere in 1985 or so they encountered Percy Danforth at a festival and said "Oh!, that's what you're supposed to do with those!" Mardeen wasn't a fan of the oval shape of Danforth rhythm bones, so she started making her own. Mardeen started Shooting Star Bones and has been rolling ever since. Mardeen Gordon's photograph is missing due to an audio issue so Zoom did not show her.

Matt Masie heard his first rhythm bones from Tommy Hayes. He moved on to Dave Holt and Mark Shelton! It's so cool to see the connections in our community. Matt teaches 40 to 50 students per week in his role as a percussion educator. We're delighted to welcome Matt to the Rhythm Bones Society!

Dennis Riedesel's affinity for living history got him into rhythm bones. He was called to the set of an IMAX movie being filmed in the Alamo. In their downtime, folks would jam. At one of these jams Dennis found a rhythm bones player! Eventually he tracked that player down and was directed to Lark In The Morning and found a set of Percy Danforth rhythm bones along with some sort of instruction material. After a long journey of playing bones in the car, he was on his way!

Steve Wixson's father was a butcher. As best he can tell, his father learned to play the bones from a sailor. Steve started playing the bones at around 8 years old and carried his bones around in his back pocket up until about senior high. Eventually he found some Joe Birl rhythm bones in a music store and

he started Googling Rhythm Bones and associated terms. That led him to the Rhythm Bones Society (not yet formed at that time, but the founding members). Steve has been the driving engine of the Rhythm Bones Society ever since. Steve shared a fantastic video of his approach to playing a variety of different styles! Don't get him started on the hairbrush . . . unless you have time to have your mind blown!

Bill Vits immediately gave a really short master class on the mouth technique that Annika loves to employ. Bill has something of the opposite experience of a lot of us who play with acoustic players. Bill has played in a lot of situations that called for loud bones. Some great jewels from Bill . . . practice the thing you can't do, who can do the longest single stroke roll? . . .

Discussion of rhythm bones holders (See story on next page)

Kate Barfield's first rhythm bone's teacher was Mike Baytop. Kate reiterated what a good time Mike had at the In-Person Event. Kate has also studied under Hank Tennenbaum, and later Rowan Corbett. Kate plays rhythm bones patterned off something Hank found in the Library of Congress, which seems to work for her smaller hands.

My introduction (Skeffington Flynn) started with a familiar tale. When I moved to WV in 2008 I met a group of spoon playing karaoke junkies. We were asked to perform at a local elementary school in 2009. I was asked to speak to the kids, and as I was researching the history I found rhythm bones. I also took a moment to share my use of shakers with rhythm bones.

Dean Robinson, our newest Board Member, has a serious interest in Irish music and Irish percussion in particular. We were fortunate enough to be able to hang out with each other through Fleadh By The Feale in Ireland. So excited to welcome Dean to the Board.

We played a track from Tom Connelly, "Little Robin Redbreast". Tom's playing on the recording imitates the driving snow and the beat of a robin's wings.

Brad Dutz met Aaron Plunkett back in 1990, roughly, and took lessons from Mel Mercier at CalArts while Mel was working on his Master's Degree in World Music. Brad later studied with Junior

Davie. Brad worked with James Yoshizawa's father in studio sessions. When James went to Cal State Long Beach, Brad was teaching hand percussion. Brad's happy to see his pupil flourishing! Check out Brad's studio recording for the TV series 'Black Sails.' His 'Recording Rhythm Bones Workshop' is below.

Mark had a great question for Brad about how his former percussion training informed his approach. Brad responded that he essentially wanted to integrate other percussion instruments as quickly as possible. But for a young musician, Brad stressed the appeal of the rhythm bones. Affordable, portable . . .

Steve Wixson gave a guided tour of some of the improvements that have been made to the website. If you haven't visited recently, you need to stop by. Steve has taken our original website and migrated it to a modern content management system. The site is much easier to explore and the search function is excellent! Kudos Steve!

## Brad Dutz Recording Rhythm Bones Workshop

This is a brief introduction to recording rhythm bones. I have recorded for forty years and just made two audio files with experimental recordings that I can email to anyone who wants it. I used four different rhythm bones, slate, rosewood Steve Brown's shin bone and metal, and seven microphones. Email me a request at braddutz.com.

Microphones. I do a whole lot with the really good Shure C6143B microphones. When I am not using them I use my favorite 'Go To' mic, the AKG 3000. Also use the AKG 451. Recently I found these Lewitt 0400 mics, and these are really cheap at \$80. They are so portable and rugged.

Bruce Carver and I have a bodhran and bones duet where Bruce used the 451 and I used the 3000. This video shows a studio recording session for the Black Sails series. (Find on his Player Profile Page.)

When recording, you don't want to play into the mic but you want to play sideways to the mic to control the accents that you are putting on the recording.

I always record stereo as it is a deeper



sound. If you have trouble with your audio software controlling the stereo output you can record the stereo as two mono channels and then you have greater control in the mixing process.

Also a good idea, if you have an ambient microphone, is to introduce just a little of the ambient mic to get the sound of the room.

San relayed that he once used balsa wood for the stationary bone and now makes cedar bones explicitly for the purpose of showing up softer on recordings.

## How to Make a Rhythm Bones Holder

Bones Fests XXVI was one of the smaller Fests, however, there were some interesting topics - one being a rhythm bones holder so you can quickly change to a different pair as you play.

Annika Mikolajko-Osman demonstrated a container filled with uncooked rice as shown in the photo below, and it is easy to grab and replace rhythm bones while playing. She also has a cloth bag holding a pair of rhythm bones that she wears on her waist like a holster.



Mark Shelton has used a peanut can that he covered the bottom and inside of the can with thin foam rubber so that the rhythm bones don't make any clanking or extraneous sound. He used another piece of foam to make a divider so he could have two set of rhythm bones in the can.

Bill Vits has taped two toilet paper rolls on a surface so he could grab them quickly, but putting them back quickly was difficult so he just tossed them.

Steve Wixson has used a 3 inch thick piece of Styrofoam punching holes where needed with rhythm bones or some tool. It can hold many pairs depending on the size of the foam. Easy to grab them, but more difficult to replace them on the fly

than Annika's holder above.

If you have another scheme, send a message using our 'Contact Us' page.

## Michael Baytop

[Editor's Note: This story is written from notes by Scott Volles about a discussion he had with Michael Baytop at the In-Person Fest on August 6, 2022 and a telephone interview with Mike by Steve Wixson on August 30.

Mike and Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas were planning on attending Bones Fest III, but Richard developed a health issue and neither attended. If they had attended, they would have been Founding Members of RBS, and you wonder how that would have changed things as you can imagine a 'Blues' Bones Fest at the Barbershop. Who knows?

Archie Edward's Barbershop became a gathering place for 'Blues' in the Washington, DC area. You can learn about Archie and the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation at the website <https://www.acousticblues.com>. Mike is a Founder of the Foundation and President - Emeritus.]

"When I was a kid I was a street busker with my friends. We played for people at the O Street Market and in front of City Main Post Office. Money was a secondary motivation as we played for fun and to show our friends something new. We were competitive.

"If you didn't have toys, kids had to find something to entertain themselves. We made rhythm bones by breaking wooden rulers in school, scoring the wood, snapping it in two pieces, and cleaning up the edges. Ruler rhythm bones were his first rhythm bones set."

Mike talked a lot about Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas. "You know, Richard was a character. Mr Bones was kind of quiet, but after Archie died 'Bones' came into his own. The thing was and it is kind of funny because Mr Bones was not much of a rhythm bones player until he hooked up with Archie. Richard was more of a jazz player, and it wasn't until he hooked up with Archie that he did a lot of rhythm bones playing.

"He was a great rhythm bones player. If I had any doubts about it, there was a hip-hop player who was crazy about 'Mr Bones.' 'Bones' was not crazy about

them and did not like young people very much. They made him kind of nervous with all those teenagers hanging around him wanting him to play some more. Mr Bones wasn't much of a hip hop fan, but they liked the way he played rhythm bones.

"Richard learned to play rhythm bones from Sammy Davis, Jr. They were the same age, I guess about 6 or 7. That made him say, I can do this because I am the same age as he is. At that time Sammy Davis, Jr play with his uncle and his dad in a group called The Will Maston Trio.

When Sammy and Mr Bones played rhythm bones there were still black-face minstrels, but Mr Bones did not play in minstrels and did not see rhythm bones as a minstrel instrument.

Actually, Mr Bones played all kinds of music. If it had a rhythm to it he could play it including Hip Hop and Blues.

"He really wasn't a Blues player, but Archie knew Richard was a crowd pleaser. Archie knew how to bring the rhythm bones player out of Mr Bones and not everybody can do that. He was a showman, and Archie knew how to press the right buttons for Mr Bones.

"Archie was the lead player when the two of them were together. It tickled me. Archie would say "Come on Bones, Come on Bones, and he would say afterwards "where are they, I don't know where he is going."

"Rhythm bones are normally an accompanied instrument, and Archie would put Bones out in front and leave him there. That's what it was, they were a funny pair, and they were real funny because they weren't trying to be funny, just trying to get through the song.

"It was then just Archie and Bones and later on I became part of the group. Archie realized that if I was part of the group, Archie would not have to pay me separate. We were the Trio, The Legendary Blues Trio, that's what it was. Then I told him that he would have to pay me from his part of the money.

"After that we were billed as Archie, Bones and myself. Then there was Eleanor Ellis, and we had one cut on a Verve record. Then Mr Bones and I backed everyone up, like Michael Rhodes and Eleanor Ellis. I was playing the guitar. Or

(Continued on Page 7)



harmonica. Just something that Mr Bones could play rhythm to.

“Everyone was dying off and we started playing together. There was always a third person with us, but we said, just the two of us, what the heck. To me, Richard was the star of the show anyway, and I thought we didn’t need anybody else other than to back Richard up. I always thought he was the star of the show anyway.

“I remember one time seeing Taj Mahal and his group, and I got Mr Bones to play with them and Mr Bones took over the show. He and himself just took over the show. Oh I know, Jay Summerour showed off the showmanship of Mr Bones.

“There was a period of time when there were several contemporaries of Richard. I loved JC Burris. I explained to Mr Bones that JC Burris played the both harmonica and rhythm bones. In fact one of the song we wound up doing was a JC Burris tune. The first time that Mr Bones heard it, he said, “that guy is playing my song.” Richard didn’t listen

much to rhythm bones playing, but he was a player.

“I learned to play rhythm bones from Mr Bones. I did a lot of listening and watching, and I had the opportunity to play with him where he corrected my mistakes. I realized that he and Archie were diamonds in the rough, and they kind of beat me into shape. I got to see them in performance and just being themselves.”

“I met Dom Flemons, who I knew of from his group before the Carolina Chocolate Drops, at Common Ground where I was teaching a rhythm bones class that Dom and Hubby Jenkins were in.”

His wife, Ernestine, noted, “Michael and I used to work at the Library of Congress. I worked in the American Folklife Center for 34 years, and we had a

lot of people come through and present programs on the Mall. Mike worked there for 31 years in the Law Library and Contracts.”



Michael Baytop at Bones Fest XXVI. See story on Page 7.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 24, No. 4 2022

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## Executive Director's Column

Well this is a pretty difficult column for me to write not only because we have lost our dear friend Bill Vits and Jeremy continues to spiral down from Alzheimer's disease, but this will be my last directors column as I am stepping down as Executive Director. I have had a lot of fun writing this column, sometimes factual, sometimes creative, but always with rhythm bones and the membership in mind.

Bill Vits was more than an exceptional musician, he was an exceptional human being. I think of our times together, how much I learned, how much I enjoyed his company, and how much I was always in awe, not only at his musical ability but how much he knew about so many things. But we must carry on and go forward, with his exceptional memory always in our mind.

We are so lucky to still have Jeremy with us although he's not the person he used to be. It makes

the smiles, laughter, and displays of his personality so much more important.

I've been so fortunate over the years to be associated with so many of you amazing rhythm bones players. Of course, Steve Wixson is certainly at the top of the list. His tireless energy, and attention to detail is what really makes the newsletter and the organization work, and for that I thank him.

Even in the midst of our difficulties, I'm still long for the old Bones Fest where we could hang out, play for each other, learn more stuff, and generally bask in the glory of our friendships.

I am very excited that Sky and Jessye have stepped up and offered to host Bones Fest back in New Hampshire next year. Reality is I don't know if I can go, but (Continued on Page 2)

## The Late, Great, Rhythm Bones Player, Bill Vits

An argument could be raised that Bill Vits was the best rhythm bones player in the history of the world. Can't prove it, but let us tell you about him.

This story is supported by Bill's Personal-Profile Page at <https://rhythmbones.org/player-profiles/vits-bill/> which has links to stories with more detail as well as all of the video links included in this article. His formal obituary is at <https://obits.mlive.com/us/obituaries/grandrapids/name/william-vits-obituary?id=36926304>

William Henry Vits was born in Evanston, IL on August 20, 1957 and passed away in Grand Rapids, MI on October 17, 2022. Bill started playing drums at age 7 and was performing at age 11. He received his B.S. in Music Education from Ball State University and M.S. in Orchestral Performance from the University of Michigan.

By age 22, Bill had two degrees and had performed at Carnegie Hall and the Montreux Jazz Festival with University of Michigan ensembles. Bill auditioned with the Grand Rapids Symphony in 1979 and won the job. He served as the Principal Percussionist for the Grand Rapids Symphony for 41 years. To read Bill's story in his own words, go to <https://localspins.com/beat-of-a-different-drummer-bill-vits-legacy-with-gr-symphony-the-concussions->

[more-local-spins/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kIbSRs-GMLU). To see a young Bill Vits go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kIbSRs-GMLU>. To see the Grand Rapids Symphony's tribute go to Bill go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxcZOW338wI>.

Bill performed with a surf rock band, The Concussions, and they released 4 CDs. They wore latex skull masks that became their tortuous trademark. They played together for 20 years and Bill said, "it's like driving a hot rod at full speed with my best buddies." We do not have video showing Bill performing with his symphony (Continued on Page 7)



Bill Vits in Symphony Uniform

## Editorial

How does someone honor and say goodbye to Bill Vits. I'm lucky as I get to write about him (which is something you can do in a Letter to the Editor).

As I look back at the people who had the biggest influenced my rhythm bones playing, I start with my father who taught me to play one-handed, Freeman Davis who I saw occasionally as Brother Bones on television, the Cowett family who exposed me to two-handed playing, Jerry Mescher who showed me high quality rhythm bones playing, Percy Danforth's instructional video, Aaron Plunkett's 'Bones From The Beginning' instructional video, Fred Edmonds who I go to know as I converted his Bones Unlimited instructional video to our website, and Bill Vits who showed me how a professional percussionist approaches rhythm bones in his many Fest performances and Workshops.

I learned about Grizzly Frank Metcalf in Beth Lenz's Master's Thesis. In this issue Frank tells the story of his four-beat rhythms and how rhythm bones became an important part of his life. It is significant he was one of a few full time bones players. The story begins on Page 4.

In-Person Bones Fests are back hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett. See preliminary information on Page 3.

A big welcome to Dean Robinson who was elected to the Board at the recent Zoom General Membership Meeting. His profile is on Page 3.

Also a big welcome to Tom Connolly who was elected to the Board at the recent Zoom Board Meeting (see Board minutes in the column to the right). Tom will serve until the next General Membership meeting. Tom's Profile is in a recent newsletter (<https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V24N3.pdf#page=3>).

Last but not least is a personal thank you to our retiring Executive Director, Stephen Brown. His contributions to our society are many. I eagerly await his editorials which are always on time. As Emcee at Bones Fests, he introduces performers as 'my friend' and means it. And as an editor, his many articles fill my white space with amazing stories. Many thanks, my friend! And still on the Board.

(Continued From Page 1)

we take things one day at a time, and hope that we are able to attend. Congratulations to Skeffington Flynn our new Executive Director, I know he will do a fantastic job. So with that I bid you all adieu. I will remain on the Board to throw in my two cents, but I want to thank you for being a member of the organization and contributing so much to it. May your bones be with you! *Steve Brown*

## Zoom Board Minutes

In the absence of Executive Director, Steve Brown, Executive Director Elect, Skeff Flynn, called the meeting to order at 7:15 PM using Zoom teleconferencing. All Board members were present except Steve Brown.

Sky and Jessye Bartlett volunteered to host Bones Fest XXVI in New Hampshire. The motion was made, seconded and approved for Sky and Jessye to host BFXVII subject to approval of their Fest Budget.

The passing of Assistant Director, Bill Vits, leaves a vacancy on the Board and a vacant Assistant Director position. As provided by our Bylaws, a motion was made, seconded and approved appointing Tom Connolly to the Board. Since the election of Board Members for 2023 has passed, Tom will serve until the next General Membership meeting. A motion was made, seconded, and approved for Kenny Wolin to serve as Assistant Director until the next Membership meeting.

We discussed how to remember Bill Vits. His Celebration of Life service will be in the Spring of 2023, and we will announce it and likely some RBS members will want to attend. A memorial video possibly using Bill's Pop Up and Percussion Discussion videos with member contributions edited in is one idea.

We received a request for help from Martin O'Donoghue for the 2024 All Ireland Bones Competition. The organizing committee is planning an Online competition with the winners receiving a voucher for airfare and housing to attend the event. They are applying to the Ireland Arts Council for funding, and the more people who join this competition the more likely funding will be approved.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

The RBS Board fully supports their efforts and will assist in any way we can. The initial effort will be to poll members and let Martin know who is interested.

The RBS Facebook page was discussed and it is under utilized. Skeff volunteered to manage it.

Kenny noted that James Yoshizawa lead a rhythm bones workshop at the prestigious Percussion Society of America Conference.

Our RBS brochure was discussed and it should be featured with a separate page on our website. Steve Wixson will add the page (this task has been completed).

The meeting was adjourned at 8:06. Respectively Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXVII**, September 7-10, 2023, hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett, in Campton, New Hampshire. See preliminary information on Page 3.

## New Board Member Dean Robinson

I am a retired attorney living in Bristol, Rhode Island. Since I was young I have enjoyed listening to all types of music. I attended numerous concerts, served as the editor of the music column in my high school newspaper and worked at the campus radio station during my freshman year of college.

Until seven years ago, however, I could not play a musical instrument. My wife Barbara gave me music lessons as a Christmas present that year which led me to learn how to play the guitar. I then became interested in Irish music and took up the bodhran.

In 2018 I attended the Craiceann bodhran school on Inis Oirr. While there I sat in on a workshop presented by Cormac Byrne on how to play the spoons and rhythm bones. I remember being fascinated by the sound of rhythm bones and decided then to learn how to play them properly.

When I returned home I bought my first pair of rhythm bones from Steve Brown and began taking lessons from Kyle Forsthoff, a percussionist and rhythm bones player here in Rhode Island. Since I learned how to play in Ireland I typically play one handed, although I use the two handed style on occasion.

It was suggested that I join the Rhythm Bones Society which I soon did. In my time as a member I have made many friends who have provided me with assistance and information on rhythm bones playing. I'm looking forward to serving on the Board of Directors.

I also decided to participate in the All Ireland Bones Playing Competition in 2020. It was canceled that year due to the pandemic, but I participated in the virtual Competition in 2021 and in May of this year competed live in Abbeyfeale.

It was a wonderful experience and quite a thrill for me. I enjoyed the Competition itself meeting some of the great Irish rhythm bones players and sitting in at the nightly sessions in the pubs with the many talented musicians from the area. The people of Abbeyfeale were very welcoming and I hope to return there soon.

I am fortunate to live in an area with a flourishing Irish music scene. There are Irish music sessions held at various times and locations in Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts, and I currently play in two sessions every week. I also conduct rhythm bones workshops at the Blackstone River Theatre in Cumberland, Rhode Island on a regular basis.

In addition, I am a member of a band called Turas which features Irish music. Even though my primary instrument in the band is the bodhran, I make sure that I play rhythm bones at every show and concert. I have a collection of real and wooden rhythm bones made by Steve Brown that I use at the sessions and shows. *Dean Robinson*

## Sandor Slomovits Wheatland Festival Rhythm Bones Workshop

My daughter, Emily, and I played at the Wheatland Festival this past weekend. Gave two workshops for rhythm bones - one for kids and one for grownups. Wheatland provided free rough hewn rhythm bones to the kids and I sold mine for the grownups.

When we got to the Fest we asked where to find the rhythm bones for our workshop, and were directed to a small building in the kids area where they kept all the supplies for kids activities. No rhythm bones. Several phone calls later someone knew - said to look in the freezer in the kitchen. Sure enough, we found a cardboard box labeled "bones," filled with 75 pairs of wooden rhythm bones in the freezer. They were cold and fresh for our workshop! We had about fifteen people, and one dad and his fifth grader really got it and several others were on the cusp by the end of the workshop. Be Well, *San Slomovits*

## Gerard Arseneault Obituary

In the 2014, No. 4 RBP newsletter, Steve Wixson wrote, "Gerard is a warm, friendly man." This description captures the spirit and heart of Gerard. His smile was ever-present and inviting.

Gerard was born on September 9, 1927, and passed away on February 15, 2021.

He was from the Quebec City area of Canada. The RBS first met him at Bones Fest V, where he was hesitant to perform until he saw others perform and realized he was a good player.

Prior to the 2014 Grand Rapids Bones Fest, Gerard and I had corresponded about the possibility of his attending the Fest. At first, he did not think he could attend, but eventually he decided to attend. Once plans were final, Jerry and I had the pleasure of picking up Gerard at the airport.

Gerard's smile and friendly nature was infectious. Watching him play rhythm bones, and having the opportunity of being around him, was a gift.

Gerard's profile can be found at <https://rhythmbones.com/player-profiles/arseneault-gerard>. *Sharon Mescher*

## Bones Fest XXVII Preliminary Information

Hi Bones Family!!

We are so excited to be hosting Bones Fest XXVII, so please go ahead and mark your calendars for September 7-10, 2023!! For anyone who attended the 2018 Bones Fest we hosted in Lincoln, NH, please note that this will be an entirely different Bones Fest in regards to location and venues. It will still be centered in the lovely White Mountains of NH, only this time in Campton.

We chose September in part for the beautiful weather this time of year. Playing venues will include our own historic mill building, the local historical society building, and hopefully an old Popsicle stick factory turned into a restaurant/inn

Our hope is to offer a reasonably priced Fest that offers lots of opportunity for re-connecting, jamming and general merriment. We have access to two large farmhouses for accommodations, one of which will be designated for late-night jamming. There will be other accommodation options as well. We will be putting more details together these next few months, so please stay tuned!

Can't wait to see you! *Sky and Jessye*



## Grizzly Frank Metcalf

[Many of us first heard about Grizzly Frank Metcalf in Beth Lenz's Master Thesis titled *Bones in the United States* (see link to it in RBS Online Museum History Exhibit or Beth's Player Profile Page), or in the newsletter story on Benoit Bourque, Vol 7, No 4, Page 6 (see link on Benoit's Player Profile Page). Be sure and look at another version of this story with more rhythm bones details on Frank's Player Profile Page. To find a Player Profile Page, click Museum on our homepage, scroll down and click Player Profile Exhibit, then scroll down and click the player's name).]



In 1980, more than half my lifetime ago, I first heard of the rhythm bones and Percy Danforth from the wacky and wonderful musician Ken Bloom, who was one of the handful of touring professionals hired to help kick off Yellowknife's first Folk On the Rocks pan-Arctic folk festival. Ken was billeted on the floor of my little shack in in the city's Old Town, the original lakeside shanty town housing the gold miners and prostitutes who soon arrived after Yellowknife's founding in 1934. The shores upon which the town was built are those of Great Slave Lake, the tenth largest lake in the world and the deepest lake in North America. In 1976, four years before meeting Ken, I had arrived in Yellowknife from a Manhattan suburb to which I had moved after a nightmare family tragedy at my Green-

wich Village apartment. My academic background--two degrees from Harvard, with ongoing PhD studies at New York University--was all well and good, but another large slice of my background--remote taiga and tundra canoe trips in Canada's Northwest Territories--had won the upper hand in my emotional life, and so I eventually heeded the call of the wild.

That call had been sounding ever since an epic YMCA canoe trip in 1960 had taken me, as a teenager, 1200 miles down the Mackenzie River from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Ocean. But the call became a roar in the autumn of 1974 when Canada's

National Museum invited me to work as an archaeological field party leader for two summer seasons of cultural exploration by canoe in the headwaters region of two great rivers of the Far North, the Dubawnt and the Thelon. By that time I had already made two canoe trips down the Thelon, the first one from source to mouth in 1973, and the second one as leader and organizer of an educational trip sponsored by the Science Museum of Minnesota, my home state. I had written to the National Museum in Ottawa as a courtesy before the 1974 trip, and the leading Subarctic archaeologist had replied by asking me to do an archaeological survey of the Upper Thelon. Naturally I was

thrilled and honoured by the request, so I replied saying yes, but I know nothing about field archaeology. Ottawa then invited me to come study and learn at the National Museum. That sealed the deal, and I was hooked. The 1974 Science Museum of Minnesota canoe trip was successful archaeologically; we did it by the book, repatriating all the many artifacts to Ottawa after a display in Minnesota; and then came the fateful invitation to lead field parties for the Queen during the next two field seasons. After those two mind-blowing summers of exploration back and forth across the Arctic treeline, something had to give. In the end it was goodbye to English Literature, my family, and my complicated New York decade after Harvard; and hello to Yellowknife, Old Town, skid shacks, Ken Bloom, and the bones.

As a colourful aside, there's a photo on my website of me setting off on portage, having just flipped a canoe onto my

shoulders. My party of two was leaving Firedrake Lake, in the Dubawnt headwaters, to portage north across the treeline to the Thelon headwaters. What we had no clue about at that time was the fact that a Dene hunting party was setting out on Firedrake to hunt and kill me because they'd become crazily convinced that I was Bigfoot. I could scarcely believe it myself, later on, but my copy of a 1988 Smithsonian Institution book titled "The Transformation of Bigfoot" makes the case. My huge footprints wandering apparently aimlessly through sandy blowouts, with the odd hole dug here and there: very suspicious! I've often been gently teased about my size 15-6E feet, but this was really quite over the top.

The bones had serious company in my musical life. My brother was a brilliant New Orleans and Dixieland jazz cornet player and bandleader before his tragic death in 1959 at age nineteen. I was seventeen at the time, and was steeped in traditional jazz and awed by my brother while fooling around on various small stringed instruments and the white plastic flutophone. It was a rather odd childhood in that I began flying light aircraft at age 14 and soloed at sixteen, the same year that I could legally drive a car. At age 15 I was flunking Latin, which greatly vexed my mother who was a Classicist. She made a deal that if I passed Latin, she would take me to Europe to follow Julius Caesar's battle campaigns, guided by his Gallic Commentary in its original Latin. By a miracle I did pass, and my life of European travel began, culminating in my long walks across Spain and France with my wife Mary starting 44 years later. Another benefit of the trip was that it helped motivate me to become my school's best Latin student and to get into Harvard. But the major benefit of passing Latin was buying my first-ever harmonica in Switzerland, and learning how to play it during the endless hours in a rented car.

From its lowly public start with bones, jaw, and spoons in my festival act, the harmonica finally became my supreme instrument, as a good listen to the Headbenders blowing the doors off of Ragtime Annie on the Three String Night video, from about minute 50 to 58, will confirm. After that tune, the video has some nice band shots of the wild piano player, the

demonic fiddler, and the steam-engine harmonica player driving the hypnotic tune Dancing Bear toward the end of the evening about a dozen minutes later. The video's title is accurate: the fiddler broke three strings that night. We wore headbands to play our dances because otherwise we were soaked and couldn't see. The harps took me beyond the bones, and a good look into the fire pit will show you why.

A small banjo ukulele was one of my boyhood instruments, but I don't recall when I first owned a full-sized banjo. I was home in St. Paul on holidays from my Connecticut boarding school when a friend told me about a really cool banjo solo in the Kingston Trio's song about Charlie on the MTA. I wanted to learn how to play it, but that solo was far beyond my slender banjo skills. So I wrote to Pete Seeger, asking him how Dave Guard learned how to play the banjo. When I think of it now, all I can say is what a flaming little jerk I was. But Pete, bless his heart, graciously replied on the back of one of his family's homemade New Years cards, saying that Dave G "learned how to play out of this same book, enclosed." I was blown away that Seeger sent me his famously motivating book, "How to Play the 5-string Banjo." The New Years cards arrived until I graduated from South Kent School.

But a sharper reply came back when I wrote to ask Pete if he happened to know of any banjo players in my area of Connecticut. Pete's tart reply (see my website) was a little unfair because I was almost literally locked into a very small, Spartan school isolated on a rural hillside with strict rules and punishments. Students could have no food, money, or permission to leave the school grounds except for walks on Sunday after compulsory Episcopal chapel. I spent five long years there before eagerly arriving in the fleshpots of Harvard in the autumn of 1961 during the dawn of the great folk music revival. As an avid banjo player I quickly got a banjo teaching job across the street from the Harvard Yard. The iconic Club 47 folk coffeehouse was only a few short blocks away. There were girls. I could drink. I was in heaven.

Skipping forward five years to the summer of 1966, I entered the Appala-

chian Volunteer program of VISTA, the domestic Peace Corps as it was thought of in those days. I chose Wolfe County, Kentucky, for my summer of field work because it was said to be the poorest county in the USA. I had a Masters degree by then, and I could easily see that the program, although well-intentioned, was completely daft in that it expected the Volunteers, who were college kids, suddenly to act as "community organizers" parachuted into the ancient hills and hollers of Appalachia as a sort of "summer abroad." To this day I hate the sight of a twerp with a clipboard. I knew of a famous singer and banjo player, Clarence Ashley, who lived in Mountain City, not too far from the AV training base at the university in Johnson City, Tennessee. So I visited him, got to know him a bit, and drove him down to Johnson to give a concert for my fellow Volunteers, who were supposed to be steeping themselves in Appalachian culture. The concert was great, and my fellow Volunteers loved it. But the next day the spit hit the fan for me, due to the fact that I had taken the initiative to do something constructive. The Dear Leaders didn't know Clarence Ashley from Sweet Fanny Adam. I had rattled their clipboards, and they were distraught.

The training then shifted to an abandoned coal camp in Breathitt County, Kentucky, where things went much better. The Volunteers were trained how to meet and be accepted by all the families in their assigned areas, however remote and forbidding the homes and "hillbilly" mannerisms seemed to be. This training was spot-on correct, and someday I'll write about this most colourful and interesting adventure. But for our purpose here, what I took from my summer in Bloody Creek was a feeling of deep respect for the folks I got to know, however different from me they looked or sounded. I promised to return for Christmas, and when I did, folks came from miles around to hang out and say hello. There wasn't much music in my community, but the culture underlying the Appalachian fiddle and banjo tunes that I loved was thick in the air. I remained so attached to Appalachia that for the honeymoon of my first marriage, in 1969, I brought my wife down to Southwest Virginia to meet the

famous old banjo player, Wade Ward, on Peachbottom Creek near Galax. She was a collector of old banjos, and had dated a member of the New Lost City Ramblers, so she enjoyed the trip. My attitude in Bloody Creek served me well later on among First Nations people in the Northwest Territories. And when I talk about clawhammer banjo rhythms on the bones, you can see why the subject has a special resonance for me. My legacy as a skilled clawhammer player is the "Frank and Dave, Banjo, Fiddle, Mandolin" entry on my website. The instruments track very closely on a wide range of classic Old Time tunes, but when you hear a slide, a chuck, or a bell-like tone, that's the banjo.

Now let's get down to the specifics of the bones-playing style that I developed from 1980 to 1982 in Yellowknife. So far as I could tell, it was a new style of play, and that in itself was exciting. It fulfilled my lust for musical adventure, which the bones later gave me in spades on the folk festival circuit until a more sustainable adventure opened by playing harmonica in contra dance bands. But all during my dance band years I was still performing with the bones in my contract "street entertainment" act with Cameron Stewart. A look at our pro photoshoot images on my website will give you a sense of our mischief, as well as a good look at the hand positions of my playing style.

I had my own style, my own act, and I was a trouper and showman with the bones for a couple of decades. But one thing was always a mystery to me. Since the bones so obviously had four clicking positions, why did even my friend and mentor, Percy Danforth, only know about three of them?

This question may have some good answers, but at this point I've moved on to the fiddle, and I'm thrilled by the great things that modern bones-players can do. What I created for myself in my skid shack near Ragged-Ass Road in a gold mining town on the shores of a giant lake at forty below zero was just what it was and nothing more. If others enjoy my story, and care to check out my careful study of the bones-playing possibilities in my style of play, that would be great. One final, obvious point is that in order to be a good bones-player, try to be good at playing other instruments too. It's all

just music, and if you're a musician, the results will flow from any instruments you play with intention. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of any help or inspiration.

For some reason I still get a kick out of the manner and style of my final leave-taking from Yellowknife in the summer of 1985. I had flown across the North Arm of Great Slave to White-beach Point to poke around a spectacular sequence of raised beach lines caused by isostatic rebound from the weight of the glacial ice. As usual, the pilot was no help while I unloaded my gear up past my waist in a mixture of freezing water and ice cubes. The deal was that he would return the day before I was due to begin my trip from Vancouver to Rome with Les Danseurs. That day came, a bush plane appeared, but then it flew away again because a strong wind from the south had blown the big lake's ice floes tightly against the shore. Oh oh. Fingers crossed they remembered the chopper. A long, nervous wait, eyes on my wristwatch, ears in the sky. At last came the chopper sound, an easy landing in a convenient blowout, a quick getaway, and I was finally on the road to Rome. The warm and racy remarks by my travel companions in the margins of the Danseurs' group portrait, on my website, show that the trip was truly special. Elsewhere I've written about how a tussle over the bones was how I met Mary. She and the Danseurs were the best of all of the life-changing adventures given to me by the mere table scraps which Ken Bloom and Percy Danforth had encouraged me to play nearly half a century ago.

If the reader is curious about my playing style, my website at [frankmetcalf.com](http://frankmetcalf.com) is the place to look. Along with my RBS Player Profile, which is linked on my site, there are two or three other essential documents to read, one video to watch, and, for the clearest sound of the bones, the audio of a festival performance to listen to. That's all, and it's not a whole lot.

1) The short video is titled with the band name, *Tempus Fugit*, followed by "Grizzly Frank Dance and Bones Demo (Minute 7 to 16)." It was filmed very low-tech at a community hall on Saltspring Island in 1991. The intermis-

sion bones and spoons cameo follows some step dancing by my talented bandmates Cameron Stewart, the caller, and Helga Sermat, the fiddler. I did my bit in a hurry because the dance was due to begin again, and it was a band gig, not a solo act. But I do play the bones with my basic four-beat Grizzly roll interspersed with the Grizzly shuffle and the odd taps and ruffs. The hall is echoing, folks are laughing, and I'm hamming it up and yelling, so the beats are somewhat obscured. Then when I play the wooden spoons together with the bones, all clarity vanishes, but it's a lot of fun. At least you can see the hand movements and the potential velocity of the four-beat roll.

The brief remainder of the video is a tribute to my dear friend and duo partner,



Grizzly Frank Metcalf and Cameron Stewart

Cameron Stewart, whose life was far too short. There are nice shots of the band playing some sweet tunes until Cam leads a grand march which is visually interesting and even beautiful in its humble way. The video concludes with a pan across the now-empty musicians' chairs until it dives down into my harmonica box and that's all.

2) The audio is my whole act at Folk On the Rocks, Yellowknife, in 1983. Some of it is plagued by mic trouble, and at one point the presenter, Cree Elder Winston Wuttunee, backs in so I can bounce the wooden spoons between his backside and mine, while at a later point he creeps up with a big hook and drags me offstage while the audience howls. It's all quite raw and crazy, not polished

at all in those early days, especially in terms of my verbal patter and the harmonica. But you can hear the bones quite well during the initial bones demo, and toward the end there's a useful demo of the electric moose ribs.

The second half of the full audio file consists of three radio pieces: first a story about NBC's Real People filming me, and then two good CBC radio interviews, Basic Black and As It Happens, as I recall. My more scholarly side peeps out from behind the clouds of gonzo showmanship.

3) "Learning the Hand-Dance" is the best and most readable brief description of my bones techniques and journey. It was written for the Folk on the Rocks festival guidebook in 1982. An advertisement begins with a massive "GET LOST" so it's easy to find on my website :) The basic licks are condensed into the separate "Lick Chart" which I handed out to participants in my bones workshops.

4) "Frank's long letter to Percy Danforth" of 1982. This is the nitty-gritty Bible of my bones-playing style. At 26 pages long, it contains lots of my own invented bones tablature, and it's the real deal. Plenty of training drills to be tried out, including the 29-beat Deadhand Roll. There's even a cheery weather report at the conclusion, if 50 below zero can ever be truly cheery. My style, as portrayed here, soon evolved toward greater simplicity as the reality of stage performing took hold. Playing bones and harmonica together dumbs down both instruments; adding spoons or moose jaw to the mix dumbs it all down still farther, but adds a spectacle factor, the "Gosh, Mabel" response. The sight of moose-tooth fragments flying across the stage tends to excite an audience. At any rate, my letter to Percy Danforth should become a museum piece because it may be unique in the bones annals for being a sustained description, with examples in tablature, of all the technical possibilities that a single overcooked mind can dream up in the dark of an Arctic night. *Frank Metcalf* [frank.moosebones@gmail.com](mailto:frank.moosebones@gmail.com) [frankmetcalf.com](http://frankmetcalf.com)

[Editor's Note: In addition to developing four beat rhythms, Frank, for a time in his life, is noteworthy for being one of a few professional rhythm bones players, e.g. Ted Goon and Percy Danforth.]

(Continued From Page 1)



(see photograph above), but you can see his skills in a drum solo on a Concusions video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVPsqyz9p\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVPsqyz9p_U) (solo starts at 1:15).

Bill met Percy Danforth in a Master's Class at the University of Michigan. Percy played with their ragtime ensemble and gave all the players a lesson on the rhythm bones. Bill had never seen or heard of rhythm bones, but was very interested and bought two pair! His rhythm bones playing improved slowly, and it took a couple years before he learned to relax and get both hands under control.

Opportunities to perform with rhythm bones with the orchestra have included Mahler's 5th Symphony. In ragtime numbers, like Xylophonia, Bill would often play the breaks on rhythm bones. He also performed Morton Gould's Tap Dance Concerto using rhythm bones instead of tap shoes. All the tap rhythms are written out, and he embellished many sections using his best rhythm bones hot licks. There is a video of Bill warming up for a symphony performance at <https://rhythm-bones.org/video/Demo-VitsBonesBackstage.mp4>

The Grand Rapids Symphony did a pops weekend with Natalie MacMaster, fiddler and step dancer, and she invited him to play with her. Natalie remembers, "Bill Vits was a dandy!! It's been so many years, but his smile brings me back to a memory in my life when I met a very pleasant and welcoming human being with a shared interest in traditional percussion. Bill, you were vibrant and I will always remember my brief encounter with your generous spirit. Thanks for the tunes. Rest In Peace."

Member Sandor Slomovits and his brother, Laz, performing as the duo Gemini, played a concert for children and families with the Grand Rapids Symphony. Sandor remembered what it was like to share the stage with fellow

RBS member and rhythm bones player extraordinaire, Bill Vits.

On this occasion, they added a tune, and invited Bill out from the back of the orchestra where he usually stands, surrounded by his wide array of percussion instruments. Sandor and Bill played a rhythm bones duet with Laz accompanying on fiddle, and the two snapped, rattled and rolled the bones, traded phrases back and forth, piannissimoed, fortissimoed, and the audience loved it all rewarded them with a huge ovation.

Bill discovered the Rhythm Bones Society while searching the Internet, and joined in late 1999. He was elected to the Board of Directors in 2010 and within a year became Assistant Director. He attended 14 Bones Fests performing and leading workshops. He and wife, Stacey, hosted Bones Fest XVIII which was special in that it honored Legend Percy Danforth who taught Bill how to play. There is a link to Bone Fest XVIII Highlights on Bill's Player Profile Page.

Bill had a degree in music education, and Board Member, Dennis Riedesel, with an educator background has these thoughts.

"It is rare to observe a person like Bill Vits who probably was a percussion prodigy but also had the knowledge to teach many various percussive skills to others. As I told my brother-in-law, "You might be a very, very good welder but it is not a given that you can teach welding to others." I watched Bill over the years impart his skill of playing the rhythm bones to many beginner rhythm bones players as well as his percussive methodology of rhythm bones playing to intermediate and advanced rhythm bones players. In each presentation, he chose a teaching technique that was a good fit to the setting and playing level of his audience.

"Take a look at Bill's videos where the audience includes children. Bill had the children actively engaged which is a mainstay in the learning process. He either had an innate teaching ability or had learned well from his university classes in "Music Education."

Here are links to his children videos, and Bill always included rhythm bones in his teaching. The first is an article at <https://www.schoolnewsnetwork.org/2019/11/22/third-graders-learn-to->

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW-Gzz7JFHu8>. Last is a video made for 3rd grade students at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNP19gT9F-o>.

Board Member, Kenny Wolin, percussionist with the President's Own Marine Band, noted, "Bill was a prolific soloist on the xylophone, and his passion for the rhythm bones gave him a rare opportunity to be the first and only musician to perform Morton Gould's Tap Dance Concerto on rhythm bones.

"Bill studied under legendary performer Charlie Owens who was the mallet soloist with "The President's Own" Marine Band and later the Principal Percussionist with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

"Bill's unique style of rhythm bones playing came from his formal percussion training by holding the bones with a timpani French-grip technique. This allowed him to play many snare drum rudiments, especially single-stroke rolls and paradiddle variations, at an amazingly effortless speed. He was an incredible innovator and creative soul."

One of Bill's Bones Fest Workshops was titled "Bones and Drum Kit," and he demonstrated how to incorporate rhythm bones into the drum kit using many drum rudiments such as a par-a-diddle. He demonstrated using a brush in one hand and rhythm bones in the other hand. He stressed the importance of keeping a steady pulse, and noted you can do most anything on top of that. He talked about when to play and when to sit out. He encourage getting out of your comfort zone and experimenting. There is also a bit of his personal experience as a musician. The workshop video is at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taxOrC\\_VkQ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taxOrC_VkQ0).

Bill noted, "I often teach my percussion students rhythm bones to help their ambidexterity."

Bill talked about his 'Rhythmic Vocabulary' which was stored in his brain, and put there with lots of practice and repetition. All Bill had to do was think it and his hands would do it.

The Joy Express Club was a band on bicycles with a piano on a bike trailer, and when they were in Ann Arbor, Bill would ride with them and accompany



songs with his rhythm bones.

Executive Director Skeffington Flynn said this, “Bill was a great encourager. A teacher who not only imparted concepts and techniques, but a love of learning for its own sake. Almost certainly the best percussionist in any room he was in, he always put music and community first. He knew just how to support the groove and the people around him. His curiosity, rhythmic sensibility, and his smile were infectious. As Carsie Blanton said in her tribute to John Prine, ‘Tonight in heaven it’s a happier place.’ Rattle in Peace Bill.”

Board Member Tom Connolly said it this way, “I thought Bill’s playing was mesmerizing. His bones were alive and creating rhythms I could only dream of making. He also had an air about him when playing that I only ever saw in three other people - elite musicians that I was lucky enough to see performing live - Arty McGlynn, Andrea Boccelli and Leonard Cohen. And best of all, though I am sure he knew how good he was, he did not flaunt his genius. He tried to teach us every chance he got.”

His wife, Stacey, tells this story. “Up until about a week before Bill passed he would go out to their porch, find a place with sunlight, and play his rhythm bones. After that he was pretty knocked out with drugs, but two days before he passed he asked to play with his ‘toys.’ Our son, Tabor, placed rhythm bones in his right hand and he played them good as always as he did when Tabor put rhythm bones in his other hand.” An amazing love of our musical instrument. *The Board of Directors*



Grizzly Frank Metcalf playing harmonica, rhythm bones and jawbone.  
See story on Page 4

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 25, No. 1 2023

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## Executive Director's Column

Hello good people! I am very excited to post my first Executive Director's column!

We are at something of a crossroads. Personally, I would like feedback on how to guide the RBS. How many of you play Irish music? How many of you play Old time? How many of you just play to whatever is on? Ragtime? Klezmer? Something else? I would be interested to find out, and we may put up a survey sometime soon. Please understand that you, the person reading this, shape what we do as the Rhythm Bones Society. In lieu of a survey (which again, may be forthcoming) feel free to send us your thoughts via the "Contact Us" page on our website.

It has been a long time since we have been able to meet in person, at least in the way we are accustomed. We had a one day in-person Bones Fest this past year. Kenny and Teri Wolin were fabulous hosts, and a good time was had by all! This year we

can look forward to a FULL ON BONES FEST in New Hampshire!!! We're talking Thursday evening to Sunday morning! Many thanks to Sky and Jessye for putting this together. It looks like an amazing program and registration is now open and can be found on our website.

The All Ireland Bones Competition is just around the corner and I am very much looking forward to seeing fellow RBS Board Member Dean Robinson over in Abbeyfeale. It should be noted that this is the 20th anniversary of former Executive Director, Steve Brown, winning his first All Ireland Bones Competition!

The Fleadh by the Feale Committee is exploring a new approach to engaging international participation in the All Ireland Bones Competition. They are considering holding a virtual competition (Continued on Page 2)

## Junior Davey

[Junior Davey is a percussion legend, a five times All Ireland Bodhrán champion and two time All Ireland bone playing champion. He is a left-handed bones player with a sensitive yet driving style.

Here is Junior's story in his own words on how he discovered the bones. At the end of the article is a short history of his deep family musical tradition. *Tom Connolly*]

My journey in relation to the Bones started back in 1988 when a friend of mine Paul Murray gave me a set of ebony ones. Paul couldn't work them and I really didn't know what they were at that time. The following year I heard Johnny (Ringo) McDonagh playing the Bodhrán/Bones with his band Arcady and I was hooked in respect of both instruments.

I felt at the time it was mandatory to learn both so I did emulating Johnny's approach on both. There was some beautiful Bones playing on the Star Spangled Molly album by De Danann especially with the song My Irish Molly so I listened to this regularly to perfect the phrasing.

The Bones I play today are made from the shin of a cow. They have a lovely clear resonance and in my humble opinion are the best. When teaching them I always emphasise the importance of the grip as this is the secret to Bones playing perfection. My favour-

ite rhythm is the reel where I like to experiment with pitch changes and syncopation. My least favourite rhythm is the jig as I have my own approach but prefer the West Limerick style that my good friend David Murphy uses. In respect of this it's a work in progress Watch this space!!

For a complete beginner to the Bones I would suggest a lot of patience and perseverance as it's not a quick fix by any (Continued on Page 3)



## Editorial

I originally released this issue with five pages, but with contributions from Dean Robinson, Skeff Flynn, and Michael Baxter, it is now the normal 8 pages. I got behind working on a project for my Barbershop Chorus Christmas Benefit Show followed by my grandkids giving me a Portuguese Water Dog for Christmas. They originally planned on an older dog that would be docile, but this one showed up in the Rescue Center and they got it. Traits include high intelligence and need for exercise both of which take my time if I am going to have a well behaved dog. But I'm not really complaining as she has a great personality.

Our Executive Director, Skeffington Flynn, writes his first Editorial starting on Page 1. Recently he visited his family in Houston and my house being about half way, I invited him to spend the night. We talked about many rhythm bones subjects including online instruction. He remembered a conversation with Kate Barfield at the In-Person Bones Fest XXVI on this subject, and had the idea that RBS could make online instruction a part of our website introducing prospective students to teachers. I contacted Kate about writing an article about her recent experience, and it appears in this issue. The Board will discuss this and if you have thoughts on the subject send me an email via our 'Contact Us' page.

On his return trip, he arrived about midnight where the outside temperature was about 65 degrees, and we sat on my deck and continued the previous conversation while cotton candy like clouds floated by occasionally blotting out the near full moon. Nice visit.

Our new Board Member, Tom Connolly, invited Junior Davey to write a profile that starts on page 1. Tom, I am sure, will make sure that Irish rhythm bones players continue to be well represented in our newsletters. The profile begins on Page 1.

## Letter to the Editor

I just wanted to give a short report on my son, Jeremy Brown, the happiest rhythm bones player. Jeremy has been home now for over six months, and the

return to home has been very good for him. He's had a few medical problems over the months, including urinary tract infections, Noreau virus, and one bout of aspiration pneumonia. Generally he's doing really well, and we are so thankful for all the help and support we get. With the good weather, we have taken Jeremy out several times and he's especially happy when he plays rhythm bones and we put on music outside. His CNA Rebecca Stone is helping him play rhythm bones. Below is a picture of Jeremy out in our driveway playing rhythm bones with a big smile. Thank you to everyone who has given support and is concerned about him. *Steve Brown*



### (Exec Director Continued From Page 1)

for international participants at a suitable time before the annual Fleadh, which takes place over the May Bank Holiday weekend. They are applying for funding from the Irish Arts Council with the intention of providing the winner (or possibly winners) with some sort of travel voucher to help cover the costs of going to Abbeyfeale to participate in the in-person competition. To aid in their application, they have asked the Rhythm Bones Society to survey our members to get a sense of what level of interest exists. Please take a moment to complete a brief survey, which can be found on our home page.

In this newsletter, Kate Bartlett shares her experiences of online bones instruction. This seems delightful to me and joins well with my own experience of learning to play the bones off of YouTube videos. What are your thoughts on online

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

bones instruction? Would you be willing to help others learn our precious skill? Your RBS board members have talked about putting together an online teaching resource. We envision making a list of teachers available. Are you interested? What would you like this to look like?

Again, you, dear reader, have the ability to shape what the RBS does. Please feel free to send comments through the "Contact Us" section of our website.

I genuinely look forward to seeing as many of you as can make it in New Hampshire this September. Until then, may your bones be with you, and rattle on!

Your friendly neighborhood rhythm bones player, *Skeff*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXVIII**, September 7-10, 2023, hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett, in Campton, New Hampshire. See registration information on Page 4.

## **(Junior - Continued From Page 1)**

means.

To conclude the nicest compliment I got about my Bones playing was it resembled Michael Flatley's dancing which will do me anytime."

Below is a lovely family musical history from the booklet of one of Junior's CDs "A Sound Skin"

Junior Davey is a wonderful musician, deeply rooted in the musical tradition of south Sligo. Not only is he a compelling performer and a truly exciting bodhran player, he is also an inspirational and experienced teacher. Junior is very fortunate to be part of the Coleman country, which is the area of south Sligo, north Roscommon and north-east Mayo, which contains the village Killavil, close to which legendary fiddler Michael Coleman ( 1891-1946 ) was born. The area has a strong and rich tradition in music for more than 150 years.

The musical capital in south Sligo is the village Gurteen. Junior Davey was born in Clooneigh, a townland of Gurteen, on the 12th of October 1966. Junior is the son of Annie and Andrew Davey. Clooneigh has been the native soil for the Davey's for generations. Junior's grandparents on his father's side, Dominic and Margaret Davey, settled in Clooneigh and built the first of the three Davey-farmhouses there. Dominic was a fiddle player and his wife Margaret played the accordion. Their home was a great meeting place for music and dance in the locality.

As a young man Dominic had worked as a cook in America and got access to a lot of the recordings of Michael Coleman, which he brought back to Clooneigh together with a gramophone. Junior's family on his mother's side was also steeped in music. Many of them were great lilters and avid followers of the music. Juniors' uncle, Ned Keane from Culfadda, was a recognised handstriker in the local area. Handstriking is the old hand style bodhran playing, which is very common and distinctive in south Sligo. The strongest musical influence on Junior has obviously been his father Andrew, who was an authority in the Sligo fiddle playing.

Andy had a lifelong association with local fiddlers like Joe and Sonny Duffy and Fred Finn. He is also associated

with Sligo-flautists like Peter Horan, Harry McGowan and especially Seamus Tansey. Tansey used to be the local postman when Junior was a baby. Every day after having delivered the mail, Seamus and Andy played a few tunes in the kitchen, so Junior was exposed to music at a very early age.

[Steve Brown notes, At the heart of Junior Davey's contribution to traditional Irish music, is his teaching, and his amazing ability to communicate to the youth. In the years he has been teaching he has taught multiple all Irish champions, that he was the primary instructor. And at the heart of his teaching, is the human being that he is. His ability to zero in and connect with his students is without equal.

He has a huge heart! I remember the day that my friend, Raymond Henry, and I spent being ferried around Gurteen to a number of primary schools and the reception Junior was given at each one. He's truly a hero! And make no mistake about it, he is a true champion of rhythm bones, through his work, many children, not only have learned rhythm bones, but excelled. Fair play to you Junior!

Junior has a number of recordings available, most of which feature him on bodhran, but also features rhythm bones on a number of tunes. He has two solo recordings, Skin and Bow, and Sound Skin. He also produced a tribute to his father., Andrew Davie, Sligo, fiddle, master. In addition, he provided support on to Caramel Gunning CDs, and a solo recording by Luke Daniels. Junior was also part of the group called Mischneach, which means courage in Irish. There are also many YouTube videos featuring Junior on both bodhran and rhythm bones.]

## **My Experience With Rhythm Bones Instruction Via Zoom**

During the Pandemic, I had the opportunity to receive remote instruction in the Rhythm Bones with two masters – James Yoshizawa (located in Los Angeles, CA) and Rowan Corbett (located in College Park, MD). We worked exclusively through Zoom. Teaching Rhythm Bones is often a hands-on experience – so I was surprised how much I gained from my

remote Zoom lessons.

I am a mid-level Bones player with no formal musical training. I wanted Bones lessons to improve my skills and improve my ability to play with others. I sought lessons that were not too expensive – and both of my teachers offered reasonable rates. However, I am not computer savvy. My response to any Zoom glitches was "uh oh!" Luckily, both of my teachers were able to walk me through computer access and sound problems.

My Teachers: Rowan Corbett and James Yoshizawa.

Rowan Corbett is the current bones player for the Carolina Chocolate Drops – he is a master of the craft. Rowan is delightfully practical – he looks at how you are holding the Bones and how you execute moves, to give you helpful feedback to improve your game. Prior to the Pandemic, he sat across a table – reaching out to correct me. Once we were meeting through Zoom, he would have me hold up my hand so that he could watch specific moves via the computer screen and provide practical advice. This worked surprisingly well – largely due to Rowan's ability to diagnose problems. In the lesson, he would set up music and then suggest that I play – so he could see how I might approach a song. Then I would ask him to do the same – it was always great to see what he would do with the same song. Rowan also gave me wonderful tips on how to incorporate the Bones into jam sessions and how to approach solos. He helped me through multiple hurdles with my playing – always focused on the most practical outcome. I highly recommend Rowan – especially for someone who may be struggling with specific limitations. Rowan suggests that anyone who is interested in lessons to contact his email address at: rowancorbett@gmail.com

James Yoshizawa is a multiple winner of the All Ireland Bones Competition, classically-trained musician and Bones master. I saw James playing in the link above – I was impressed with the fluid ways he bounced off his right and left hand, so I contacted him. Since we are located on different coasts, remote lessons were the only option. My original goal with James was to learn hand inde-

**(Continued on Page 6)**



## Baxter's Ensemble Project 2023

My first RBS Ensemble project was *Turkey in the Straw* in 2022, and it was so much fun I wanted to make it a yearly gig. The next project was about six months in the making. Near the end of 2022, I had the idea of recording live music for the second annual RBS Ensemble video, instead of licensing a royalty-free music track. In addition to being a member of the Rhythm Bones Society, I'm also a member of the Phoenix Old Time Music Society. The group has been around for over twenty years, hosting jams and other public events, promoting old time traditional music from the US, Canada and Europe. It's the type of music that lends itself to rhythm bones.

I approached "Irish" Mike McClure, the organizer and jam master of the Society, who happens to play rhythm bones guitar, bodhran, Irish whistle, and who co-founded the group over twenty years ago. He presented the idea to the group and we ended up with nineteen musicians at our first Barn Jam in January 2023. This went far beyond my expectations, as I would have been happy if five musicians had shown up. The range of instruments was wonderful. We had five fiddlers, three mandolin players, two

hammered dulcimers, two guitarists, a banjo, accordion, Irish whistle, harmonica, bodhran, mountain dulcimer, citra, bouzouki, and upright bass. It was a great day, the weather was perfect, and the musicians really put their hearts into the jam. They played for several hours and even entertained our neighbors.

The hardest part for me was not being able to jam with them, since somebody had to film the whole thing. I have to thank my family or the extra camera phone recordings, which I used in the final production. Over the next several months we did a few small sessions with guest musicians, like "Banjo" Tom Jablinske from Arizona City, whose ancestry dates back to Krackow, Poland. Of course, he was charmed to see Annika in the video. She's had the honor of leading off the videos both times, with her stellar musicianship. The hardest part was trimming down the hours of recordings, into a musical medley for the Rhythm Bones Players. Scott Miller, Skeff and I discussed the idea of changing out the musical genre each year, to keep it interesting. Somehow that went on to become a medley, which includes *Cold Frosty Morning*, *John Ryan's Polka*, *Lil' Liza Jane*, *Turkey in the Straw*, and *Cripple Creek*...a nice mix of Irish, Old Time, and Bluegrass Music.

After sending off the final set list, each

Rhythm Bones Player recorded themselves playing to the music using headphones. What I requested was isolated bones playing, for a clean recording that could be synced with the music tracks. Brad Dutz went all out with two recordings at his Percussion Ranch Barn, and he steals the show by hitting everything in sight. There's Scott Miller grooving with four bones in each hand and Barry "Bones" Patton sounding like a drum core with his signature lightning-fast style. At one point Steve Litos is playing like a champ with the longest ribs I've seen, while Annika executes absolute rhythmic precision. Skeff is always on point, with his unique hand grip and ultra-tight playing. Steve Brown (who got to play with The Chieftains!) brings his energy and massive talent every time. Finally, there's Tom Connolly rolling his custom cut bones with a smile on his face...and lastly me, just trying to keep up but having a blast. After many hours of synchronizing and editing, the video is done and the response is tremendous. My favorite part of these videos is bringing together talented people from around the world. I'm truly honored to be involved. Mike

Check out the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=z2AgnTnR4mw>.



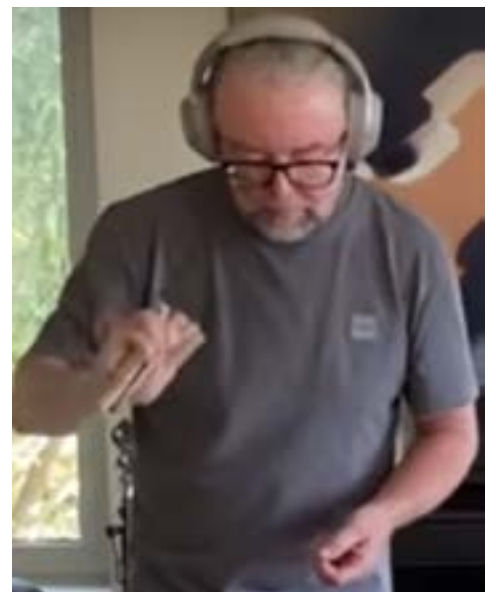




Michael Baxter



Steve Brown



Tom Connolly



Brad Dutz



Skeff Flynn



Steve Litos



Annika Mikolajko-Osman



Scott Miller



Barry Patton

### (Continued From Pate 3)

pendence – a skill that I am still working on. This goal expanded to consider how I might play the Bones with multiple types of music – like Ragtime. James might offer a phrase from Ragtime, then we would consider how to use the Bones to best highlight what I heard. James’ advice reflected his considerable musical training which helped me think about how to use the Bones for both percussion and augmenting the melody. He was patient with my lack of musical training – James could breakdown complicated musical concepts into bite-size pieces that I could use. Folks with professional training will enjoy dipping into James’ serious musical knowledge – but even a neophyte (like me) will benefit greatly from his astute observations. To get in touch with him, try this link: <http://www.jamesyoshizawa.com/>

#### Pros and Cons:

No surprise, the biggest problem with Zoom is sound lag. When you play something for a remote listener, s/he will hear a gap between the music and one’s playing. Both of my teachers were skilled at compensating for this lag – including using their imagination to “hear” my playing in real time. But it helps to be aware of this ongoing problem.

The greatest benefit with remote learning is the ability to have lessons with people who live far way. You can access the skills of teachers who would otherwise be unavailable. This is a huge boon for a Bones student – you are learning an obscure skill, so multiple perspectives are very helpful. Both Rowan and James were able to diagnose problems with my playing – even if they only had the images/sounds via a computer. Each of them made Zoom lessons a pleasant and inspiring process at a reasonable cost. I highly recommend both teachers and wish you great success if you decide to pursue their expertise. *Kate Barfield*

Rowan Corbett:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLazWX8uxPU>

James Yoshizawa:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLo2wmkzcoA>

## Interview with David Murphy

David Murphy, bones player from Ballaugh South, Abbeyfeale, Ireland, who has won the All Ireland Bones Competition several times, recently agreed to be interviewed for our newsletter. See his photograph on Page 8.

1. Tell us a little about growing up in Abbeyfeale.

I was born in Grogeen a townland in the parish of Abbeyfeale. I was the youngest of 4 with 3 older sisters (Mary, Noeleen and Joan). We moved to another townland in Abbeyfeale called Ballaugh South where my parents ran our farm so I grew up in a rural back ground. It was an idyllic childhood surrounded by family and friends. The farm is still a growing concern today as I took over the farm when I was a teenager. We grew up surrounded by Irish music, song and dance, influenced by my mother Noreen as my father passed away when we were all young.

2. How did you become interested in the bones?

We were so lucky to be neighbours with the great Patrick ‘Sport’ Murphy who is renowned for his unique style of bone playing, and I happened to be listening to him from a young age which sparked my interest in bone playing. Patrick was a great neighbour. I was lucky enough to become a good friend of his and we spent many a good night playing together. He generously gave his time playing at our house for parties and gatherings and very kindly spent time passing on his style to me.

3. Do you play any other musical instruments?

I love listening to all musical instruments but I am more into percussion.

4. What musical instrument (or instruments) do you most enjoy playing along with on bones, and why?

I like playing along with all instruments. My good friend Sean Hartnett and his brother Dave both play the accordion and we have been playing together since we were children, so I suppose the accordion would be my favourite.

5. Can you tell us about Paddy “Sport” Murphy? For many of us in the US, we don’t have access to another bones player

in our town. I can tell just from the pictures in the walls of pubs in Abbeyfeale that he was something of a local celebrity. What was his impact on your playing?

Patrick ‘Sport’ Murphy was an amazing character and oozed with confidence when he played the bones. Patrick loved to socialise and enjoyed a few pints of Guinness. He never left home without his bones and at the first hint of a tune he would always join in. Patrick also played the harmonica and the drums with a celi band but more often than not stuck with the bones. There was a pub in Abbeyfeale owned by Dan Murphy (The Failte) who regularly had famous Irish musicians from all over Ireland performing there. Each musician who played there knew of Patrick and always invited him to play on stage with them.

Patrick had a big influence on my bone playing, I was fortunate enough to be taught by him from a young age. Patrick was very knowledgeable about music and knew every tune that he played, he was famous for his ability to play the tune as if he was playing the melody not just accompanying it. We spent years going to each other houses where we would sit down and play for hours and I believe Patrick taught me everything I know but not everything he knew. When Patrick was teaching he had no fancy names for different rhythms he was playing he would simply play a 30 second rhythm and turn around and say to me ‘Do that’. In my younger years this was intimidating but I had fun attempting to imitate him. Patrick was extremely talented he had music in his soul, may he rest in peace.

6. Did anyone else have an impact on your playing?

Until the all Ireland bone competition started in Abbeyfeale Patrick was the only bone player I knew of. Once the competition started I got to know and listen to a lot of excellent bone players. It was great to see different styles and see a genuine interest in bone playing renewed.

7. Can you give us a brief description of your playing style?

I play a single handed style of bone playing, my bones are roughly 42 years old and come from the ribs of a heifer.

Due to the influence of Sliabh Lucra music (i.e. Slides, Jigs and) Polkas), which is a style of music played predominately in the counties of Limerick, Kerry and Cork, I tend to play lots of triplets, roll and rhythms which complement the tune.

8. Following up on that last question, I have noticed that you often make gestures with your non-playing hand. Can you tell us how this helps in your playing or how it became a part of your style?

I didn't actually realise I was doing that until you pointed it out but as you probably know yourself when you get into the rhythm of a tune the music seems to take over. I get lost in the rhythm and play in an automatic mode if you like, and so gestures come naturally.

9. Tell us about your experiences participating in the All Ireland Bones Competition.

•How many times did you compete?

I didn't compete in the first few years of the competition but once I started I competed for many years, it is hard to put a number on how many times I competed but I really enjoyed competing and it was always a great pleasure.

•How did you fare?

(I know you placed 2nd in 2004 and 1st in 2005, but I'm having a little trouble finding more complete information.)

I got placed 3rd a lot of times and 2nd a few more times and got placed 1st a few times but I'm not exactly sure how many of each.

•Did you typically bring your own melody players or did you use the players provided by the Fleadh?

I had multiple people playing for me over the years which consisted of a mix of my own players as well as the players provided by the Fleadh.

•Was there anything that surprised you about competing that you hadn't expected?

It was a great to listen to all the different styles of bone playing, which I wouldn't have been exposed to but for the competition. I was not familiar with double handed bone playing, I found it fascinating, I might try it sometime.

•What was the biggest thing that you learned from competing?

I suppose I learned like most things in life some days things will go your way and other days it won't but the main thing is to enjoy it regardless of the results. The part I most enjoyed was meeting bone players from all over the world and having a session with them over the Fleadh weekend.

• When did you decide to stop competing, and why?

I stopped competing after winning the Patrick 'Sport' Murphy memorial cup, the reason for this is because I would shortly be competing against some of my pupils and there is now so many fantastic bone players representing Ballaugh I feel I don't need to compete. It is so great to see how far bone playing has developed since the early days of the Fleadh by the Feale started.

10. You have coached up a number of bones players in your area over the years. Many – if not all – of them have done quite well in both the Junior and Senior All Ireland Bones Competitions. Can you tell us a bit about what you look for and what you are trying to impart?

I take a slightly different approach to teaching than Patrick and try not to frighten the life out of my students, however, I try to pass on the skills and style that Patrick instilled in me of playing the bones.

11. Would you tell us a bit about what your life and family are like in Abbeyfeale these days?

Well we have great talent in Ballaugh these days my niece's Sarah and Laura play the flute, the fiddle and piano, my nephew John plays the banjo, my daughter Jackie plays the accordion and the concertina and my son Dave plays the banjo and the guitar, my cousin Adrian plays the accordion and Brid is an accomplished tin whistle player and a great dancer, and of course I still play with my friend Sean and his brother Dave who now lives in the US but we have a great session when he gets home I am still running the family farm and I also work in Kostal as I have done for many years. My sisters and their families live close by so we are blessed to be surrounded by family, close friends and great neighbours,

12. Following up on that last question, how often do you get to play outside of the Fleadh?

Having such an extended family living close by we all get to play together on a regular basis as no family occasion would be complete without a session of Irish music. On a bank holiday weekend we are often asked to play in local pubs in Abbeyfeale. There are also many festivals in local surrounding town and villages which we also attend so trad music, bone playing, song and dance is alive and well in Ballaugh, in Abbeyfeale and in the surrounding locality.  
*Dean Robinson and Skeffington Flynn*

## How Do We Actually Play Rhythm Bones Triplets A Preliminary Study

The drawing below is from a manuscript by Percy Danforth describing the path of a triplet. Many years ago I remember seeing a video showing exactly how the triplet is produced. I can't find it now and if anyone knows of it please let me know so I can give credit where credit is due.



When we teach a beginner how to play a triplet they are told its like turning a door knob or the back and forth motion of an automobile window washer.

To see a different approach look at Dom's Flemons instructional video on our 'Learn How to Play Bones' page. He starts with a downward motion.

I decided to do experiments to see exactly how I produce a triplet. While these experiments used my style, I expect the same is true with most rhythm bones players.

I set up a video camera to capture a triplet run, and I placed a mark on my middle finger close to the second knuckle. Each frame from a single triplet from the triplet run captured by the video was extracted and the position of the mark recorded on a two-dimensional graph. When the dots are connected the path of the hand playing a triplet is shown in Figure 3 on Page 8, and there is a slight downward motion at the furthest point outward. Now that I can see it I can feel it. You can hear the Triplet clicks at numbers 3, 7, and 10 in Figure 3.

This experiment was repeated with the Tap, and shows a simple circular arc that rightly can be described as turning a door handle. You can hear the Tap click at number 9 in Figure 2 on Page 8.

I will repeat the experiments with a camera with a higher frame rate, and hopefully that will give data to analyze using Newtonian physics. Who knows, maybe something practical will come out of it. *Steve Wixson*





David Murphy (See story on Page 6)



The path of a Triplet (See story on Page 7)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 25, No. 2 2023

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*Bones Fest*

*Columns:*  
*Executive Director*

*Editor*

## Executive Director's Column

These last few months have been incredible. Michael Baxter has outdone himself with the latest rhythm bones collaboration video. Michael garnered submissions from around the globe! The resulting video is expertly edited and a joy to watch. You can see it here: <https://youtu.be/rkM9tDKpDNI>. Mike has written a story about the project that will appear in a future issue.

I was fortunate enough to be able to get back to Ireland this year. Not only was I able to compete in the Senior All Ireland Bones Competition, but I was asked to judge the Junior Competition! There will be an article in a future newsletter based upon my experiences that I hope you will find interesting.

Tom Connolly has served up an amazing article on Irish bones for this newsletter that is truly intriguing and an excellent read.

Almost every year, for Memorial Day Weekend, I

head to Delfest. I go as a fan, but I look for late night jams. My partner Mary got to experience the full four days this year. Needless to say, we had a blast jamming. When you get to the point that you are metronomic, you're generally accepted almost anywhere. Of course, there are exceptions . . .

Previously, Mary had commissioned an art piece from a local artist named Lincoln Miller (he can be reached at [nyokamillr@gmail.com](mailto:nyokamillr@gmail.com)). It resulted in the best gift ever! I can't help but share a photo. (See page 2.)

Here is the back story. At some point I had taken an online quiz that showed my Appalachian astronomy sign was a possum. Laugh all you want but that's what it showed. Mary got wind of this, and hired an amazing artist (Lincoln), who researched (Continued on Page 2)

## An Irish Bones Story

[Editor Note: The Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) selected its name so that people would recognize our instrument as a musical instrument. The Irish and many other people just call it bones, and as an editor I change bones to rhythm bones in submitted articles. In this article by Irishman Tom Connolly, I've decided to leave it as the Irish say it.]

When I was asked to write an article about the history of bones in Ireland I was very excited. I expected to compile a rich dossier going back through the annals of history recounting Irish bone playing. I found however that very little has been written or recorded over the years about bones in the Irish context. I did do some research, but I hasten to say this is not an exhaustive trawl of the literature! I went and met Dr. Mel Mercier, a phenomenal musician and percussionist, former Board member of the RBS, and son of Peadar Mercier who was a pioneer of professional bodhrán and bones playing in Ireland.

Mel confirmed that there is indeed very little recorded history of the bones in Ireland. He provided several references to me, and I will summarise them and other bits of published information in this article.

Mel also suggested that it may be better to frame

the article around the contemporary players, going from the time his father came on to the scene, until the present day; and in particular comment about the differences in style between the Irish one handed style of bones playing and the American two-handed style.

I went with Mel's advice, managed to interview a few players, and dug deep into my own personal experiences to produce this article. And I hope that in future more research and more writing by more people will bring this fantastic instrument to a greater audience. This was not intended to be a scholarly article, but I will try to give the proper sources for every- (Continued on Page 2)



Irish Bones from [irishbones.com](http://irishbones.com)

## Editorial

This issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player* Newsletter presents a story from our new Board Member, Tom Connolly, from Cork, Ireland. His story titled, *An Irish Bones Story*, takes up the entire newsletter, a first for this newsletter. The Irish are important to rhythm bones playing, and I am not aware of any article that presents Irish bones playing in this depth. This article will be referenced in years to come.

We have published other articles about the Irish over the years. Check out the listing in the Museum (from Homepage click Museum, scrawl down and click History, and scrawl down to Ireland.)

I don't play in an organized group so my rhythm bones skills have diminished. I am practicing basics so I will be ready for BFXVII. Check out the column to the right for latest details, and look at a preliminary sketch of the BFXVII graphic. There are 35 signed up to date. How great to be back together in person again.

### (Continued From Page 1)

the content and found William Sydney Mount's painting of "The Bones Player". She gave me a physical copy of the artist's rendering for Christmas.

Then we went to Delfest. As we wandered around the main field to look at the vendors, we came across a booth selling flasks with cool images. Mary being ever curious asked if they could produce a custom image. The vendor said yes, and after a bit of high tech back and forth, Mary was able to get the image to the vendor. We picked it up the next day. I think it looks even better than the



original drawing.

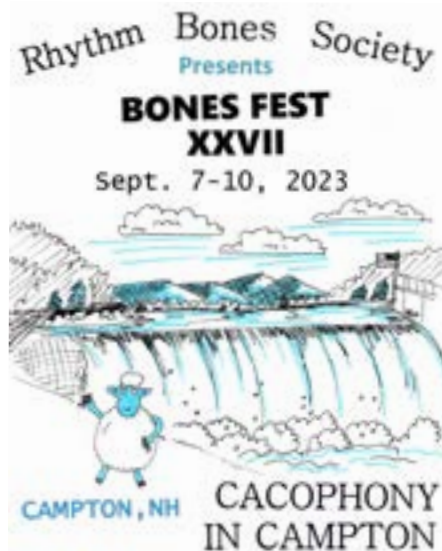
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/10Ngzd9SzrH7vaprbHI4RGSLUTRHjX0N/view?usp=sharing>

[www.newworldglass.com](http://www.newworldglass.com)

What have you all been up to? Let us know here: <https://rhythmbones.com/contact-us/>

As we head into the heart of the Summer, I hope you can all stay cool.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*



## Time to Register For BFXVII, BUT...

We are so excited to see everyone in person at Bones Fest XXVII in a few months! You still have time to Register, BUT do so at your earliest convenience. To Register, click on the Post on our Homepage titled, 'Registration Is Open For Bones Fest XXVII.' Thirty people have registered so far, so it is going to be a great???? Fest.

Most importantly, please book lodging ASAP - our region has heavy tourism and will book out months in advance. I recommend the Mountain Fare Inn where most RBS guests will be staying. Please call as soon as possible to reserve your room: (603) 726-4283.

The closest airport is Manchester, NH, and you need to rent a car for the one hour drive to the Inn whose address is 5 Old Waterville Rd, Campton, NH 03223. As time draw near Steve Wixson will send out an email to see if arrival times allow attendees to share a car. *Sky and Jessye*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

## An Irish Bones Story (Continued)

thing. And it is just possible I may descend into slight irreverence at times, but it is all meant to give joy and have fun, so hopefully I won't offend anyone!

So here goes! I hope you enjoy reading this, and if you smile a few times during your reading, I'll be happy!

I believe bones to be the second-oldest instrument in the world, preceded only by the human voice. They have been around for a long time in Irish music, and many people believe they were one of the prevalent percussion instruments in Ireland for a very long time, simply because they were accessible to people. In the Irish countryside, families had small farms with cows, goats, and sheep that provided milk and meat. And in providing meat, the animals also provided the raw material for musical instruments.

The book Companion to Traditional

Irish Music is a detailed reference guide to Ireland's traditional music, song and dance – a 2,000 page compilation of the knowledge of two hundred contributors harnessed by Fintan Vallely. In the introduction, it says “Traditional music has been intimately associated with the rural poor and the politically downtrodden in the past – the greater part of the Irish population for whom it had been their major cultural resource ...” The contribution to that book by Mel Mercier describing bones includes a picture of bone flutes found in Dublin dating back to the 11th century. If flutes were being made from bone in Dublin that long ago, it is not hard to imagine bones being made in the countryside centuries before that. So by Sherlock Holmes-like deduction, it seems to me that rhythm bones could easily have been a common home-made idiophone, simply made from readily available materials, and rattled to accompany the music when people got together to celebrate, for many hundreds of years.

The earliest reference I could find to them was in The Fair of Carman poem in The Book of Leinster, c. 1160 AD, translated by Eugene O'Curry; “Pipes, fiddles, chainmen, Bone-men, and tube-players, A crowd of babbling painted masks, Roarers and loud bellowers.”

Conor from McNeela's Music told Steve Brown, long-time Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society: “Our website statement ‘bones are the oldest Irish folk instrument’ was written by a copywriter who has since left McNeela Music so I unfortunately I cannot ask her. However, in his book Traditional Irish Music: A History, musician and scholar Tomás Ó Canainn notes that bones were likely used in ancient Celtic music, and that they have been played in Ireland for centuries. Additionally, The Traditional Irish Music Education Society claims that while the specific origins of the Irish bones are not clear, it is likely that they were developed in Ireland sometime during the medieval period or earlier.”

According to Wikipedia “The technique probably arrived in the U.S. via Irish and other European immigrants, and has a history stretching back to ancient China, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. [The bones] have contributed to many music genres, including 19th century

minstrel shows, traditional Irish and Scottish music, the blues, bluegrass, zydeco, French-Canadian music, and music from Cape Breton in Nova Scotia.”

Christian Wenande of The Copenhagen Post agrees that bones go back a long way, and he comments on the one-handed Irish style. He says “The bones are reputed to be the second-oldest instrument in the world, next to the human voice. Though the bones technique probably got to the US via Irish and other European immigrants and went on to influence the likes of the blues, their history can be traced back to ancient China, Egypt, Greece and Rome.” Christian also agrees that “though there are different varieties and styles, the Irish tradition is particularly unique. For instance, while North American players typically use two hands, the Irish style uses just one hand.”

In 2011, Mel Mercier wrote in Companion to Irish Traditional Music: “While the bodhrán holds pride of place as the principal percussion instrument of Irish traditional music, the bones, although much less frequently heard, provide the distinctive idiophonic component of the sound of that tradition. In terms of their playing technique the bones have often been confused with the ‘spoons’, and the sound they produce is, at times, likened somewhat inaccurately to that of the Spanish castanets. The bones, as played in the Irish tradition, are in fact unique both in terms of the technique used to play them and the timbral palate and rhythmic constructions they offer to the traditional percussionist.”

Aaron Plunkett, a renowned percussionist, played bones one-handed in the original movie The Titanic, for a scene down in the hold where the Irish immigrants were having a session. I think maybe some of us believe the bones came to America via Irish emigrants because we saw that scene in the film in 1997!

2.5 million years ago, according to Aaron, rhythm bones were one of our first forms of musical instruments. Similar styles of playing music using bones, wood and even stone are found all over the world stretching from South India to Mongolia, to the six Celtic regions of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England,

Bretagne, France and Asturias, Spain. Aaron is well versed in percussion all over the world. He completed a two-year, 48,000 mile world tour including Ireland, Iran, India, Indonesia, the Balkans, Turkey, Egypt, and Ghana, Africa.

Bone playing in Ireland is mentioned by the famous Listowel writer John B. Keane in his book The Bodhrán Makers published in 1986, where he describes a band of musicians, including a group of bones players, making the traditional Wren Boy tour of their locality on St. Stephen's Day, going from house to house and stopping at crossroads giving impromptu concerts, collecting a few shillings from happy listeners to fund a “Wrendance” later in the month. The book was set in 1950's Ireland, and I confirmed in June this year with percussionist Dwayne Kiernan from Cavan that bones were indeed prevalent in the 1940's. I'll tell you that story later on.

Sean O'Riada in the 60's developed Irish traditional music from its context as dance music to a much richer status as music to be listened to, with beautiful arrangements for a range of instruments including bodhrán and bones. The fabulous Chieftains brought this re-imagined music to the wider world and the man who brought the bones to the Chieftains early line up was Mel's father, Peadar Mercier, who was the original bodhrán player with the revolutionary Ceoltóirí Chualann. We all owe Peadar Mercier a tremendous debt of gratitude. He was the first to bring the bones as played in Ireland to international attention.

Now a few words from and about some contemporary players (with my apologies to the many I do not know!). These include Mel Mercier, son of the great Peadar; Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh of Galway; the late Martin Fay and Ronnie McShane of The Chieftains and Ceoltóirí Chualann; Roscommon's own Cathy Jordan of Dervish; from Sligo the brilliant yet gentle Junior Davey; the late Paddy “Sport” Murphy of Abbeyfeale; Dave Murphy, Paddy O'Donovan and the young John Forde and Sarah O'Donoghue of Abbeyfeale; Dublin-born Rossa O'Snodaigh of the band Kila; percussionist extraordinaire Tommy Hayes from Scariff, Clare who played with the renowned Stockton's Wing; and I will finish off with an interview with the



less well-known but truly inspirational Dwayne Kiernan from Cavan.

Mel Mercier has been playing bones for over 40 years, he told me, and is very proud of his collaborations with the late great Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin. Mel wrote the first ever PhD on the bones and he tells us of playing with his dad Peadar. I think Mel's own words in his PhD cannot be bettered, where he gives us an informative and touching account of his style and his time playing with his dad Peadar:

“... I learned how to play the bones from my father when I was a boy. Like Jerry and Bernie [Mescher], the foundations of my musicianship were built in the courses of my musical relationship with my father, Peadar Mercier. I was about ten years old when I began to imitate his bodhrán and bones playing and I have been playing the bones and the bodhrán ever since. My father played the bodhrán and bones with some style. He always seemed to me to be quite self-conscious in his playing, concerned as much with the visual communication of an aesthetic as he was with its sounding. I believe that he passed that appreciation for a combination of the visual and the sonic dimensions of performance style to me. His playing also gave me an appreciation of the importance of precision and groove, defining characteristics of his own playing which he developed in response to the challenge of integrating the bodhrán and bones into the new Irish traditional music ensemble aesthetic first formulated by the Chieftains and Ceoltóirí Chualann in the 1960s. For many years, and on many occasions, before my father passed away in 1991, I had the privilege of duetting with him. Making music together, we yielded to the same pulse and shared in the same groove. This shared entrainment to the communicative eloquence of musical sound had a profound influence on our relationship and was formative in the development of my musicianship and the emergence of my identity as a musician.”

Mel goes on to discuss some differences between Irish and American bones playing:

“The typical American style of bones playing and the typical Irish style of bones playing are very different in several important respects. In Irish traditional music, with few exceptions, only one

pair of bones is used. This one-handed technique is used by all of the prominent Irish bones players, including Tommy Hayes, Johnny ‘Ringo’ McDonagh, Cathy Jordan and Junior Davey. Irish bones players usually sit when playing, in sessions and even in concert performances, and they must negotiate the aesthetic of quietude and reserve that typically prevails in informal and formal music making. As a result, the inherent kinesthetic potential for extrovert display is typically muted. By contrast, American bones players typically play with two pairs of bones, one pair in each hand, and consequently they have the potential to produce more sound than their Irish counterparts. Most American two-handed bones players that I have seen stand when they play and the intrinsic physicality of bones playing is un-attenuated in their performances. In general then, American two-handed bones playing is today characterised by the same extroversion in performance as that displayed on the minstrel stage by Brother Bones in the nineteenth century. Today, this relative freedom of individual musical expression is amplified when American bones players perform with recorded music rather than live music.”

Continuing to other contemporary players - I met Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh a few times over the last 10 years. I remember him but I am not sure he remembers me! On one occasion he cautioned me that you should only really play bones when there are a few fiddles in the session. He said “Most other musicians don't like them” and asked me not to join in. The next time he gestured to me to sit down when I asked if I could play the bones and welcomed me into the session. Then he tried out my bones himself and said they were a great pair and I should learn to play them properly. The last time I encountered him he was a judge at the All-Ireland Bones Competition in Abbeyfeale in 2019. I couldn't go due to work commitments, but I watched the recording online, and saw Johnny explain how he had made his choice. “I just picked the best one!” he said. Ringo is an exceptional player, both of bones and bodhrán, and his genius in my opinion lies in how simple his style appears to be – until you try it. He plays one-handed, with a great sensitivity to the music,

which implies that you need to know each tune. In my opinion that is one difference between the Irish and the North American style – the Irish players I meet and hear seem to “follow the music,” while the North American style tends to lead the music with a confident rhythm. In my conversation with Mel Mercier on a sweltering hot day in Cork at the end of May 2023, we both agreed that many Irish players tend to sit at the edge of the session, almost apologising for making noise, while North Americans take centre stage and run the show. In general!

The late Martin Fay of the Chieftains played fiddle and bones. If you listen to Track 6 of the Chieftain's album Chieftain's 8 from 1978, with Martin Fay on bones and Kevin Conneff on bodhrán, you can hear his simple style. Sometimes I've had batches of bones drying out in the kitchen and have had to move them to make room for necessities like preparing dinner. They tap against each other gently as I gather them up and, all being at different stages of drying out and hollowing out, they give out a soft melodic wind-chime-like pattern of sounds that invariably makes me stop and just listen. A few years ago a visiting friend (for whom we were cooking dinner and therefore had to move the bones out of the way) stopped in mid-conversation and said “Wow. That sound reminds me of ancient times”. My memory of Martin Fay's playing was exactly that, though he had a simple style. In fact he came late to the instrument and he used to be visibly tired at the end of a vigorous bone-playing set. But he was able to get that sound that I think rings in the depths of all our memories. In the Irish style you can often get that kind of hollow sound.

In contrast to Martin was the late Ronnie McShane, whose exuberant style can be heard on Chieftain's 5 (1975) and Chieftain's 6: Bonaparte's Retreat (1976). As Mel Mercier told me Ronnie “did play a few times with the Chieftains, as you mention, but to my knowledge he was never a member of the group. His more significant contribution was with Ceoltóirí Chualann. And he was very much a flamboyant performer and character – very different to Martin Fay.” Steve Brown and Steve Wixson interviewed Ronnie McShane in Rhythm Bones Player Volume 7 No. 1

2005. Ronnie passed away peacefully in 2017 and Peadar O’Riada, had this to say about him on the Rhythm Bones Website obituary: “Ronnie started out as the props manager at the Abbey Theater and my father was putting a group together to play for Brian McMahon’s play ‘The Honey Spike.’ They wanted to have rhythm bones in it and Ronnie went down to the butcher shop and got some bones and put them up on the roof of the house to weather them. And that’s how he got the really nice hollow sound to them. He had a very sharp beat, very clean, like my father’s bodhran playing, on the beat, on the pulse. Looking back they were so definite, with the beat of the music, whereas today a lot of bodhran and bones players are too complicated, ornamental, getting away from the pulse really at the expense of the music.”

Listening to the North American style I am always amazed by the intricacy of the rhythms, and it has been my privilege to have personally seen the late Bill Vits conjure up his wizardry at BonesFest XXII in Lincoln, New Hampshire in 2018. Bill was certainly the best two handed bones player I have ever heard in person, and I was always left wondering “How did he do that?.” I’ve heard many two-handed players get tremendous variety of pitch. But so far I have only heard that hollow evocative sound in one-handed Irish-style playing.

A great Roscommon player - Cathy Jordan, lead singer of the brilliant band Dervish, joined the Rhythm Bones Society in 2002. In her letter to the Editor at the time she said: “Yes indeed you have found another female bones player and I have played for eleven years or so now. My teacher was another female bones player, the mighty Monica Sullivan. In fact here in Sligo (Ireland) I know another three female bone players which is very healthy for the tradition. I play bones at every concert and try to have them on every album. They are featured a few times on the Live in Palma album. Now I’m going to rest my weary bones. All the best. Cathy Jordan”. Cathy has been into all sorts of music all her life and doesn’t feel restricted to any particular genre.

I managed to catch up with Cathy by phone in July 2023 even though she was in the middle of a hectic gigs sched-

ule as well as attending a funeral that day. Growing up in Scramogue County Roscommon in the 1970’s, Cathy told me she had very little exposure to live musicians – a lot of singers, but very few musicians. Her sister arrived home from college for the weekend with Monica Sullivan, a Sligo-born wizardress of bodhrán and bones. Monica taught Cathy the bodhrán using an empty cornflakes box, and the bones with her own homemade pair. According to Cathy “To this day Monica rarely leaves the house without a pair of bones”. Cathy was hooked. The following week when Monica returned they went down to the local butcher and gave him explicit instructions on the bones they wanted. Cow ribs, one being a good “grippy” one for holding firm, and a nice slightly convex one to hold loosely. “We took them home and boiled them for days” said Cathy “then we buried them for months”. I gathered that the acid test for fully seasoned rhythm bones is that the dog no longer has any interest in them. “They were rudimentary” Cathy continued “but isn’t that the beauty of the bones? Accessible to people in poorer times, when they had to make do with what they had. And she does not believe in cleaning or “shining up” the bones too much. “The ribs have a certain sound, kind of hollow, when the marrow really dries out. If you shine them up too much they get ‘clicky’. Like shins – shins are too clickety for me, I like the more hollow sound”. I agreed in general but I did say some of the shins I make have hollow sounds – now I have to prove it by making a pair for her! [Cathy still has her first pair of ribs, and we hope to get a picture of them for a future edition of RB].

Cathy can play with both hands and likes to do that as it enriches the sound, but modestly maintained that really her left just does a poor imitation of her right. “Not like Rossa (O’Snodagh) who can play both hands with complementing patterns”. But she does play with four bones in one hand. “It’s like trotting horses” she grinned “but I don’t go too fast – maybe stick to the hornpipes for that”. In her one-handed play she has three fingers between the bones. Although stating that she cannot really analyse her own style, jig is her favourite rhythm. As she puts it “There’s more meat on the bone if you pardon the pun. You can add a lot of stuff into the tune and complement it without

overpowering it. Sometimes a strong reel beat can interfere a bit with the melody. I like to enhance the music rather than dominate it.”

Cathy Jordan told me she gave Junior Davey his first pair of bones.

Which brings us neatly on to Sligo, home of Junior Davey, bones and bodhrán player extraordinaire, who told us this year in Volume 25 No.1 of the Rhythm Bones Player that he learned how to play from listening to Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh (p.s. a Galway man!) in 1989, who played in the band Arcady at that time and went on to be a founding member of De Danaan. Junior generously teaches many kids to play bones and his progeny are doing really well at the All Ireland Bone Competition hosted annually in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick. I wonder is it the Sligo style that he teaches, or the Galway style, or has he adapted to the unique Abbeyfeale style in order to go back to the North West with their trophies?



Paddy “Sport” Murphy was a giant of Irish bones. Single-handedly throughout his life he championed a tradition of bones playing and as a result we have a fabulous annual All Ireland Competition in Abbeyfeale. I never had the pleasure of seeing Paddy “Sport” Murphy play but I did see his nephew the great Dave Murphy play when he won the Abbeyfeale All-Ireland contest in 2012 – one of his five victories. Mel Mercier wrote in Companion to Irish Traditional Music: “It is not uncommon...to see the more flamboyant performer allow this free hand to be swept into spontaneous movement, bringing both hands into an eloquent dance born of the exhilaration, and the frustration of a body caught up in musical motion. Music becomes dance

becomes music.” For me, that perfectly describes Dave Murphy’s style. He plays with one hand and cannot seem to contain the other one as it draws looping shapes all around him. I played with him at the session after that 2012 competition and got to talk to him afterwards. I asked him how Sport had taught him. Dave took up his bones, described a huge arc in the air that erupted into a madly energetic rolling triplet, and said: “He did that, then gave me the bones and said ‘Go home and do that! And if you can’t do it keep trying until you can!’”. I can vouch for the fact that Dave can definitely “do that”! He is a joy to watch as well as to listen to – in fact to get the full experience you need to do both. And as the venerable Steve Brown wrote in his Executive Director’s Column in Volume 14 No.1 of the Rhythm Bones Player in 2012, like Junior Davey, Dave Murphy is incredibly generous with his time teaching local kids all he knows. Steve said: “David not only exhibits the finest bone playing, but he works tirelessly with the local children to ensure the tradition of bone playing in Abbeyfeale continues in fine style.” And I have to mention Paddy O’Donovan here – also an Abbeyfeale winner, who has a smooth but most intense driving almost hypnotic rhythm when he really gets it going. And John Forde, a lovely young man who I have never met but who I have seen playing live and online, and I have seen him develop over the years. John won his first Junior competition at the age of 4 and has taken multiple Junior titles - his last one being in 2017, as well as winning second place twice in the senior competition - which his dad Pat won in 2018! My personal opinion is that John’s style is like a mix of Paddy O’Donovan’s and Dave Murphy’s.

In 2023 the Abbeyfeale bones competitions was won by Abbeyfeale native Sarah O’Donoghue. Sarah has a beautiful style that sort of sneaks up on you. It seems basic and simple at first then it insists on making your foot start tapping. Brilliant. I also talked to Sarah in July 2023. Sarah told me she started to play the bones when she was 5 years old! She learned from her uncle Dave Murphy who learned from Sport Murphy and who also taught her cousins John Forde, Adrian O’Leary, Jackie Murphy and David Murphy and her sister Laura. Sarah’s favourite rhythm is the jig, played as a rolling triplet as it was taught to her that she says is different to how she has heard it played by people not local to Abbeyfeale. Bones was Sarah’s first instrument, and she

won the Junior Bones Competition in 2006 – the year that Gail Brayden from the USA became the first female winner of the senior competition. Sarah sent us a lovely photo of her playing in the competition, she does not remember the year!

Rossa Ó Snodaigh is one of the rare breed of Irish two handed players. But Rossa is a rare breed anyway! A fabulously talented multi-instrumentalist with the legendary band Kíla, Rossa, the youngest of 6 boys, was brought up in an Irish speaking household in Dublin in the 1970’s and ‘80’s by parents publisher Pádraig Ó Snodaigh and artist Clíodna Cussen, and was taught the tin whistle along with his primary school class by a teacher who was unable play the instrument herself. In secondary school he started the band with his schoolmates and his brother Rónán, (his other brother Colm joining some years later) and they began to experiment with different instruments, rhythms, melodies and genres. Kíla have created a unique type of music best defined as Trad fusion, due to the differing musical backgrounds of traditional, classical, rock and funk and the variety of instruments such as whistles, fiddles, Uilleann pipes, mandolin, bouzouki, guitars, bass, bodhrán, bones, djembe, darabuka, cajon, congas, drums, and a whole plethora of other wind, skin and stringed instruments.

Rossa’s style on bones (as on all his instruments) is organic, passionate, energetic and imaginative. He kindly took my phone call in early July 2023 whilst on a train journey home. He told me that at one time he busked with his bones in the echoed corridors of London’s tube stations and would sing tunes in his head to play along to. He also said that he’s developed a way to step dance and play the two handed bones at the same time. He has even further developed that and now he can whistle tunes with two fingers in his mouth, play a pair of bones in the other hand, and get both feet treble stepping to the rhythm!

It was in the late ‘70s that Rossa learned the bones from his brother Rónán who learned it from Colm who learned it from their eldest brother Fergus, (the other two brothers didn’t show an interest). He told me two intriguing things about his two-handed style.

The first was that although he is right-handed, he was only able to learn the bones “properly” with his left hand, and then in his words “The left taught the right how to play!”. I guess this is one instance the left hand did know what the right hand

was doing? Secondly, he discovered much later into his bone-playing journey that Fergus and Colm played the bones “the other way around” that is, the bone between thumb and forefinger tight and the other bone loose. I asked him what his “normal” way was and he said “Hold the bone between thumb and forefinger loose, with the other one tight” - which is the opposite to what I had thought! On reflection that reminded me of a joke I heard years ago: A man walks into a bank and when he gets to the teller, he surreptitiously points a gun at her and says quietly: “Put all the money into this bag, hand it over to me, and act normal”. She looks at him and says “Define normal”. Personally I think each bones player has at least one unique playing style, there is no “right” way and there is certainly no “normal” method. For instance the great percussionist Tommy Hayes showed Rossa how to play with three bones in one hand while doing an ad for Hersheys Mousse where they played the spoons. In Varnasai during the filming of TG4’s Ceolchúairt Rossa saw these “really long bones” called ‘Khartals’ being played in both hands in a kind of clicked manner. In the same programme they played with drummers who wrapped the ends of their drumsticks with cloth, dipped them in paraffin, lit them and gave an extraordinary performance of sound and light. Of course, Rossa had to try that with the bones. “How did that go for you?” I asked. “I got through half a tune before I burned me hand!” he replied. In Canada where bones and spoons are played to Quebecois music, Rossa loved the spoons carved from single pieces of wood, which are played with concave facing in or facing out. He has a pair of both types.

Rossa made his own pair of bones in the early days from butcher bones his mother got to make broth. He would choose likely candidates and leave them outside to “season” for a few months. People advised him to leave them “behind the chimney” for six months, or to bury them in the soil. But he found leaving them out on a windowsill did the trick for him. Although he still remembers one beautiful bone that the cat knocked off the sill to the delight of the dog...

He has tried many different materials including bronze – which were too heavy, and slate which he loves and still uses. He says he can teach anyone to play bones within 5 minutes and has taught loads of people over the years – including Michael Flatley - but the only one who has continued to play them is the brilliant sculptor Séighean Ó

Draoi.

Rossa's techniques are self-taught and to progress his abilities he would imagine what a better bones player might do and would attempt to better them. He loves varying the rhythm patterns, and altering which hand plays the basic beat while the other one syncopates. But amazingly despite learning the whistle and céili dancing he initially didn't know the names of formal rhythms of traditional music – he said to me “I just kind of ‘knew’ the rhythms and followed the tune.”

He plays the bones as an instrument in their own right. An encouraging older musician took him aside in the Béal Bocht pub and told in no uncertain terms that he should never yield to other people's idea of how he should play the bones. This did however land him in trouble in sessions a number of times. He has been stared out of it, criticised for being too loud, too fast, too busy and even asked to leave sessions as a result. In many situations the melody players expect uncomplicated percussive support to their music and find intricate bones playing challenging. But for him he notes that because the Irish trad tune is solid the accompanimental rhythms can have grand variations whereas in rock music it's the drums that provide the backbone with the music providing the variations.

Rossa noted that traditionally Irish music was really meant for dancing to. Then Seán Ó Riada and Peadar Mercier and the Chieftains brought it to another level, creating harmonious arrangements for all instruments including bodhrán and bones in the 1960's. They created ensemble Irish music to listen to. Rossa has a view on the Irish music played in pub sessions that emerged during the Irish music revival in the '60's and '70's which continues to this day. “... it's magnificently informal, can accommodate any amount of instruments, but essentially it's music to drink to” he says. I hasten to clarify that Rossa is not being derogatory or sanctimonious here – he loves a good session; he is bemoaning the fact that there are not enough public fora for great musicians to display their skill, between the formal settings of arranged music and the aurally challenging session environment. In my recent experience this is changing a bit for the better and you can find some lovely musical sessions in some pubs. You do still have to look hard.

I have not yet met Tommy Hayes in the flesh but I have heard him play many times and during the pandemic I heard him speak

online about bones. For this article Tommy made time for a phone call late one Sunday evening in July 2023. Tommy Hayes has rightfully earned a reputation as one of the greatest bodhrán players of all time. In his career spanning more than 40 years Tommy has played with Stockton's Wing, Puck Fair, Altan, Liam O Flynn, and Eileen Ivers. He was the original percussionist with Riverdance and has performed on more than 400 albums.

In the year 2000 The Irish Times called him “An intricate texturist on a baffling variety of instruments”. As well as his beloved bodhrán, Tommy plays spoons, bones, the djembe, shakers, bongos, and many other instruments.

“I probably saw someone playing them in a pub” he said when I asked him how he had discovered the bones. He honestly did not remember. He had cousins who played spoons as well as bodhrán, but I was fascinated to learn that Tommy taught himself bones over a six month period without any help from tapes, records, radio or live music. He literally figured it all out by himself. He plays one-handed and having a huge curiosity and adventurous approach to percussion, he very quickly added a third bone. “I just preferred the sound of three bones” he said and went on to describe how, when recording with Stockton's Wing in the late 1970's, he was often asked to record “in the studio toilet” where the sound would be amplified and enriched by the hard surfaces. “And the third bone helped that too” he grinned.

He knows very few other players and fewer still who exclusively play bones – and he said contemplatively that there is a difference between “pure” bones players and people like himself (and Johnny Ringo McDonagh) who are primarily bodhrán players. “You can hear the bodhrán in our bone-playing” said Tommy. He mentioned the late Ronnie McShane (a former member of the Chieftains who played marvellous bones in 1975's The Chieftain's 5 and 1976's The Chieftains 6: Bonaparte's Retreat) as one of those “pure” bones players. (Check out the note below to read what Sean O'Riada's son Peadar had to say about this). Tommy is familiar with the late Paddy “Sport” Murphy's playing and said “He had a real driving style”, agreeing that the Abbeyfeale style in general is driving and energetic. “But I love all rhythm” he said, “and I love listening to the two handed bones players in America, the likes of the Carolina Chocolate Drops. In Riverdance where I

played bones 8 times a week, I managed to get good at them, and loved playing in 7/8 and even 11/12 rhythm.” He commented on the Indian style of bone playing and remembers watching a film on gypsies from India moving into Europe and bringing their bone playing with them.

Tommy finds that the hardest rhythms to play are reels with no triplets and jigs played slowly in 3/4 time.

At the end of the call Tommy asked me if I ever heard anyone playing the tongs – the simple fireside tool. He mentioned a documentary somewhere featuring Eugene Lambe, the piper, and a Late Late Show episode featuring the late great Micheál Ó Súilleabháin...I feel another article coming.....!

And now I want to finish by telling you about a less well-known contemporary Irish bones player. And in the telling, I think many of us who love the rhythm bones will relate to the feeling that bones give us. Playing bones has a therapeutic aspect, and when bones players meet, it is friendship first, playing music second. The instrument



is so simple, the sound is so pure, but to really master it you have to stop everything else and concentrate on it. Much like friendship.

The player is Dwayne Kiernan. Now in his mid-thirties, Dwayne was an accomplished professional rock drummer for 15 years until he was struck down by a neurological condition 8 years ago that paralysed him physically, traumatised him mentally, and ended his drumming career because as he told me, you need your feet for drumming as much as your hands, and although he recovered from the paralysis, he lost some of the co-ordination in his legs. Dwayne had never really listened to traditional Irish music but became inter-



ested as he explored hand percussion. He now plays bodhrán, bones, spoons, Indian kanjira, cajon and a number of other instruments. Six years ago on his honeymoon in Dingle, County Kerry, he bought a bodhrán. Then he got a pair of bones. Then he listened to a DVD by Tommy Hayes. And he practised and practised. He told me it took ages for him to get the triplet. And then ages more to get single and double clicks. But in his own words – “I’m stubborn!” And now if you heard Dwayne play you would be amazed - his clarity and variety in my opinion is honed from his years of drumming. I interviewed Dwayne for this article. Dwayne’s perspective on the Irish one-handed style of bone playing is that it “flows with the music” much like the Indian kanjira style. I could never play fast polkas until this year I accidentally discovered that I could, with very short bones! I somehow thought that was my own limitation, but Dwayne taught me that for different rhythms, you need different bones. I discovered his grandfather used to play spoons, and when I

asked him how far back he thought bones went, he reckoned they go back “a lot farther than we think”. Then at the end of the conversation, Dwayne mentioned his grandmother commenting on his various instruments. When he took up bodhrán she told him they used to call bodhrán players “flickers”, describing them flicking their fingers on the skin. She is 86 years old, her name is Nuala Smith, and she is from Ballymote County Sligo.



When Dwayne showed her the bones, Nuala told him she remembers neighbours making and playing bones when she was a young child in the late 1940’s. The impression I got listening to Dwayne recounting these conversations was that bones were played a lot at informal gatherings and dances. They were easy to make from readily available materials.

“Shur you’d make them yourself!” Nuala said to Dwayne. And maybe grand-

mothers in Ireland have been saying that for thousands of years.

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With special thanks to Mel Mercier for his guidance and patient correction of facts, and Dwayne Kiernan for his open and very personal interview

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# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 25, No. 3 2023

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Bones Fest XXVII*

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Competition 2023*

*Columns:  
Executive Director*

*Editor*

## Executive Director's Column

The Cacophony in Campton was a huge success in my book. Sky and Jessye were the ultimate hosts. Their Dole Mill location was absolutely amazing! It's astounding to me to see what the Bartlett's have built in their community.

The Dole Mill features a video arcade, a "Made in America Shop". Jessye, (an accomplished fiddler and instructor) has multiple spaces inside to give music lessons, including the "Dancehall" - which is as fine a venue for Bones Fest workshops as I have seen. They even had space to accommodate a ragtag crew of bones players to stay for the weekend (hotel options were available as well for those who didn't want to "rough it").

Family connections were on full display over the weekend. John Archibald and the greater NH community hosted us on Friday night at their barn. A wood fired pizza oven provided sustenance for all in

attendance and there was ice cream for dessert!

Steve Brown mentioned to me after the event that there didn't seem to be a whole lot of pass offs at this year's Bonesfest. I didn't think much of it during the event, but he's right. Don't get me wrong, they happened from time to time, they just weren't the feature that they so often have been in the past. There's probably not much use in speculating as to why this was, but I'm guessing the sheer joy of being back together again in person after a few years absence had a lot to do with it.

This is something we as a community need to take note of. The pass off is probably one of the best tools we have for sharing our unique individual takes on our instrument. It allows us to hear each other, to see each other. Most importantly, it's a way (Continued on Page 2)

## Highlights From Bones Fest XXVII

Firstly and foremostly, thank you to every person who put in the time, effort and expense to come to Bones Fest this year. It is amazing that so many folks (35ish) made it; the rhythm bones community is a marvel to behold. For anyone who did not make it - and as a sweet reminiscence for those who did -, I will recap the events.

Thursday night about half of the attendees made it to appetizers and humble jamming at a local restaurant (formerly the old popsicle stick mill) where we had a small private room to ourselves. After that Jessye and I met a few folks back at the Dole Mill who were staying the evenings with us.

On Friday morning we started at about 10am with workshops and jamming, ate lunch and then back to workshops up until the Miniature Golf tournament. It was a close game but ultimately Gerry Hines pulled ahead and won the grand prize of a bag of Bones Coffee. I have no doubt there is still much celebrating in the Hines household.

That evening we headed over to the White family's house for wood-fired earth oven pizza and ice cream in their barn, along with some more jamming. Some folks ended up back at the Dole Mill for continued jamming until around 12am.

Saturday started off with workshops that went

until a communal lunch, after which we all took our group photo at the Campton Dam. Jessye took a large group on a hike up Rattlesnake trail in Holderness and they got to do some rattling on a mountain overview looking out over all the Squam lakes. While they hiked, the rest of us either visited, played or napped. I did all three.

Our next and last planned event was the

(Continued on Page 2)



Sky and Jessye Bartlett Performing on Saturday's Show

## Editorial

I come back from each Bones Fest (and I've attended every one except Bones Fest I) with renewed energy, ideas, memories, and photographs and video to process. This issue has Highlights from BFXVII and the story of Skeff Flynn's 2023 trip to the All Ireland Bones Competition. There is also a Highlights video soon to be Posted on our Homepage.

Speaking of energy and ideas, the 25th Anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society is on September 20, 2024, and while we may not have BFXVIII on that date, we will do something virtual on September 20th so the whole world can celebrate. You can help make it special emailing to us your ideas.

## Editorial Continued

to draw each other together. It's a way to celebrate each individual as well as the collective as a whole. The pass off is also an excellent hands on teaching tool that helps us sharpen our listening skills, as well as our playing.

So, let this serve as a reminder to us all (myself included). The pass off is important whenever and wherever bones players gather! We all get excited and it's easy to abandon the pass off from one tune to the next. It's up to all of us to remember how important it is and to make sure we pick it back up if we get away from it for too long. Even if it doesn't seem important in the moment, I assure you it is. The pass off was essential to my development as a rhythm bones player, and we should be mindful of how important it might be to the next generation!

It was very encouraging to see so many new faces. Great to see Spike Bones' son, Trueman Muhrer-Irvin, if only on Thursday night. Jax and Vicki Petroski were a welcome addition. Erin and Diane Sharkey got in there as well. "Gerry's Angels" included so many new and long time rhythm bones players, and spouses. Roscoe Oswald and Paul Sedgwick were incredible additions, adding harmonica, rhythm bones enthusiasm, reclaimed school chair bones, and amazing banjo playing. I was ecstatic to have Mary Gunderson King with me, and judging from the requests for her accompaniment, the attendees were as well. Please

forgive me if I have missed anyone.

There are players who were missed as well. Those still with us and those that have passed on. I thought Kenny's memorial to Bill Vits was an excellent tribute to the ones that couldn't be with us. So, celebrate the ones who are with us now. Cherish these moments. The future is bright my friends. I look forward to seeing you soon!

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeff Flynn*

## Highlights Continued

Saturday night performance at the Campton Historical Society building where we subjected the locals and some family members to our unique abilities. After the concert, most everybody came back to the Dole Mill and jammed until pretty late. I was told 1 AM, but I didn't make it past 11 PM, so I neither confirm nor deny. Sunday was a very relaxing goodbye as many folks had no need to hurry home, so we were able to visit and such until well past noon. Jessye and I had the added treat of getting to share dinner with Dennis Riedesel that evening. I had the Salmon.

A few notable things, highlights etc.

Kenny Wolin was able to attend this year. Not only is that a highlight in and of itself, but he also brings much in the way of ability both as a player and teacher. This allowed us to have some higher level workshops that stretched our brains and, if nothing else, left us in a state of sublime humility.

He was also good enough to have prepared an "In Memoriam" performance for Saturday night. I was especially grateful for this as I received many questions about how we might handle incorporating the memory of lost friends into the weekend. I cannot imagine anything better than Kenny's performance for that. Post performance comments confirmed it was a unanimous view.

Ron, Ernie, Dennis, Steve B, Gerry and Paul all volunteered to handle some workshops and for that we were and are grateful. It takes a lot of pressure off of a host to have people willing to step up and help in that manner. I enjoyed every one of the workshops.

John Archibald got a hole in one on

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

Hole #9 - a never-before accomplished feat, even if he did accidentally jump the ball over the brick wall to do it.

I very much appreciated everyone's patience at the public performance with regard to limited time. I thought everyone was very professional with self-awareness and sensitivity to the crowd. This was not much of a "performers" fest as some have been, so thank you to everyone for still being so reasonable with your one good opportunity to shine during the weekend, and I really do apologize if you were hoping for more; everyone certainly deserved more. And along with that, thank you all for your exceptional performances. I thought the quality of the show was A+. Special thanks to Steve Brown for finding the Conga line song last minute and for Gerry for rallying his angels (in full-festive headdress) and providing them an opportunity to play on stage.

As always the missing faces were sad, whether due to passing or just an

absence. There are too many to list and I'd be bound to forget a few so I won't try. Maybe we can just wrap them all up in the absence of Jeremy Brown: I think his smile is big enough to help a person see past anything.

It was an incredible Fest, and as always, it was not because of location, host, venue or any such thing. It was amazing because 35(ish) people all showed up with great attitudes, great musical abilities, and a genuine desire to make the weekend work. You all made so many wonderful, lasting memories for myself and so many others.

I will close with the words from a thank-you note we received from one of the Saturday night concert-goers: "We had an honest-to-goodness good old time, and are so thankful to have been there, in that venerable old building, toe-tapping, and finally Conga-line dancing and clapping with some of the finest, friendliest, and Talented (yes, with a capital T!) folks I've met! That rare experience in Campton Lower Village is one of my favorite memories of magical times!"

## A BFXVII Reflection

Jennifer and I were so excited to be able to attend another Bones Fest, and looking back on this year's bones fest I thought there were a number of interesting distinctions from other Fests.

First of all I thought the mill building was an excellent location, and the ability to serve as a sort of dorm was perfect. Although I didn't stay there, I could see the camaraderie in the people who did, and how relaxed everyone was.

Secondly, I thought it was a Fest in which there were a number of beginners who gelled together, and really added to the camaraderie of the event.

One interesting point that seemed to be missing from this Fest in comparison to other Fests was the lack of pass offs. I'm not really sure why that was but in the many opportunities to play people seem to be playing all at the same time. All in all it was a wonderful time, so good to see people again! *Steve Brown*

## All Ireland Bones Competition 2023

### Travel

I was delighted to be able to return to Ireland for the Fleadh By the Feale to compete in the All Ireland Bones Competition of 2023. I was lucky enough to be able to attend in 2022 as well. As such, I will share a few thoughts on travel.

There are essentially 3 airports to look at if you want to visit Ireland. There may be one or two that I am not aware of, but these are your best bets: Dublin, Shannon, and Cork

When I flew over in 2022, I was able to get my flight on reward miles. That meant that my ticket was free, I just had to pay taxes and fees, but my itinerary was convoluted, and my travel times were long. I flew out of Dulles (IAD), near Washington, DC, but I had a layover in Amsterdam on the way there, and a layover in Paris on the way back. This was obviously an inexpensive option, but again, the travel times were long. In this case, I had more time than money, so that was fine with me.

The Cork airport is absolutely lovely! It's easy to get in and out of, and we would think about it as a mid-sized airport in the US.

This year, I flew into Dublin. I was flying out of Dulles (IAD) again and was able to get a very reasonably priced flight that flew directly from Dulles to Dublin, and the same was true on the return flight. Total flight time for me on this trip was between 6 and 7 hours.

My brother flew into Shannon in 2022, and joined me on the last few days of my trip. Shannon is close to Galway and may be more desirable if you are not renting a vehicle. I was able to pick him up at the airport.

Ireland has an excellent bus system, and I encourage you to check it out. (there are others in RBS who are more knowledgeable than me on this front). That said, both in 2022, and in 2023, I rented a vehicle. My primary impetus behind this decision was to be able to go where I wanted, when I wanted. I also thought it would be good to have somewhere to put my stuff when I was in between lodging.

I should also note that in 2022, I had

a very flexible itinerary spread out over roughly four weeks, so flexibility was far more important to me than it was in 2023. However, having gotten used to driving in Ireland, I was much more amenable to renting a car again in 2023, even for a shorter itinerary. In addition, my primary use of the rental cars was to get from town to town. Once I arrived and settled into my lodging, I generally left my vehicle parked until it was time to move to the next town.

Here are some things to note about driving in Ireland. First, you are almost certainly going to be driving a manual transmission (aka stick shift). Many of you may balk at this, but the vehicles available for rental that use an automatic transmission are generally more expensive, and larger.

It is my position that you want the smallest possible vehicle that will fit your needs when you are driving in Ireland. I was in a session in 2022 in Galway, talking to a young woman who had moved to Belfast from New Jersey. She said, "driving in Ireland is like playing a constant game of chicken", I don't disagree.

On my 2022 trip I was driving a Fiat 500. It was big enough to fit myself, my brother (when he finally joined me), and both of our suitcases. It was perfect! When I booked my vehicle for this year's trip, the vehicle advertised was a VW Polo or similar. What I got was a Dacia Jogger. I should have returned to the desk immediately to return the car. The Dacia Jogger is a Romanian manufactured station wagon that literally has 3rd row seating! It's bigger than a Subaru Outback! Needless to say, I had many white knuckle moments navigating through roads designed before the advent of motor vehicles;

This brings me to another point. If you are capable of driving stick shift, don't worry about shifting on the left. You'll pick it up quickly. After all, the pedals are in the same position. Driving on the left side of the road is also something that you will quickly acclimate to. Roundabouts are actually helpful, as they will challenge you to shift appropriately, and worst case scenario, you just go around the roundabout again.

Here is something that you don't hear all that often, though I am fairly sure



# Photographs From Bones Fest XXVII



The Mountain Fare Inn



Thursday Night Reception



The Bartlett's Dole Mill Building



Main Venue with Individual Introductions



Kenny Wolin's Advanced Workshop



Paul Sedgwick's Workshop



Gerry Hines' Beginner Workshop



Ron Bruschi's Workshop



Dennis Riedesel's Workshop



Jamming at the Dole Mill



Friday Dinner (Main Course was Pizza)



Scott Volles Interviews Steve Brown



Campton Historical Society



The Grand Finale Cogo Line at the Campton Historical Society Building



# Photographs From The Saturday Night Public Show



Michael Ballard with Shannon and Jessye



Steve Brown



Ron Bruschi



Jonathan Danforth



Ernie Duffy (on rt) with Sky and John Archibald



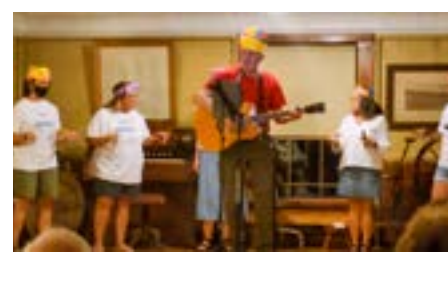
Skeff Flynn and Mary Gunderson King



Bruno Giles



Gerry Hines



Gerry Hines & His Angels (Beginning Students)



Roscoe Oswald with Mary



Dean Robinson with Jessye



Jim Runner with Mary



Paul Sedgwick



Stan Von Hangen with Skeff



Kenny Wolin

that Steve Brown warned me about this. Most of the vehicle damage that happens with American tourists driving on the left hand side of the road happens to the passenger side of the vehicle. It's fairly easy to realize when you have a vehicle driving toward you in the right lane, you should move to the left lane. What is less obvious is we have a tendency to drift.

If you are going to drift, your natural tendency will be to drift left, or to the center (which for Americans means drifting left). If you drift left when you are sitting on the right side of the vehicle, you may hit a curb, or a shrub, or a wall, or whatever, since you can't see how close you are getting to the left edge of the road from your right hand seat. When driving in Ireland, I had a mantra: drive left, drift center. It served me well, as I had no issues driving, even if there were times when my knuckles were white.

**Preparation** I really felt in both my 2022 and 2023 trips that I wanted to get in as much practice with Irish musicians as I could before the Fleadh. In 2022, that mostly meant going to Galway. In 2023, I had a few more options, as I now had connections with players and places.

Don't forget your etiquette! The very first thing you want to look for are places that have traditional Irish sessions. From there, if you can determine if they are open sessions, that will go a long way. Not all sessions are open, and you don't want to step on someone's gig.

Next, you want to make sure that you have permission to join the session. Ask who the session leader is and talk to them. Tell them that that you are interested in joining the session on bones and that you will be respectful. Next, follow through! If someone thinks you are playing too loud, try to play quieter.

The bones are not universally accepted in Irish Trad, and there may be folks that turn you away outright. I was in a session in Cork (in 2022) with some well known players – who accepted me in the session – when someone sitting at the bar asked me to play softer. I talked to the piper about it after I had made adjustments and he said to me – “you know, he's not wrong, it's nicer with the softer bones”.

Having made some connections in 2022, it was much easier going in 2023. I spent time in Dingle, Galway, and Doolin, before heading on to Abbeyfeale.

I would guess that I was in sessions for at least 4 hours a day (with one possible exception) before I made my way to Abbeyfeale. All the while I was taking notes. If you aren't familiar with the Irish repertoire it can be helpful to take note of tunes you like so that you can call on them later when working with musicians during the Fleadh.

### **What to expect at the Fleadh**

When you get to Abbeyfeale, the pace tends to slow down a bit. There is typically a welcome session on Thursday night. This starts at about 9pm. It's at this point that I should probably talk about the Irish approach to food. They typically front load their calorie intake. So, have a big breakfast, maybe you eat something for lunch, and have an early dinner. In Abbeyfeale you won't have many choices for food after about 6 or 7pm. It's possible in a late session they may offer some sandwiches to the musicians, but I wouldn't count on this – just be grateful when it happens.

On Friday evening there is typically a street busking competition. This is really great fun! All sorts of little folks, separated into groups by age, playing music on the streets of downtown Abbeyfeale. It's wonderful to see the support the community has for traditional music and the way they pass it along to the kids!

If you've been lucky enough to make some friends on Thursday night, you might find yourself participating in one of the marches of the Wren Boys down to the square. If you're not familiar with the Wren Boy tradition, I highly suggest you look it up. Great stuff!

Of course, there will be sessions afterwards, starting at 9 or 10 pm. And that is sort of a theme in Abbeyfeale. There will be afternoon sessions on Saturday and Sunday, but it really gets cooking at about 9 or 10 pm. Keep an eye on the schedule and figure out who you want to see and/or play with. If you're feeling ambitious, you might be able to do some morning or day trips during the Fleadh.

### **Surprise Invite to Dave Murphy's**

One of the greatest honors of my 2023 trip, was being invited out to the home of the great Dave Murphy. Dave has taken the All Ireland Bones title enough times that he's decided to give other folks a chance. And of course, he's trained some of the best bones players in the world,

such as his daughter Jackie Murphy, John Ford, Adrian O'Leary and others – all of whom have placed in the All Ireland Bones Competition in recent years.

Dean Robinson, Kyle Forsthooff, and myself, were all invited to Dave's house on the Monday of the competition. All of the aforementioned bones players were present, along with family and friends. It was a wonderful afternoon of music, fellowship, and not to mention a wonderful lunch provided by Dave's wife. We had probably the most beautiful weather that Limerick will see this year and most genuinely, a good time was had by all. I have nothing but gratitude to Dave and his family for a wonderful afternoon.

### **Junior Bones Competition**

It was a great honor to be asked to judge the Junior All Ireland Bones Competition this year. I really felt as though it was a tip of the cap to me, and I really took it seriously.

There were five competitors in the Junior Bones Competition this year. They were: Chloe Quille-Drummond, Feidhlim Watters, Amber McDonald, Tessa Marie O'Donnell, and Iarla Dunford

I am reminded of a story from Steve Brown when he was first asked to judge the junior bones competition. He told me that he was excited to finally see the judging criteria. When the moment came, they handed him a blue composition book, like one you would have used to take exams at school. Excitedly, he opened it up to see that it was blank. At this point, he turned to someone on the stage and asked if they had a copy of the judging criteria. Their response, “You're the adjudicator, you should know.”

So that tells us that there isn't any set guide. Each adjudicator needs to devise their own set of criteria for what they are looking for. I'll start by talking a bit about what I was looking for. I broke it down into four parts:

Rhythm - essentially a pass/fail - is the player in time?

Variation - did the player play the same thing the whole time or did they mix it up?

These first 2 are objective and measurable. Now we move on to the subjective categories.

Technique - How clean were they? Did they do anything beyond taps and triplets? For example, Amber had what I

call a running double.

How well did they back the tune - This is perhaps the most subjective.

I scored the competition as follows:

1st - Amber McDonald

2nd - Iarla Dunford

3rd – a tie between: Tessa Marie O'Donnell, Chloe Quille-Drummond, and Feidhim Watters

So when we look at our top 2 competitors, I thought Iarla had really clean technique, and impressive triplets. They both had variations in how they played both tunes. Amber had a running double - and she was the only junior to do it. You could make the argument that Iarla's playing was so smooth that it canceled out Amber's advantage in terms of technique. Iarla's triplets were really smooth – great playing! Ultimately I thought Amber was more sensitive to the melodies. She accented the tunes quite nicely. And of course, she was no slouch in her technique! Her attention to the tunes is what gave her the edge in my mind.

On to our third place competitors. All were good in terms of rhythm and timing. According to my notes, Chloe and Tessa had very little variation. Feidhim had some on the second tune. I didn't really get a sense that either Feidhim or Chloe were backing the tune, more just playing the pulse or subdivision. Tessa seemed to be the best in terms of accenting the melody. There really was very little separation between the three, all played very well!

Someone said to me once, in Irish bones playing there are only two elements: to roll, and to stop. I personally disagree, but I understand the philosophy. I think Iarla is a good example of a player who takes this approach and does it well. That said, if this is the approach, the stops become incredibly important. The stops become the way that you accent the melody. In Irish music, the melody is primary. My feeling is that bones players should be playing the melody (in a sense). Bodhran players are really the only ones who can get away with playing the pulse or subdivision - and I know bodhran players who would disagree. They would say that you have to know the tune to play it properly.

I would also note that playing in sessions is very different than competing. In a session, variation is far less important

than consistency. Also, I would advise any juniors (or seniors), that when they are competing, they should do a few clicks and rolls once the microphones are live, but before the tunes begin, just so they can get an idea of what things sound like on the stage. I know that for me personally, the volume of bones coming back at me in 2022 was jarring and had an effect on my performance.

### Senior Bones Competition

Here is what is expected from you if you are participating in the All Ireland Bones Competition. You are required to play a jig, typically 2 times through. Then you are expected to play two reels, one going into the other without stopping, again, playing each two times through. Finally, you are expected to play a tune with a different time feel. That means anything other than a jig or a reel. For myself, I chose a polka this year. Dean, I believe, chose a slide. But it could be anything.

One of the interesting things to consider when competing in the All Ireland Bones Competition is who your musicians will be. For example, this year and last year both Dean Robinson and I opted to use local musicians we had met in sessions – Micheal and Liam Broderick. While this and last year both James Yoshizawa and Kyle Forsthoff opted to use the players provided by the Fleadh.

When choosing musicians, either approach is acceptable. Here are some thoughts on both. If you can connect with local players, or bring your own, you have some opportunity to practice. Both Dean and I were able to work out the tunes we wanted to play, and to get at least one run through with our melody players before the competition. If you are using the players provided by the Fleadh, you will probably not have the opportunity to practice, and it is possible they may not know the tunes you want to play.

Dean and I were lucky enough to make friends early. Micheal and Liam were incredibly accommodating and worked with us both on our competition sets. In 2022, Micheal basically crafted the set for me. In 2023, I had a better

idea of what I wanted to play, and so he worked up the tunes that I was asking for (I mean he knew them anyway, but what a kindness!). They extended the same cooperation to Dean. It was a big relief to us to know that our melody players knew what we wanted to do, and that we had at least one run through with them before the competition.

The 2023 competitors were (please forgive any miss-spellings): Sarah O'Donoghue, William Murphy, Dean Robinson, Jackie Murphy, Skeff Flynn, John Ford, Paddy O'Donovan, Darren Roach, Sean McNerney, David Murphy, Kyle Forst-off, and Adrian O'Leary

The adjudicator was the great Junior Davey! 5 time All Ireland Bodhran Champion and 2 time All Ireland Bones Champion. All of the competitors represented themselves admirably. I won't go into depth on my personal analysis, but rather will let you see for yourselves. You can view the 2023 All Ireland Bones Competition here: [https://fb.watch/lz6MpEv\\_Ps/](https://fb.watch/lz6MpEv_Ps/)

The results for the 2023 All Ireland Bones Competition were; 1st - Sarah O'Donoghue, 2nd - John Ford, and 3rd - Skeff Flynn.



Adjudicator Junior Davies, Melody Players Micheal and Liam Broderick, and Skeff Flynn

### Closing Thoughts

Ireland seems to me to be a magical place. Music seems to be in the air and only needs someone to grab it. I found the people to be incredibly welcoming, and very receptive. It is my hope to go back again, and again. Please let me know if you have any questions about going across the pond, or any interest in the competition. *Skeffinton Flynn*





## BFXXVII Group Photograph

From left: **Standing;** Paul Sedgwick, Bruno Giles, Michael Ballard, Kenny Wolin, John Archibald, Steve Brown, Ron Bruschi, Erin Sharkey, Marie Bruschi, Dean Robinson, Emmett Danforth, Bruce Strong, Dennis Riedesel, Gerry and Janet Hines, Sky Bartlett, Scott Volles; **Sitting;** Roscoe Oswald, Jessye Bartlett, Jaqueline and Vicki Petroski, Diane Sharkey, Becky Shannon, Mary Gunderson King, Skeff Flynn, Jim Runner, Jonathan Danforth, Ernie Duffy; **Front;** Tina Smith, Don Joy, Stan and Janet Von Hagen.



## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 25, No. 4 2023

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Playing, Banjo  
Player

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raphy

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## Executive Director's Column

I am often amazed by the efforts and creativity of our Secretary and Treasurer Steve Wixson. He's been cranking out Newsletter content for quite some time now and this edition is no exception. I am impressed at least in part because I understand how challenging it is to do. I dealt with some serious writer's block trying to put together this editorial. Some of my early attempts went something like this:

*The end of the year is always a time of reflection for me. I remind myself to be grateful for all that I have. I mean there are children out there who don't even have rhythm bones!*

*The Holiday season often leaves me with a profound sense of gratitude. I find myself thinking of the less fortunate among us who don't even have jam sessions!*

*As we head into the New Year, let's pause to reflect on the poor souls who don't even have ideas for the*

RBS newsletter!

Johnny Cash said "it takes a lot of imagination to write a song". I thought I might try my hand at it in hopes of sparking some content for my editorial.

*Yes and how many times must a man turn his wrist, before he can produce a triplet? The answer my friend is clacking in the wind, the answer is clacking in the wind. Yes and how many trees must a man chop down, before he can make a set of bones? The answer my friend is one.*

Needless to say, Johnny was right and my effort was less than successful:

Then I realized that as cheesy as my early starts to this editorial were, I was on the right track. I do have a lot to be thankful for. 2023 saw the return of (Continued on Page 2)

## Jim Connor, Bones Playing, Banjo Player

Jim Connor was born and raised in Gadsden, Alabama, and is described as a song writer, composer, vocalist, and instrumentalist on the banjo, guitar, harmonica, and rhythm bones. His most famous song is *Grandma's Feather Bed* made famous by John Denver. Banjo legend, Earl Scruggs, says "Jim is the finest living traditional banjo player, and perhaps the best that ever lived." The banjo is important to his rhythm bones career in that it has taken him around the world where he has played rhythm bones. That story is told on Page 4 in this newsletter.

Jim was Ted Goon's newspaper delivery boy in the 50s in Gadsden, Alabama, and he learned to play rhythm bones from Ted 'Mr. Goon-Bones' Goon. Ted was an important rhythm bones player in and around the 1950s, and we have a large exhibit in our Online Museum that documents his playing and recording career (<https://rhythmbones.com/goon-bones-exhibit/>). His recording of *Ain't She Sweet* rose to #7 on the Billboard Jukebox Chart.

Unless otherwise noted, text in quotes was taken from an interview with Jim in November 2023.

"I heard Ted play rhythm bones early in my banjo years, and learned how to hold them and do my arms and learned his style. I can't even remember the

years – in the early 60s. I think he had another job and was not a full-time rhythm bones musician at that time. (Continued on Page 2)



Jim Connor with banjo and rhythm bones (Gadsden Times)

## Editorial

I am embarrassed. Several years ago Jim Connor attended Bones Fest VIII, and due to circumstances including rain, he did not get to perform. We learned of Jim from the late Tom Raisbeck. At that time I knew he played rhythm bones, but I did not know about his impressive career. I know now and his story begins on Page 1.

I am excited to be a part of the planning for the 25th Anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society. Back in 1999, you could find about 100 Internet pages of rhythm bones information. Just now I Googled “rhythm bones” and found about 20,000 pages. We have made a difference, and it is time to celebrate.

Though not official, there will be two celebrations, the first at Bones Fest XXVIII (see Page 8 for preliminary details), and a world wide virtual celebration on September 20, 2024, our actual anniversary date (an idea from Jonathon Danforth). The Board welcomes with open arms ideas, like Jonathan’s, to add to the celebration.

Tom Connolly wowed us with his story titled, ‘An Irish Bones Story.’ Now he is back with a fun piece on Page 6.

At the Board Meeting at BFXXVII, Facebook was discussed and Skeff Flynn took administrative control. Check out his Facebook story on Page 7.

### (Continued From Page 1)

the in-person Bones Fest in Campton, NH. Randy “DaBonesMan” Seppalla is actively organizing Bones Fest 2024 in Clarksdale, MI. The Rhythm Bones Society is looking forward to recognizing a major milestone in 2024, celebrating 25 years as an organization. Our Facebook page is once again thriving as a way for bones enthusiasts to connect and may even help bolster our membership, as new folks seem to be joining all the time. (More on this on page 7.)

The Cacophony in Campton was an absolute blast! Our hosts Sky and Jessye created a wonderful atmosphere in a beautiful setting. Many familiar faces were able to join us along with several welcome new editions. If you missed it, or if you just want to reminisce, you can read more about it in *RBP*, Vol 25, No 3.

Bones Fest XXVIII will be in Clarksdale MI in May of 2024. I was fortunate enough to attend in 2019 and can say that we are in for a treat. The Shack Up Inn is the perfect venue for workshops, jamming and fellowship. The town of Clarksdale welcomed us with open arms and has spent the past few years asking Randy when we’re coming back. More details can be found on page 8, and registration should be open around the time you are reading this, so hit the website and reserve your spot. Randy has lots of local connections, including great caterers! It’s worth noting that the registration fee includes a good number of meals.

The Rhythm Bones Society turns 25 in 2024. How should we celebrate? There is talk of a virtual event on September 20th, the actual date of our anniversary, which sounds great to me. A few thoughts have been discussed for commemorative items. Your input will help ensure we come up with a fitting tribute, so if you have an idea, please send it our way.

2023 provided lots of opportunities for me to play rhythm bones. I returned to Ireland to participate in the All-Ireland Bones Competition. My partner Mary and I continue to lead a weekly jam session, The Shedhoppers. We’re performing regular duo gigs as Tangled Woods as well as participating in Old Time and Irish sessions in our area and generally doing whatever we can to share the gift of music with friends both new and old.

And that’s just it. Music generally, and for us, playing rhythm bones specifically, really is a gift. It is something to be shared. I’ve connected with a few folks this past year who told me that they had relatives who played the bones, but hadn’t seen or heard anyone play them in years. Truly a gift for me to be able to help them remember their loved one in this way. What a wonderful thing we have this organization to bring us together in music and fellowship. I really am grateful for you all.

At Bones Fest this fall I was talking to Mary and Vikki when Rosco came along and chimed in, “what are we doing, starting a cult?” As I look back on 2023, I realize that there are less fortunate folks out there who don’t even have cults! I’m glad I’m not one of them.

Happy New Year. Your friendly neighborhood bones player. *Skeff Flynn*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

### (Jim Connor Continued)

“He would teach anyone who wanted to learn and would spend time with them. The first group I was in was the Gadsden Guys, and several of them learned to play rhythm bones from Ted. He was very nice and I knew his family a little bit. My wife and I visited him not long after we were married, and she remembers us just sitting around with me playing the banjo and Ted playing his Goon-Bones.

“I first started picking up pieces of wood, big old pencils and different kinds of spoons, soup spoons and big old serving spoons and playing with them. I have bone and wood rhythm bones, and all and each provide distinctive soundings and rhythms. But nothing is better than a good set of wood bones. My rock maple ones are rich sounding, and I occasionally use persimmon and cow-rib rhythm bones. I carry my favorite wood rhythm bones in my banjo case or left pocket everywhere I go.

“I had several ‘Goon-Bones’ from





Ted Goon lost most of them in the 50 years or so I've been traveling on the road. I've got one set around here in some box, and it is stamped with 'Goon-Bones' on the side, and I would not take a million bucks for it. I leave my original 'Goon-Bones' stamped set at home (see the photograph below).

"Frailing on a banjo makes your hands the shape to play rhythm bones. The right hand frailing made it seem natural to put two rhythm bones in there. I learned how to ease up them to make a high tone and pull them down to make a lower tone.

"I had a scholarship to go to Harvard so I did 4 years up there. I just messed around with my major and didn't have enough classes and I didn't get a degree. We were playing on all our holidays and all during our time at Harvard in a group called the Charles Valley River Boys. I don't remember playing much rhythm bones with them, but I think I did a few little numbers.

"Then Richard [Lockmiller] and I hit the road. We were a duet with Capitol Records, and we were together during the 60s. We recorded and I can't remember if there were any rhythm bones on our records. They weren't a substantial part of our show, what they were was a novelty to us.

"As a novelty, I'd bring the rhythm bones out and play on some up-tempo number. I'd play the banjo and put the rhythm bones in my right hand and pick the banjo with my left hand and play the

rhythm bones. I would strum an open chord on the banjo that was appropriate, and I wouldn't play all the chords with my left hand cause I couldn't do it. Maybe we'd do it as part of the encore. It was part of the show, but just a novelty.

"When I was on road I played rhythm bones as I would get tired of playing the banjo with the same old sound.

"I took Dave Guard's place in the Kingston Trio. We didn't play anything in the regular show with rhythm bones that I remember, and I don't think we ever recorded anything with me on rhythm bones. I did play them as a novelty sometimes for an encore. I'd say, "I've got some bones in my pocket." I'd pull them out and the Kingston Trio crowd had never seen them before. So that was just something extra.

"When I was in John Denver's band, I tried to teach John how to play, but he wasn't interested in pursuing them. I always carried them with me when I toured with him, and I remember playing them at parties. We'd be jamming at parties and I'd get bored and I'd pull the rhythm bones out. But I don't remember playing them on his show at all.

"I did not meet many rhythm bones players when I was on the road, but I've taught many people.

"I'm a 70 year experienced rhythm bones player, and I played rhythm bones



Still photograph from a YouTube video of a Jim Connor concert. What is that in his back pocket?

all over the world. The audiences loved rhythm bones.

"More recently, I shook 'em at several concerts during John Denver week in Aspen, CO. I played rhythm bones in Holland and Belgium on John Denver's Memorial Concerts with the John Adams' Show. I play rhythm bones a time or two in each of my solo concerts."

Jim has made several contributions to the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter. In the special issue covering the first ten Bones Fests, in the Bones Fest XX Prophecy section he wrote, "The Fest Motto is 'Clone them Bones,' and the T-shirt graphic shows the earth with twenty bones radiating out like the rays of the sun. Gerry Hines remembered that prophecy and used it to make the T-shirt graphic for Bones Fest XX.

Jim sent us this poem titled 'Bones Forever' printed in the newsletter.

Long live bones and may your tribe increase  
 May the rhythm of the bones bring you peace!  
 May your spouse or friend put up with you  
 As the music of the bones sees you through  
 Friends of the bones are everywhere  
 Some ride the road, some fly the air  
 And we all know when on earth we're through  
 There'll be a set of heavenly bones waiting for you.

"I place my hand over my heart in memory of having Ted Goon on my paper route in Gadsden, Alabama when just a kid and yet had enough sense to listen and learn direct from the master!

"By the way, my composition *Grandma's Feather Bed* is a good un' to play rhythm bones with... naturally!

"Maybe someday you can see me play the banjo, rhythm bones, harmonica and sing at the same time." Jim and his wife, Cindy, hope they can make it to Bones Fest XXVIII. *Steve Wixson*



Ted Goon's 'Goon-Bones' rhythm bones made from northern Michigan maple



# Jim Connor Biography

Below is a brief overview of Jim Connor's music life.

1938 - Born in Gadsden, AL

1943 - Learns harmonica from his granddaddy

1946 - Mrs. Morris encourages writing

1948 - Adds a 5th string to a banjo ukulele

1949 - Learns rhythm bones from Ted Goon

1956 - 1971 - Studies old-time banjo style from Arthur Kirkendall

1956 - The Gadsden Boys

1960 - Harvard College and part of folk revival

1962 - Richard and Jim, his first commercial group, hit the road

1966-67 - USO Tour

1968-72 - Kingston Trio

1974 - ? - John Denver Band

2018 - Inducted into Alabama Bluegrass Hall of Fame

Over the years hundreds of live club, festival and theatre appearances throughout the world.

On tour with many famous artists, and Jim has three Platinum and eight Gold records to his credit.

Has played in 68 countries on 4 continents.

He has been described by master banjo artist/singer, Earl Scruggs, as "the finest living traditional banjo player, and perhaps the best that ever lived."

What follows is from an interview with Jim in November 2023 plus words extracted from online interviews. Unless otherwise noted quotation marks are quotes from Jim.

## Early Music Life

"I had piano lessons starting in the first grade given by my mother, and I had a cousin, Marylin, who started playing the 4 string ukulele. The reason I bring that up is because of the four strings, it kind of interested me. I learned some ukulele chords and decided to get me a banjo ukulele. I had seen them in newspaper pictures so I went to the music store in Gadsden, and bought me a 4 string banjo ukulele. I was strumming around and liked the sound.

## First banjo

"Then someone told me you only have

4 strings and you are supposed to have 5. So I started looking at banjo players on TV and the Grand Old Opry.

"I was just a pre-teen kid. I took my pocket knife and bored a hole in the side of the banjo neck and put a stop and added a 5th string. I started diddling around and played in local talent shows where they would give a prize. I played my banjo, but didn't win anything.

## Harmonica

"My granddaddy taught me to play the harmonica when I was 5 or 6 years old. He also taught me to play the harmonica without moving it in my mouth.

"In one talent show I put the harmonica in my mouth and along with the banjo won a gallon of ice cream. I was so excited and I guess that's what started me off. I was about 10 years old.

"Every since my granddaddy taught me how to play the harmonica, I've always had one in my left pocket, and still do. For almost 80 years, I carried a little harmonica ready to pull it out hoping it was in the right key. I must have lost 30 or 40 of them over the years. I played solo harmonica on occasion including a couple of award winning Linda Ronstadt albums

## Arthur Kirkendall

"I never met a really good banjo player until I finished high school. I was in college in my home area and went to a fiddler's convention where you had a contest for all the various instruments where the prize was \$15. I met a man there who played the banjo and it was melodic to me. His hands looked like they moved like a ballet dancer on the fret board and the banjo. He was playing the old-time style. This was on Sand Mountain, Alabama, not far from where I lived.

"He was an old man, and I asked him if he would teach me how to play. He said just come to my house, and I did and had my first lesson. His name was Arthur Kirkendall, and he had learned from his uncle, Roe Kirkendall in 1896 when he was a little kid. Roe had learned it from an African slave. That's the source of the old-time style as I know it. I studied for 15 years with Mr. Kirkendall until he passed away in 1978. I can play bluegrass a little bit, but I love and stick with that old-time style. You play with your

fingertips if they are strong enough."

Here is a bonus, a banjo lesson from Jim on his old-time frailing style - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8sZYIY-sYio>

## Harvard

"When I applied to Harvard, my entrance essay was about my grandmother, and I think that tipped the scale for my scholarship."

The '50s and '60s saw Harvard Square at the core of a massive folk revival, a musical movement that largely began with a ragtag group of college students from Boston including Jim and ultimately it became a nationwide phenomenon.

## Richard and Jim:

"My first commercial group was 'Richard [Lockmiller] and Jim,' and we were regulars on Birmingham TV and at the Lowenbrau House in Homewood branching out to the top East Coast folk clubs including the Gaslight and the Bitter End. We toured Europe and made a recording in England that led to a contract with Capitol Records. We also made two appearances on ABC's 'Hootenanny.' Richard was the best rhythm guitarist I have heard or played with." Here is one of their recordings: [https://www.lp2cd.com/time/120611/richard\\_and\\_jim--watermelon\\_hangin\\_on\\_the\\_vine.mp3](https://www.lp2cd.com/time/120611/richard_and_jim--watermelon_hangin_on_the_vine.mp3)

## USA Tour

Jim Connor performed more than 300 USO Shows during 1966-1967. Known as the Jamboree Show and during the holiday season as the Holiday Jamboree Show, Jim performed eight months doing two shows a day, around the globe. Here's a letter from one of those soldiers.

"Jim, I know you don't remember me, it's been about 53 years. You were in Wiesbaden, Germany, and I believe you were performing at the Service Club. After your performance we went down stairs and jammed. What fun, and how nice you were for giving us the opportunity to jam with you. Oh! I remember "Richard and Jim" recordings. Do you still have the D-45?"

## Kingston Trio

"They were Nick Reynolds, Bob Shane and Dave Guard, and I would jam with them on occasion. Several years later I took Dave Guard's place as the banjo player, and was with them for 5 years." You can preview songs on our album

‘The Best of the New Kingston Trio including the first recording of *Grandma’s Feather Bed* (see below) at <https://music.apple.com/us/album/grandmas-feather-bed/478184727?i=478185079>

### John Denver

“I met John Denver about the time I left college and before he changed his name to John Denver and started writing songs. He heard my song *Grandma’s Feather Bed* (see below) and years later as he’s beginning to be a superstar, he recorded the song on his biggest selling album ever ‘Back Home Again.’ He asked me to join him in performances and that led to about 60 concerts covering most of his career.” Here is John Denver singing the song with the Muppets: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH\\_tYxY8AKE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH_tYxY8AKE)

### Songwriter and Composer

“I had a third grade teacher, Mrs. Morris, who really encouraged me. I would finish my homework or tests early and write things on the edges of the paper to pass the time. She read them and eventually asked me to write a poem for the class. She had me stand up and read it and the class applauded. That was the beginning of my writing career.

I visited my grandma who had the feather bed and she was so much fun. She sang old time songs and told stories that she learned from her grandmother when she was a child. I remembered many of them, and later discovered people wanted to hear them as Folk songs.

“I wrote hundreds of songs and the first song published was *Grandma’s Feather Bed* (see below). That gave me a publisher though most of my songs were never published.”

I could not find a list of the songs Jim published, but this link lists the credits for just one of his albums: <https://www.discogs.com/release/21839608-Jim-Connor-Personal-Friend-Of-Arthur-Kirkendall-Monk-Daniel-And-Cluny-Rakestraw>

Here is a song sung the day he wrote it called *Ten Pounds of Possum*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPLyanP-F1kw&t=68s>

His composition *Sand Mountain Symphony* is recognized as one of America’s Landmark Musical Compositions. It has 24 movements, some orchestrated, and here is the finale titled *The Mist*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43udjrTKrlw>

### Grandma’s Feather Bed

I got lonely on the road and I’d often write letters home. I wrote a letter, more like a poem, to my grandmother and tucked a copy away in my banjo case. Years later, I found the letter and decided to turn it into a song.

One day in 1968, I was practicing the song and John Denver walked in and said he liked the song. I made him a cassette recording, and as fate would have it, John lost it

I ran into John from time-to-time and was invited to his house for a barbecue. I played the song for John’s producer, Milton Okun, and my song was recorded with me playing banjo. “John loved *Grandma’s Feather Bed*, and would play it at all his shows and all his appearances.” It has been covered by at least 22 artists, and I still get royalties from that song.” Here is Jim telling the story of the song and then singing it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIZdf4pupl4>



### The Vegavox Deluxe Banjo

“This banjo, the Vegavox Deluxe Special, was made for me in 1968, the last year before the Vega Banjo Company was sold to the to Martin Guitar Company. I wanted a custom made Vegabox Deluxe because it has the high head and the high, wide resonator.

“They made this banjo for me because at the time I was in the Kingston Trio and we endorsed Vega so they could use our name to advertise their banjos. They made banjos for several different members of the group for just the cost of the parts, and this banjo was made for me for \$600. I asked them how much they would have sold this banjo for and they said \$10,000.

I wrote out how I wanted the neck inlaid, carving on the heel and inlaid with mother of pearl and little ivory lines. It is gold plated. It is one fret longer making it a G-flat banjo, but I tune it in G as I like the way the strings sound.

“About the end of the first year that I had this banjo, it was stolen in Greenwich Village. Someone broke into my little car, a Volkswagen, and when I came out of the club where I was playing there on the sidewalk was all stuff that was in my car, suitcases, guitar case, and my other banjo. 35 years later a friend saw it on Ebay and I was able to get it back and it looked like it had never been played.”

Here is Jim telling stories and playing tunes on his Vegavox banjo: <https://www.facebook.com/JimConnorBanjo/videos/1688144698120473/>

### Sand Mountain

Dill Production from Birmingham, Alabama produced a movie about the rich heritage where Jim lived. It is titled, “Music in Their Bones: The Music & People of Sand Mountain” and it was shown on TCM and PBS. Jim plays on this trailer starting at about 1:30): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVe-7v4IVMJJ>

As I reflect on this article, Jim’s music life was built on the shoulders of people of Sand Mountain, Alabama; piano, his mother, harmonica, his granddaddy, old-time songs, his grandma, rhythm bones, Ted Goon, banjo, Arthur Kirkendall, song writing and composing, Mrs. Morris, and there were others. A fertile place to call home, and he still lives there.

### References:

This link is a wonderful overview of Jim’s life in his own words: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Semg0dEFPp0>

Here is Jim from an earlier video telling stories and playing several instruments: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTuFBwuEiUQ>

Here is a story about Jim from the The Aspen Times: <https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=ATW19760101-01.2.35&e=-----en-20--1--img-tx-IN%7ctxCO%7ctxTA-----0----->

Additional material for this article came from the Ft. Payne Times-Journal, Gadsden Times, Sand Mountain Reporter, Steve Celuch Podcast, Colorado Historic Newspapers. *Steve Wixson*.

## It's the Action that Matters, Not the Size

Is there a “perfect” size for a pair of rhythm bones? Is there a “normal” size? Is there a specific curve or an ideal weight? Should they be narrow or thick, or tapered? Should the marrow be hollowed out of rib bones? Should one bone be heavier so that the other bounces more easily against it? Are smaller bones better for smaller hands? I made my first pair of rhythm bones in 1979, and it is still the only pair I have made that I have not agonized over the length and thickness and weight.

Back then a musician friend Joe “Strokes” Stephens told me about the bones and when I went to the local butcher I told him what Joe told me. I asked him for beef rib bones, about 5 ½ or 6 inches long, with a bit of a curve and a good thickness so I could hollow out the marrow for a nice sound. The butcher had never heard of rhythm bones either and kindly offered to cut a few samples from different parts of the rib for me to experiment with but, with a confidence that belied my total ignorance, I said one pair would do and I marked out two ribs for him to cut.

If I knew then what I know now I would have taken him up on his offer because one thing I do know for sure about making rhythm bones is that they all turn out different. They are different to what I expect when I start making them, and they behave very differently as I clean, dry, sand, polish and balance them. They all feel different in the hand and they behave differently depending on where and how you hold them.

I usually make a few pairs together. I get full beef ribs, boil them, match them up into pairs and choose where to cut them. But I almost always end up swapping partners a few times during the process. And then if I am satisfied I go back to them a few days later and change my mind again. I only really know that a pair of rhythm bones is good when I ask my wife Bríd to try them out.

For over forty years as I have tried to make the perfect pair of rhythm bones I've found that each pair turns out to be unique even when I carry out the exact same process and use the same dimen-

sions. I learned a lot from Steve Brown when I met him first. I read Scott Miller's booklet on how to make rhythm bones, and I have even done a diagram of a beef ribcage numbering the bones according to Scott's advice that I give to the butchers as a guide. I have tried to copy Joe Birl's famous Bakelite rhythm bones, and Steve Brown's beautiful shin rhythm bones. Yet, I often find that random bone sizes and shapes produce beautiful sounds. Some of the nicest rhythm bones I have made were from butchers who were trying to do me a favour by cutting them and shaping them as they saw fit. One pair I made recently were in my bin at least twice as “scrap” before I changed my mind and rescued them.

The smallest pair I ever got was from a West Yorkshire man called Stephen Thorp, whose grandfather Charlie Thorp played them during the 1st World War. The largest pair I ever saw was owned by a man in Padstow in Cornwall who was MC of their famous Obby Oss festival. They were probably eleven inches long and two inches wide at the base. He lost them and asked me to make replacements, which I did, but he found his own again in the meantime.

To my surprise those large bones were actually very easy to play, but I did have to change technique – once I got them swinging, I just let their momentum do the work and let them “fall” against each other rather than clicking. They reminded me of rhythm bones I read about years ago that were made from horse ribs and were so large because there was no amplification in the music halls in the USA at the time. The tiny World War One bones on the other hand (if you'll pardon the pun) were quite a workout to play!



I have made rhythm bones from Italian water buffalo, which turned out to be very big and flat with a surprisingly “soft” texture. I also made a few pairs

of goat rhythm bones from shins, which are thin but very hard and “clicky”. I am still looking for goat ribs (for more than 10 years!) and I suspect they will also be quite hard. As well as various types of wood (elm, pine, and even cheap deal) I've tried aluminum and copper. This year I even saved the thigh bones of the Christmas goose, and I will try them out in the New Year.

And after all that here are the seven things I have learned about the size of rhythm bones:

Rhythm bones players preferences vary hugely.

Nice looking rhythm bones are no good if they don't play well.

Some ugly rhythm bones play beautifully.

Lots of lengths, widths, curvatures and weights can produce great action.

Even rhythm bones made to a standard pattern from non-bone material have individual characteristics.

There are many different opinions of the same pair of rhythm bones.

The bones decide.

And if I were forced to choose the most important physical characteristic, it would be the action.

I hope you had some fun reading this article. *Tom Connolly*

## Dom Flemons' New Instructional Video

Dom Flemons has a new Rhythm Bones Instructional Video. Check it out at <https://www.facebook.com/watch?v=2619785601517000>. It will soon replace his earlier video on the ‘Learn To Play’ Page on our website.

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXVIII**, May 2-5, 2024, Clarksdale, MS, the birthplace of the Blues. Randy Seppala host.

**Rhythm Bones Society 25th Anniversary Celebration**. September 20, 2024. In the planning stage, but possibly a world wide one day affair using Zoom teleconferencing.



## RBS's Facebook Page

I'd like to take a moment to talk about our Facebook group. Over the last year, one of the goals of the Rhythm Bones Society was to revitalize our Facebook group. We have done this in splendid fashion. You can find the group here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/818901525412905>. Or you can search on Facebook for Rhythm Bones Society, you'll most certainly find it.

Our hope was to create a forum where rhythm bones players could interact with one another. So far, it seems to be doing well. We have beginners asking questions. Rhythm Bone makers give us glimpses of what they are working on. Collectors ask for help in identifying the source of the bones they're playing. Some share family histories, stories of rhythm bones players who came before us. And of course, there are videos of actual rhythm bones playing! There are even videos from recent Bones Fests!

I know not everyone is on Facebook or is a fan of the platform. If we can find a way to replicate this on a more accessible platform we will, but sometimes it just makes sense to use the tools that are in front of you. For the moment, this seems to be working.

The Board has shown a high level of engagement in the group. Kenny Wolin, and Tom Connelly's Irish Bones, have contributed volumes! Stephen Brown has been active in the comments. I have commented or replied to many posts, and have posted a bit of my own playing as well. And that's the whole point, isn't it? We are the Rhythm Bones Society, and a Society is a community. We need each other, and this is a virtual place for us to hang out. Let's grow it.

To hang out in person, mark your calendar's for Bones Fest XXVIII! We'll be in Clarksdale, Mississippi, May 2-5, 2024. Your registration fee includes something like 6 meals, so don't let the sticker shock deter you!

I am so excited that Bones Fest will be in Clarksdale, Mississippi this year! Mary and I have already booked our air travel. *Skeff Flynn*

## Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting

The meeting was called to order on September 9, 2023 at 12:21 PM in the Doll Building in Campton, NH by Executive Director, Skeff Flynn. All members were present except Tom Connolly.

The Nominations Committee was called to order, and all current Board Members were nominated for 2024.

Bones Fest XXVIII was discussed. Attendees will be asked the month they prefer and if anyone wants to host it. Randy Seppala has expressed interest in hosting it again in Clarksdale, MS.

The 25th anniversary of RBS was discussed, and we need program ideas and commemorative gift ideas. (Note: after the meeting, Jonathan Danforth suggested a virtual event on September 20, 2024 so the world can celebrate our 25th anniversary).

Facebook has become more active. Several Board Members have become administrators and have actively been posting and/or responding to community conversations.

Printing the RBP newsletter was discussed and the Board wants to keep a paper copy as a membership benefit.

ASCAP has announced a new Festival License that would almost triple our yearly cost. All or most of the background music played at Fests is live and in the public domain, and we are not sure how a volunteer society like ours can do the research required to know how much to pay. The motion was made and approved to create a RBS Youtube Channel and see if their copyright tools will tell us if we are using copyrighted songs. Dean Robinson made a motion to table this discussion until the next Fest, and it was approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:36PM.  
Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson,

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order on September 9, 2023 at 1:44 PM in the Doll Building in Campton, NH by Executive Director, Skeff Flynn.

Motion was made and approved to accept the minutes from the last meeting as

printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson gave a brief Treasurer's Report.

Steve Wixson presented the results of the Nominations Committee with all current members nominated for another year. The floor was opened for additional nominations, and there being none a motion was made and approved to elect the nominees by acclamation. Those elected were Skeff Flynn, Executive Director, Kenny Wolin, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members, Steve Brown, Tom Connolly, Dennis Riedesel, and Dean Robinson.

Bones Fest XXVIII was discussed, and no one volunteered to host it. Randy Seppala wants to hold it again in Clarksdale, MS, and the Board will ask him for a formal proposal.

Steve Wixson announced that the 25th Anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society is September 20, 2024. Attendees were asked for program and a commemorative give ideas. Skeff Flynn also asked how many people might attend a Fest in Ireland, and 16 responded yes.

Sky and Jessye Bartlett were thanked for hosting Bones Fest XXVII.

ASCAP has a new Festival license that will increase our cost. The Board is studying this and will advise.

Ernie Duffy thanked the Board for serving in 2023.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:01PM.

Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson  
Secretary

## Minutes of the Board of Directors Zoom Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Skeff Flynn, on December 5, 2023 at 7:15 PM using Zoom teleconferencing. Those attending were Steve Brown, Tom Connolly, Skeff Flynn, and Steve Wixson.

The Board received a proposal from Randy Seppala to hold Bones Fest XXVII again in Clarksdale, Mississippi. There was a general discussion about the Fest.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to hold Bones Fest XXVII, our 25th Anniversary Fest, in Clarksdale, MS on May 2-5, 2024 with a Registration Fee of \$130 (which includes 5 meals).

Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson



## BFX XVIII Preliminary Information

“SHAKE, RATTLE & ROLL dem bones at the Crossroads, deep in the heart of the Mississippi Delta.” Bones Fest XXVIII will be based once again at the Shack-Up Inn and Chapel on the old Hopson Plantation off historic blues Hwy 49 just outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi. If you attended BFX XIII in 2019 you already know what an ideal venue Shack-Up is for such an event. For the past five years people have been constantly asking me “When is Bones Fest coming back to town?”

On May 2, 3, 4 & 5 Bones Fest XXVIII will celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society in Clarksdale, Mississippi the “Home of the Blues.” Some are calling it the Blues Bone Fest, but all types of bones related music are welcome and certainly encouraged.

I am happy to host another Fest at this unique place near my winter home on Hwy 49 South. Clarksdale has much to offer musically, historically and culturally and the town is always ready to open it’s doors, nationally and internationally, with it’s own home grown blend of Southern hospitality to the many visitors that come here seeking the blues. Come get you some.

Randy “DaBonesMan” Seppala (Fest graphic is an acrylic creation by Randy)



## Rhythm Bones Society

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 26, No. 1 2024

*In This Issue:*  
*A Brief History of the Rhythm Bones Society*

*Founding Members Reflections*

*Tambo and Bones: A Book Review*

*Columns:*  
*Executive Director*

*Editorial*

## Executive Director's Column

Hello good people! This installment of the Rhythm Bones Player gives us a great look at our history. This issue is presented out of sequence, and as a result, I would like to take a look forward, as well as back. In Volume 26, No. 2, we announced the Rhythm Bones Society Leadership Mentor Program. I would like to invite anyone who feels they could contribute to contact us using the link below:

<https://forms.gle/8o5EDqXvqTaStsCu8>

Steve Wixson does the incredible, if not Herculean task, of keeping the Rhythm Bones Society going. It is easily the work of a half dozen people, and he seems to manage it by himself. I would imagine he could use some help – especially from his Director, lol! I make light of the fact that I'm not always on the spot, but again, we could use your assistance. The hope is to create a pipeline of diversified talent that can help the Rhythm Bones Society thrive for

years to come.

This issue of the newsletter takes us through the history of the Rhythm Bones Society. It is a testament to the early participants and founders. I often use the term “Bones Ambassadors” to describe key figures who have managed to keep our tradition alive. Today, you will read about a number of them. If your mind is like mine, you will aspire to be like them. Join the RBS Leadership Mentor Program.

We are also including a book review. “Tambo and Bones,” written by Carl Wittke and originally published by the Duke University Press in 1930. It is important to remember that the height of rhythm bones playing in the United States came in the 1800's. A time fraught with racial injustice. The minstrel show was in some ways equivalent to (Continued on Page 2)

## A Brief History of the Rhythm Bones Society

The Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) will be 25 years old on September 25, 2024. It came into existence in 1999 on the back porch of Russ and Wilma Myers' house in Brightwood, Virginia, when 22 attendees at Bones Fest III signed the By-Laws. At that time there were about 100 pages of rhythm bones information on the Internet and now there are over 20,000 pages searching for 'rhythm bones' with countless more if you could do a meaningful search with just 'bones.' RBS has made a difference!

### Background

There has been no record found of an organization like RBS. In a telephone interview, Ted Goon, a 1950s recording artist who also sold rhythm bones, said he organized several clubs where players could gather, but provided no documentation to prove it.

The legend Percy Danforth had the first rhythm bones instructional video that was sold to individuals. Fred Edmund, a drummer, made a rhythm bones instructional book and video and rhythm bones, and wrote a newsletter that he mailed to people who bought his products that also promote a rhythm bones organization (Fred's newsletter highlights are on Fred's Player Profile Page on our website). Fred talked Everett Cowett into hosting the first Bones Fest, and Ev in his opening remarks

said, “I'd like to talk to you all about having a real big Bones Festival.” Bones Fest II had a few more attendees including Steve Wixson who bought a pair of bones labeled 'Rhythm Bones' and using that found the Bones Fest II announcement on (Continued on Page 3)



## Editorial

It is hard to believe the Rhythm Bones Society has been around for a quarter of a Century, and the actual anniversary is September 25, 2024. We can celebrate it at Bones Fest XXVIII hosted again by Randy Seppala in Clarksdale, Mississippi on May 2-5, 2024.

The Page 1 story is a brief history of the Rhythm Bones Society. There were twenty-two people who signed the By-Laws officially creating the society, and there are four still active, Mel Mercier, Spike Bones Muhrer, Parker Waite and Steve Wixson. Steve Brown, not technically a Founding Member, was actively discussing such a society, and read about that in his Reflections on Page 3.

Many Founding members have passed away, Joe Birl, Dave Boyles, John Cahill, Terry Carroll, Everett Cowett, Dan Cowett, and just recently Tommy Cowett, Vivian and Ed (presumed) Cox, Russ Myers, and Matteo Vitucci. The rest of the Cowett family including Bonnie became inactive with the passing of Everett Cowett who is thought of as the father of the Rhythm Bones Society, and also inactive are Charlie Breeland, Deborah Brower, Kevin Dunn, and Tom Rice. We lost contact with Sally Carroll.

Following the Page 1 article are reflections from some of our Founding Members on our 25 years as a society.

Steve Brown, our previous Executive Director, emailed me some pages from a book his brother had used for research titled "Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage" written by Carl Wittke and published by the Duke University Press in 1930. The book was deemed important enough to republish with the same title and can be purchased via the Internet. I present sort of a review that covers the 19th Century minstrel show from a rhythm bones point of view. This is not a scholarly article, but I hope is something to think about.

I will soon review a newer book titled, "The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy" by Bob Carlin. Sweeney and Frank Brower, the first minstrel bones player, performed together, and there is a lot about Brower in the book.

### (Continued From Page 1)

Rock and Roll, or Hip Hop, in that it traveled the world – a true American cultural export! It is not our role to excuse, celebrate, or denigrate, the content, or context of the minstrel show. Our goal is to examine the history of our instrument. You will find excerpts from this historical text that will allow you to do just that.

Michael Baxter just put out his 2024 Rhythm Bones Society Ensemble video and it is absolutely fantastic! Huge thanks to Michael for his work on this. To anyone reading this, go check this out, it's a wonderful representation of the diverse group of bone players involved with RBS.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-HxmCZVH6Kw>

I hope that all of you have had opportunities over the Spring and Summer to get some good playing in. If you are polite, respectful, well practiced, and complimentary to the music, you should be welcome wherever you go. There are exceptions, so don't take offense if you encounter them, but generally if you follow these guidelines you'll be accepted. May your bones be with you!

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

### (Continued From Page 1)

the Internet. Steve had an academic background and searched the Internet discovering the 100 pages mentioned above (<https://rhythmbones.org/documents/InternetResearch1999.pdf>) as well as the email address of many players who he contacted. RBS was organized at Bones Fest III.

#### Rhythm Bones Central Website

What do you give a father who doesn't want anything. Martha Cowett pondered that question and came up with a rhythm bones website for her rhythm bones playing father, Ev. You can see it at <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/MarthaEarlyWebpage.pdf>.

Jonathan Danforth had web design experience and took over from Martha. In addition to a more professional website with more content, he selected a muted yellow background color that continues as sort of a brand (red=255, green=221, blue=153).

Steve Wixson took over maintaining it and then doing one upgrade. At

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central website: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

the persistence of Skeff Flynn to get a website that someone else could take over, it was upgraded using the WordPress platform. While there is a learning curve with WordPress, it is straightforward to maintain, and it has powerful features that non-web designers can use.

With many years of newsletters, the WordPress website serves as an index to all that previously unorganized information. It has two sides, one with information about playing rhythm bones, and the other a Museum with exhibits; player profiles, history, Bones Fest highlights, RBS history, media, contests, art & images, Percy Danforth, Ted Goon, and odds & ends. It has over 300 web pages with more than 600,000 words making it the largest resource for rhythm bones information in the world.

#### By-Laws + IRS 501(c)(3)

How do you organize a new society? Help came from the Jews Harp Guild who gave us not only their By-Laws but



their documentation on how they got IRS (501)(c)(3) non-profit status. The main change was the name to 'Rhythm Bones Society' plus allowing meetings to be held over the Internet. The non-profit IRS application was approved on its first submission.

### **Board of Directors**

The By-Laws established a Board of Directors to carry out day-to-day business for the membership who meet once a year to elect Board Members and vote on other matters of interest. The Board also serves as the Nominating Committee for general elections though anyone can be nominated at a membership meeting.

The first Board was elected at Bones Fest III with Everett Cowett, Executive Director, Russ Myers, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members at large, Steve Brown, Sally Carroll, Mel Mercier, and Jerry Mescher. Mel from Ireland gave us an International Board. The current Board is listed on Page 2, and the following have served, Sky Bartlett, Sharon Mescher, Bill Vits, Tim Reilly, Jonathan Danforth, and Gil Hibben. Steve Brown served as Executive Director for 17 years.

### **Newsletter**

At the first Board meeting, a newsletter titled *Rhythm Bones Player* was authorized including color which at the time was expensive. The first issues were four pages in length, and then eight pages except for two large special issues that each summarized a decade of Bones Fests. A paper copy is mailed to members as a membership benefit.

The American Folklife Center has an interest in folk instruments including rhythm bones and a copy of each newsletter is mailed to them. After many years, a letter arrived stating that it was now housed and fully cataloged in the Library of Congress. While the Editor gets credit, he is happy to share it with everyone who contributed content to the newsletter.

The Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University also receives the newsletter and from time to time professionally binds them into Volumes for placing on shelves.

### **Bones Fests**

The first gathering was in the backyard of Everett Cowett's house with twelve

attendees, and only in retrospect is it called Bones Fest I. It had the feeling of a family reunion with family you never knew you had, and that feeling persists through all Bones Fests.

There is an exhibit in the RBS online Museum titled 'Bones Fests Highlights' that present the highlights, photographs and video from every Fest (<https://rhythmbones.org/bones-fests>). Below are single highlights that help remember each Fest. Each Fest had a host who volunteered to organize it, and they should be applauded for their effort.

Bones Fest I was the first. II saw the Fest held at a public venue. III saw the start of RBS. IV saw Fests expand from a single day to a weekend and had the first public show. V saw the first Fest Graphic and T-shirt. VI was held in a planetarium. VII was held in the Kentucky Theatre. VIII saw organized workshops. IX was the first time a host held a second Fest. X was the largest with 89 attendees. XI included a public show at the Milwaukee Irish Fest. XII saw part of its program canceled by the Obama 100,000 political rally. XIII saw the on stage marriage proposal of Kenny and Teri Wolin. XIV had the most workshops and the wedding of Kenny and Teri. XV is the Performance Fest with 9 hours of public performances. XVI was in Disney World. XVII has the first Flash Mob. XVIII celebrated Percy Danforth. XIX had the public show in an Opera House. XX included a workshop for youth at a Nature Center. XXI was interrupted by Hurricane Harvey. XXII was in the New Hampshire White Mountains hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett who met at a Fest. XXIII was the Blues Fest. XXIV was virtual around the world due to COVID. XXV celebrated the 25th Bones Fest virtually. XXVI had both in-person and virtual events. XXVII was back to New Hampshire. XXVIII is back in Clarksdale, Mississippi and will celebrate the 25th Anniversary of RBS.

### **Facebook**

In early years there was a Yahoo chat group that at times was used a lot. We now have a Facebook presence with fairly robust posting.

### **RBS YouTube Channel**

Originally we used our own website to post videos. With the arrival of mobile devices we recently created a RBS You-

Tube Channel for new videos or videos that do not run smoothly on mobile devices.

### **Awards**

RBS has recognize several individual for promoting the Society or rhythm bones in general. They include Ted Goon, Honorary Member, Russ Myers, Fellow, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy, Special Recognition, and Mitchell Boss, Community Enrichment. Those receiving the Meritorious Service award include Joe Birl, Steve Brown, Al Cowett, Dan Cowett, Everett Cowett, Martha Cowett, Mel Mercier, Mary Lee Sweet, and Steve Wixson.

### **Membership**

The annual number of members goes from 69 to 114 which is enough to pay for the website and printed newsletter. Bones Fests pay for themselves. Mem-

## **Founding Members Reflections**

**Steve Brown.** In September of 2000 I found myself on a plane headed for Chattanooga, TN. Highly unusual for me as I hadn't been on a plane since 1968. I was soon to attend the 4th Annual Bones Fest hosted by Steve Wixson and his wife Janet. I had been flirting, if you will, with the prospect of attending a Bones Fest since the first in 1997. I had been doing rhythm bones business with Fred Edmunds, a retired doctor and avid rhythm bones player since 1995, and he had invited me to the first two events held in Greensboro, NC. I remember myself thinking who in their right mind would travel all the way to Greensboro to play rhythm bones? Then in 1999, Ev Cowett, Russ Myers, Martha and Val Cowett traveled all the way to Natick, MA to attend the New England Folk Festival. Other attendees included Ellen Stern, Johnny Muise, Rob Rudin, Brett Walker, Mance Grady, and over a hundred participants. We had an amazing workshop, with all participating, and an impromptu meeting to discuss the possibility of a rhythm bones players organization, and promises to attend the 3rd Bones Fest in September, a promise I was to break due to family illness (see photograph on Page 4). Low and behold Bones Fest III was to establish the Rhythm Bones Society, and I was nominated to the Board of



Directors. Unable to avoid attending any longer, I made my way down to Chattanooga to fulfill my responsibilities as Board member, still highly skeptical as to why anyone would travel all the way to Tennessee to play rhythm bones!

Soon I was under the spell of the most amazing rhythm bones playing gathering I had ever attended! Meeting the most amazing players and people, feeling like I was with a family I didn't know I had! We began to joke we were like the Duck billed Platypus, almost extinct!

This was the beginning of my long term relationship with the RBS. Over the years it has not only become a second family to us, but an oasis in the midst of our chaotic life. The amazing newsletter with so many interesting and important articles, the support of so many amazing people, not to mention players of our instrument. Some of my best friends in the world came from the RBS. It has enriched my life so much, and that of my family. My son Jeremy who passed away in April truly loved his rhythm bones family, and his rhythm bones family loved him! Looking at the pictures and video of him at Bones Fests is a consolation to us that is so enduring. And seeing the tribute to him at Bones Fest XXVIII this year means so much to us.

In my 25 years association with the RBS it became clear very early on the Steve Wixson was a force of nature. From his telephone interview with Ted Goon, almost totally forgotten, finding the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour footage of Jerry Mescher and his father

playing, to the countless amount of time and effort to produce a high quality newsletter, he has surpassed accolades you could possibly describe him with. I was Executive Director for much of those 25 years, and I could have not done it without Steve. We in the RBS owe him a debt of gratitude.

But the true measure of an organization is its members, who support and ensure that it continues, and we have had the most amazing members over the years. Some have come and gone, some continue since the beginning, but all have left their mark and contributed to what we are today! I want to particularly thank the core of new leadership, Skeffington Flynn, Kenny Wolin, Tom Connolly, Dean Robinson, and all past and present Board Members for their dedication, and support of our little instrument.

And as Ev Cowett reminded us so many times, May your bones be with you!

**Al Cowett.** Our father, Everett, had his 'bones' stolen (image explaining that to the police), and in trying to replace them met Dr. Fred Edmunds who knew a few rhythm bones players. The two met and decided to hold a get-together, and it was a grand time. It was a strange collision of like-minded individuals who loved to make noise by slapping sticks together. The Bones Fest was always the highlight of Everett's year, and he would be so happy to see that it continues to this day.

**John Cowett.** "A Gift, Thee Gift, Be A Gift!" Martha gave our Father a Gift [the first RBS website]. One that he received

with Joy and Wonder. Ev always embraced life with excitement and passion. With this gift he was all in not knowing what would or could happen, "What is a webpage?" What can this thing do?" I believe he said.

Ev's excitement and passion for the rhythm bones in his hands carried on and the boners of the world came together and experienced years of strength and endurance. The Boners of the World have the passion, excitement, and desire to keep up that rhythm and playing hard and strong. The rhythm bones have been an instrument in the human experience and thankfully will remain an instrumental Cornerstone as humanity clicks and clacks onwards. Thank You Martha for giving a gift and I hope all of us will be willing to give a gift.

"It's Wonderful what a Gift can Do!"

**Mel Mercier.** The Rhythm Bones Society is a 21st Century phenomenon. But the stories it has told itself, up to now, have largely been 20th Century ones. Has the time come for the society to find and tell itself the 19th Century stories of the bones? I believe it has.

In this, it's 25th anniversary year, the society has an opportunity to reflect on its roots, continuing to trace them through the last century with renewed vigour, and following them as they go deeper, into the 19th Century. Deepening its knowledge of this recent history of the bones may help illuminate a path forward for the society into the second quarter of the 21st Century, and beyond.

There is so much to celebrate at this moment - so many wonderful people and experiences to be grateful for over the last 25 years, and in those few, but vital, formative years leading up to the first Bones Fest. Those who established the society and those who have continued to nurture this unique community through their passion, love and hard work, deserve to be elevated and honoured in our stories. Without their vision and leadership we would not be a community, a democratic family of equals.

The Board plays a crucial role in the structure of our society. Those who serve on it provide valuable leadership, guidance and ideas, and our community has been blessed with passionate, wise, gentle and consistent leadership from the Board for a quarter of a century –



Photograph from Steve Brown's 1999 NEFFA Rhythm Bones workshop. From left: Rob Rudin, Mance Grady, Bret Walker, Ev Cowett, Martha Cowett, Russ Myers, Johnny Muise, and Steve Brown standing.

that's really something. The Board also represents the community. Ideally, in my view, it would also be representative of the society, a microcosm of the community. In our democratic community, opportunity for leadership extends out beyond the Board. Leadership in thought and action, initiative and innovation, are in the gift of every individual member of the society

In that spirit, I write here to suggest that part of an approach to a collective reflection on the past and shaping the future might be to ask ourselves some questions. What, I wonder, does it feel like to ask our individual and collective selves questions about, for example, our 'whiteness'? Or the relative status and representation of men and women in our society? Obviously, I don't have all the answers, but I do have an interest in encouraging and participating in a conversation about these important issues within our community. As they used to say on the radio back in the 70s (1970s, that is) "responses on a postcard please," or in the newsletter, and maybe a special session at the next Bones Fest?

**Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer.** Prior to 1983, I was an professional educator teaching high school science and creating a company called 'Ed Tech' that produced educational materials. That all ended in a fire setting me adrift from my professional life to try something new. I set out to design a teaching character, but needed something unique to define the character ... a hook.

Then I met Percy Danforth and rhythm bones and instantly got hooked myself. I soon adopted the name "Spike Bones," Spike being a personal name and Bones being a major character in every minstrel show in the 1800s and who played the rhythm of course.

For the next 15 years, I performed in many venues, but always felt professional alone as a rhythm bones player and lacking a sense of community. Then in 1999, I attended my first Bones Fest at Russ Myers house in Virginia. WOW.... what a bunch of fresh air...I had found my people...all bones all the time. What a brilliant, lovely, and inspiring group of new friends.

Since then the highlight of every year... must do list.... was to attend the next

Bones Fest. Each time meeting new boning friends. Special friends one feels a deep relationship with even though you see them once a year

In 2008, I had the honor to host Bones Fest XII in St Louis, the first Fest west of the Mississippi River. What a treat...I recommend watching a special documentary I hope to make in the future.

In addition to the Fests, four times a year I would receive in the mail the RBS newsletter filled with so much history and insight into rhythm bones around the world. Thank you Steve Wixson for being such a driving force behind the newsletter as well as being such a unique rhythm bones player yourself,

So thank you Rhythm Bones Society and congratulations on 25 great years. And RIP to all my great friend who have passed away. I am so fortunate to have known and boned with you. Hope to play with you again when I pass to the other side.

**Steve Wixson.** The Rhythm Bones Society has been a blessing in many ways. It took my childhood hobby and turned it into a retirement avocation. It changed me from a one-handed to a two-handed player. It gave me a chance to visit new cities as well as Ireland. The first born in a family typically has the need to be productive, and RBS helps satisfy that need for me.

Coming from an academic background, editing the newsletter has been rewarding, and researching is fun especially when you find a gem of information. Having the Library of Congress house and catalog this small journal is a nice reward that I share with all who have contributed to our newsletters.

Bones Fests are exciting and the Saturday night performances with such talented performers is magic. Thanks to the hosts and workshop leaders for volunteering.

But when all is said and done, it is the people who bring the greatest satisfaction.

**Kevin Dunn.** I played bagpipes and bones for an Irish band, but we broke up last year and I haven't been playing. I would say I am a supporter rather than a player at this point. I am glad to know y'all are still making music.

## Tambo and Bones A Book Review

In the history of 'playing the bones' the Minstrel Era is but a blip in the timeline of rhythm bones that dates back at least 5500 years when the first artifacts were found. The Minstrel Era lasted about 60 years professionally followed by amateur performances into the 1960s, but it was the heyday for rhythm bones being popular as a stage musical instrument as well as what must have been a very large number of people, exposed to them by the many minstrel troupes that circled the globe, playing them as performers or for fun. This is borne out by the number of our members who learned to play from their father or a relative who was or learned to play from minstrel players.

The minstrel show was the first distinctly American contribution to the theatre, and many books and articles have been written about the minstrel era and even how it affects us today.

Recently one book was deemed important enough to be republished. The book 'Tambo and Bones' was written by Carl Wittke and published by the Duke University Press in 1930 and the new version by Hassell Street Press in 2021.

Carl Frederick Wittke, (1892 -1971), was an American historian, and a specialist on ethnic history in America. Wittke wrote 13 scholarly books, wrote hundreds of articles for scholarly journals and popular magazines, and wrote 262 critical book reviews.

Many of the authors who write about the Minstrel Era might mention rhythm bones as one of the original four minstrel instruments, but they do not identify it as important to the era: the movement was more important than the instrument performances. This article looks at the Minstrel Era from a rhythm bones point of view, though it likely applies to the tambourine as well as the banjo and fiddle.

### The Reprinted 'Bones' Pages.

This following are excerpts from pages that mention 'bones.' As you read these reprinted bones stories you get to know Wittke's writing style and can anticipate stories about other aspects of the minstrel era which if interested might justify buying the book. If all you are interested

in is the bones stuff, then you don't need to buy the book because here they are.

**Page 7.** "These Negro performances were spontaneous and almost instinctive. In more recent times, some of the chain gangs of Negro prisoners working on Southern roads, still fall quite automatically into singing while they work; the "end men" on the chain develop a real talent for improvising new stanzas, while the others chant the chorus, swinging their picks and tossing them around with a dexterity that suggests the skill of the professional minstrel end man with his tambourines or bones. From their pathos and humor of the Negroes, their superstitions and their religious fervor, their plaintive and their hilarious melodies, their peculiarities of manner, dress and speech, the white minstrel built his performance."

**Page 43.** "According to the generally accepted account, Whitlock, on one occasion, happened to be practicing on the banjo with his friend Emmett, when Brower and Pelham, quite by chance, came to call at Emmett's boarding house. It occurred to one of the group to develop an ensemble performance, with the result that the quartette began to practice for a public presentation of their minstrel acts. Emmett played the violin, Whitlock the banjo, Brower the bone castanets, and Pelham the tambourine. Their first show was presented either in Bartlett's billiard parlor in the Bowery, or in the Branch. Hotel, a favorite rendezvous for showmen in New York City. Some of the leading circus men of that day, including Nathan Howes, were present to witness this first minstrel performance.

"According to Emmett's account, many in the audience were disposed to ridicule the new experiment in theatricals, and the show began with the crowd jeering this new and strange musical combination of violin, banjo, bones and tambourine. For although the single blackface performer had become an established feature, this new combination had never been tried, not even on the comic stage. The costumes and other novel features of the program were apparently planned by Emmett."

**Page 45.** "From all accounts, there was great interest in "the first night of the novel, grotesque, original and surpassingly melodious Ethiopian Band,

entitled, the Virginia Minstrels," as the first show was eloquently described in language which became a feature of the extravagant advertisements and press stories of later minstrel performances. The announcement in the New York Herald characterized the show as "an exclusively minstrel entertainment combining the banjo, violin, bone castanets and the tambourine, and entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas." In the course of the evening's program, all four performers sang and danced, jiggled in solo and double numbers, played their respective instruments singly and in various combinations."

**Page 57.** "The Buckley Serenades probably were the first to produce burlesque opera as part of the regular program. One member of the family was a virtuoso on the Chinese fiddle. Another was skillful with the bones and imitated drums, marching soldiers and horse-racing with great success."

**Page 77.**" The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, minstrelsy invaded many of the western towns along the route. It was in the summer of 1869, for example, that Murphy and Mack's Minstrels delighted large audiences for ten days in the famous Salt Lake Theatre of the Mormons of Utah. Two years later, the Joe Murphy of this minstrel troupe returned to the Mormon capital as an Irish comedian. Among the minstrel favorites of the Pacific Coast were Ben Cotton, a song and dance man, Charley Backus, of the famous Birch, Bernard, Wambold and Backus combination (an organization which made its debut on the west coast as the San Francisco Minstrels), Joe Murphy, a bone player and singer at auctions and cheap entertainments in Sacramento who had risen to the distinction of being the champion bone player of the Pacific Coast and later went into Irish comedy."

**Page 88.** "Bryant's Minstrels also visited Cincinnati in the summer of 1870 and played at Pike's Hall. The program perhaps deserves special mention, because it shows clearly how variety acts were becoming regular features of even the best minstrel performances.

"After a more or less traditional first part, Dan Bryant, as conductor a la

Maretzek, presented a concert, featuring Eugene, the wonderful burlesque prima donna. In a character act, entitled "The Drum Major," Dan Bryant displayed his unusual skill as a manipulator of the bones. There followed a farce, a burlesque duet by Bryant and Griffin of Gens d'Armes, a stump speech, a banjo solo, and an act called "Daniel in the Bryant's den." The next number was the famous "Shoo Fly," as "vitalized and made a public necessity of by Dan Bryant and Dave Reed," a song given by these two stars for at least two hundred and fifty nights on Broadway."

**Page 104.** "During the season of 1882-1883, there were at least thirty-two minstrel companies on the road, most of them large and pretentious organizations. When Haverly's Mastodon Minstrels played at the Drury Lane Theatre in London in 1884, there were at least sixty visible performers in the show, eighteen end men with tambourines and bones, and six star end men who were presented to the audience in relays. Needless to add, there was less and less evidence of genuine Negro characterizations in these elaborate spectacles. They were vaudeville or variety shows but hardly the blackface art of the 'thirties' and 'forties.'"

**Page 132-3.** "Here the story of the decline of American minstrel shows ??? might end, were it not for the fact that the "talkies" promise a revival of this venerable art. Probably this new version of minstrelsy will have only a remote resemblance to the performances of the early burnt cork artists. Seven minstrel shows were on the "talkie" programs by May, 1929, and "the twinkle of tambourines and the rhythmic rattle of the bones" are being heard again in Hollywood. Optimists say that "Hollywood has gone minstrel." It permits the introduction of many specialties, very little plot is needed, and there is virtually no limit to the "wise cracking" by which the minstrel boys can enliven the film. Universal seems to have started the new experiment with "The Minstrel Man," starring Eddie Leonard. Into this film, Leonard took with him two of the old songs with which he was identified in the days when he was on the minstrel stage."

**Page 136.** Add the excerpt.

**Page 140.** "Tambo" and "Mistah



Bones,” names derived from the instruments with which they added to the hilarity and din of the show. Frank Brower, of the original “Big Four,” the Virginia Minstrels, seems to have introduced the bones into minstrelsy. At first, they were of bone, as the name implies; later they were made of ebony or some other hard wood. “Tambo,” who performed on the tambourine, was expected to go through wild and grotesque maneuvers for the benefit of the audience, while performing on his instrument. As minstrelsy developed, the number of endmen increased, until sometimes dozens of performers graced the extremities of the half circle, and had to be introduced to the audience in installments, the greatest blackface stars naturally being reserved for the last.” [there is more that follows if needed.]

**Page 223.** “Dan Bryant was one of the greatest of the minstrel kings. His real name was Daniel Webster O’Brien. As a boy, he had worked as a baggage porter in hotels. Before the close of the ‘forties, this young Irishman made his first appearance as a minstrel in New York. Bryant played with many companies, and in 1857, his own company opened in New York City. Ten years later, he took it to California. Dan Bryant’s chief claim to fame rested upon his ability as a dancer of such favorites as “The Essence of Old Virginny,” and “Shoo Fly.” He had few rivals in “shaking up a grotesque essence.” “Shoo Fly,” a song and dance, usually was done with Dave Reed, an endman and performer with the bones who was so famous for his rendition of “Sally Come Up” and “Shoo Fly,” that he became known as the “Sally Come Up Man.” Mert Sexton was a close rival of Bryant in these Negro dances. Jerry (O’Brien) Bryant, the older of the Bryant brothers, was a comedian and endman, who had begun his minstrel career as a ballad singer.”

**Page 224.** “Billy Morris, another partner, was an endman and expert tambourinist, who sang with a very sweet voice such favorites as “Peter Gray” and “Ruben Wright,” in the late 1850’s. Johnny Pell of the same company, played the other end with the bones.”

**Page 226.** “E. Freeman Dixey began his career at the age of eighteen, in Boston. He was noted as a bone player, and

for his playing of wench roles. In 1862, he became the partner of Carncross, and thus Carncross and Dixey’s. Minstrels, one of the best minstrel organizations in the United States, was launched. so Thomas B. Dixon’s (1847-1890) specialty was the old ballad “Sally in Our Alley. Sam Hague was one of the rare examples of an English minstrel manager and clog dancer who came to the United States to follow his profession. He toured the country in the 1850’s. While here, he organized a colored troupe, known as Hague’s”Georgia Minstrels, and took them to England. In 1866, he was the owner and manager of a mixed company of white and black performers playing in London.”

**Page 233.** “Other favorites of the Pacific coast audiences were Joe Murphy and Fred Sprung. The former began his career as a bone player and singer at auctions and cheap entertainments in San Francisco, and later became the champion bone player of the west coast. The latter was a native of Germany, an excellent basso and a successful interlocutor, with much experience as a singer with the Mississippi River Boat Minstrels.”

#### Highlights

There are 15 references to rhythm bones from a book of 269 pages. The following are short highlights from the above excerpts.

**Page 5.** What makes up a minstrel performance.

**Page 43.** Virginia Minstrels formed.

**Page 45.** How the performance was received, plus a curious note - “entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas.” It would be nice if that means what it says in today’s understanding of racism.

**Page 57.** Another was skillful with the bones and imitated drums, marching soldiers and horse-racing. We like to think we are better than they, but that page reminds us of our professionals like Kenny Wolin and the late Bill Vits who do things like that.

**Page 77.** The spread on minstrelsy and Joe Murphy being Champion of the Pacific Coast. We now have the All-Ireland Bones Competition and Murphy is an Irish name.

**Page 88.** A Dan Bryant recognized as a skillful player.

**Page 104.** Noting some minstrel troupes had as many as eight rhythm bone players.

**Page 132-3.** Minstrels shows make it into the movies.

**Page 136.** Describes the semi-circular seating arrangement.

**Page 140.** Recognizing Frank Brower as originating bones into minstrelsy. Also records they soon became made out of Ebony.

If you are interested in more details about Frank Brower, go to my article on him at [rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V6N1.pdf](http://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V6N1.pdf). Soon I will review a book by Bob Carlin on Joel Sweeney that has a lot more about Frank Brower.

**Page 223.** Dave Reed becomes famous bones player.

**Page 224.** Some well known players recognized.

**Page 226.** Dixey was a noted bones player.

**Page 233** Joe Murphy recognized as champion of the West Coast.

#### Discussion

The Minstrel Era was both a movement and stage performances. The Era might not have started without the performances and the performances would not have continued for so long without the movement. I wonder if the movement could have started from some other trigger if minstrelsy had not come along.

The Virginia Minstrels found something unique and unexpected with the format they developed with the violin, banjo, tambourine, and rhythm bones. The violin has a long history in folk and classical music. The tambourine has a shorter history that parallels rhythm bones and during the 1800s was well known. The banjo with its African roots was just beginning its history with players like Joel Sweeney. Rhythm bones are likely prehistoric.

Rhythm bones were played before the start of the Minstrel Era. The banjo and rhythm bones performed together in circuses and other venues. The Virginia Minstrels found a format where performers and performances could be staged without a host, like a circus, and that changed everything for performers.

Performances like these could not have continued if they were not top notch. The pages of this and other books describe



performers being talented. In these excerpts rhythm bones players competed with each other which like our Bones Fests and the All-Ireland Bones Competition inspire players to improve. 'Bones and Tambo' were more than instrumental as they had to tell jokes and stories and interact with the MC, that is the Interlocutor.

[Sidebar. I memorized an Emily Dickinson poem as a kid and it popped into my mind as I was editing this article. It is one of her most famous poems written during the Minstrel Era.

"I'm nobody! Who are you? Are you nobody, too? Then there's a pair of us — don't tell! They'd banish us, you know.

"How dreary to be somebody! How public, like a frog. To tell your name the livelong day To an admiring bog!"

Could she have seen a minstrel show and the two nobodies are Bones (who I make the narrator) and Tambo, and the frog is the Interlocutor. Or does she just describe the social state at that time that welcomed in the minstrel show. Or like a good poet, write something understand-

able on many levels.]

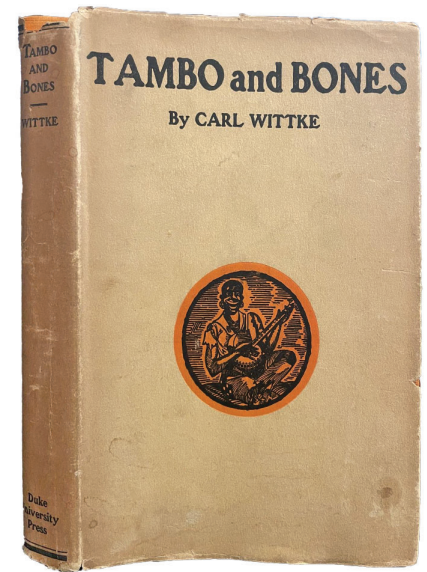
Was it the 'bones' that the Virginia Minstrels added that was something special. We players know that people are amazed when they hear rhythm bones for the first time. People could make them from dinner leftovers or buy them from catalogs, and learn how to play them.

So, here is a question. Would the minstrel show have flourished if the end man was not a rhythm bones player. I don't know, but I will continue to research this theory.

Over the years the movement changed as did the music. Rhythm bones were there at the beginning, there when minstrel troupes were large, and there in amateur shows at the end a century later. What does that say?

The timeline mentioned at the start of this article expands like this; early artifacts found in China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Etruscan Italy. Troubadours carried them across Europe to England, and Europeans brought them to America. The Minstrel Era begins and ends, rhythm bones artists like Brother

Bones and Ted Goon had successful recording careers in the 1950s, musicians in Ireland recorded for several decades thereafter, and RBS is formed and its story begins on Page 1. *Steve Wixson*



Book Cover photograph courtesy of Matthew's Books, Chattanooga, TN.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 26, No. 2 2024

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## Executive Director's Column

It is such a joy to write this editorial. Bones Fest XXVIII was a huge success! We had roughly 45 bones players in attendance, and that means everything. So often over the years I have heard folks say that it is like a family reunion, with a family you didn't know you had. This year was no different.

Our primary venue, the Shack Up Inn, was the perfect place for us to get to know each other, to have musical performances, jam sessions, and talks. The weather was kind to us – not too hot for Mississippi – and I even spotted some Irishmen taking videos of the rain, an irony to be sure! The Hopson Commissary was a perfect venue for eating delicious food and listening to great musicians. I am not sure Randy could have planned it any better, including some on the fly moves to ensure our success.

The thing that makes a Bones Fest great are the people. This year was no different. We had guests

from Ireland, as well as as players from all over the country, from San Diego, to Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan, West Virginia, New York, Florida, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Missouri, Iowa, D.C. and, Tennessee.

Randy also enlisted some fabulous musicians for us. Reverend Robert Reynolds played resonator guitar and vocals, Edwin "Fast Eddie" Consolmagno added his harmonica, Detroit singer, Maggie McCabe, added vocals. That core served as the primary back up band for us over the weekend.

The bones player who was most missed was Jeremy Brown. Jeremy was the son of our previous executive director, and fearless leader, Steve Brown. Jeremy was famously called by his father "the world's happiest bones player." I think that anyone (Continued on Page 3)

## Bones Fest XXVIII Highlights

What I will remember most about Bones Fest XXVIII is the passing of "Super" Jeremy Brown just days before the festival date. Steve Wixson and I were discussing who we should memorialize at the festival; Steve mentioned that Bill Vits had not been remembered and we planned to do him when we learned that Jeremy was gone. I was able to contact my friend Kurt Gronvall, who was at the Fest on Thursday and Friday, and owns Globe Printing in Upper Michigan who printed our T-shirts. He was able to make a banner for Jeremy, which he donated and brought down with the shirts. On Thursday many arrivals were shocked to hear of Jeremy's passing, even if we all knew he was quite tentative. But the spirit of "Super" Jeremy Brown prevailed and I saw nothing but happy smiling people for the next three days. We will all miss your smiling face Jeremy, you taught us to stay happy and keep on smiling, no matter what comes our way. Rest in peace fellow rhythm bones player.

As in so many festivals that I've

been in involved with you spends months and months planning and making arrangements and when the actual event starts rolling it goes by in a flash and is suddenly over.

XXVIII started rolling on Thursday evening with blues and jamming, and kept building in a crescendo climaxing in the BIG BONES SHOW at Ground Zero. The skill level of rhythm bones players was truly astounding. We have an organization with such (Continued on Page 3)



Randy Seppala and his Bones Fest XXVIII Acrylic Fest Graphic Creation

## Editorial

There are four Founding Members of the Rhythm Bones Society who are still active after 25 years, and three were at the Fest, Mel Mercier, Spike Bones Muhrer, and Steve Wixson (the complete list of all 22 Founders was presented in the Vol 26, No 1 issue). During these 25 years we have accomplished much, and we celebrated at this Fest with a 25th anniversary session with projected images for discussion and a composition titled 'Roll On' for a rhythm bones ensemble from Mel Mercier. Let us keep 'rolling on.'

On Page 1, Randy Seppala starts his Bones Fest XXVIII summary sadly noting the passing of Jeremy Brown, son of former Executive Director, Steve Brown and his wife, Jennifer (see the Banner prepared in his memory shown in the photograph on Page 8). Jeremy was the first down-syndrome person I had been around, and I learned a lot what he could and could not do and the happiness that radiated to those around him. Turns out that for months and months before each Fest Jeremy impatiently waited for it to come. I thank Steve and Jennifer for sharing Jeremy with us.

Jim Connor came to Bones Fest VIII and did not get to perform, and I was so glad he came to Bones Fest XXVIII. He learned to play rhythm bones from legend Ted 'Mr. Goon-Bones' Goon, and you can learn about Ted in his own Exhibit in our Online Museum. Jim is the only person we know of who learned to play rhythm bones from Ted. Jim was on the road for 60 years playing his banjo and rhythm bones in 68 countries. His story is told in RBP, Vol 25, No 4.

Vgo Terry has been to three Fests and his skills are impressive. He is a multi-instrumentalist and tells the stories of the music he plays. For Bones Fests XXIII and XXVIII, Vgo presented the History of the Blues in hour long sessions. His story is way overdue, and will be featured in the Vol 26, No 4 issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player*.

You are in for a treat when you read Beth Shelton's Bones Fest XXVIII highlights. She is a writer of note and wife of bones player Mark Shelton.

## Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Skeff Flynn at 1:25 PM in the Shack Up Inn, Clarksdale, MS, with all present except Steve Brown and Dean Robinson.

A motion was made and approved to accept the minutes of the last Board Meeting as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson did not have a Treasurer's Report and apologized. It will be forthcoming.

The Nominating Committee was called to order at 1:28 PM. All current Board Members have agreed to serve another year, and were nominated by acclamation.

Our Youtube channel is underutilized. In the future new videos and any videos with long load times will be placed on our channel.

Our issue with paying ASCAP fees was discussed, and will be address for the next Fest. This year all of our venues have an ASCAP license, so we are covered.

The motion was made and approved to add up to \$600 to the budget for BFXXVIII. This is to cover increased food costs.

The possibility of a world wide Virtual Bones Fests close to our actual anniversary date, September 24, 2024, was tabled until later.

We need a host for BFXXIX, and no one has volunteered. This will an item in the General Membership meeting.

Joy Watkins donated the rhythm bones of the late Walt Watkins to RBS. These will be inventoried for possibly giving them to attendees at the next Fest.

Motion was made and approved to adjourn at 2:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Minutes of Board of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Skeff Flynn at 2:22 PM in the Shack Up Inn, Clarksdale, MS with a quorum of 'members present.' Motion was made and approved to approve the minutes of the last membership meeting as printed

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

in the newsletter.

The first order of business was electron of the Board for 2025. Steve Wixson reported on the results of the Nominating Committee, and the floor was opened for additional nominations. There being none a motion was made and approved to elect the nominees by acclamation. They are: Skeffington Flynn, Executive Director, Kenny Wolin, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board members at large, Steve Brown, Tom Connolly, Dennis Riedesel, and Dean Robinson.

There was a discussion about a host for Bones Fest XXIX. One person expressed interest and the Board will follow up.

There being no new business, a motion was made and approved to adjourn at 2:35 PM.

Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary



### **(Highlights continued from Page 1)**

a variety of talented players that we can surely call this “the most eclectic festival we have had” as Steve Wixson said to me. I am so glad we had perfect weather and everyone enjoyed themselves again at the incredibly unique Shack Up Inn and additionally this year the Hopson Commissary, providing two unbeatable venues for our festival. Big thanks to both of these grand facilities.

Big thank you also to all 45 Fest attendees, each and every one of you are what made this gathering an overwhelming success. The workshops, jamming and individual performances were well presented and informative. The “Discussion of Irish Bones” and “Vgo’s History of the Blues: part 2” really added the some perspective and reverence.

Then came the BIG BONES SHOW at Ground Zero and it was an EXTRAVAGANGA!!!!!! Everyone played wonderfully and world premier of Mel Mercier’s “ROLL On,” performed by a Rhythm Bones Ensemble to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society, was nothing short of sensational. WOW!!!!!!!!!!

Over the past 25 years The Rhythm Bones Society has created Brotherhood/Sisterhood, an alliance, dedicated to the presentation, preservation and perpetuation of the ancient art of rhythm bones playing and Bones Fest XXVIII is proof that it is working. Discovering that there are more bones players out there than we first thought and bringing them together at an annual festival to celebrate and teach our bones playing tradition is a brilliant idea and way to ensure the survival of rhythm bones playing. It is vital that we keep this organization going for at least another 25 years. Thank you for attending Bones Fest XXVIII and being a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Best always. *Randy “DaBonesMan” Seppala*

### **(Exec Director continued from Page 1)**

who had the pleasure of interacting with Jeremy would agree with that title, his joy was infectious. Jeremy passed just before this year’s Bones Fest. Randy was kind enough to organize a banner to hoist in his honor during the fest. What a great way to remember him. He will be missed.

Attendees filtered in on Thursday, and immediately connections were either made or rekindled. We jammed, and bonded, and genuinely got excited for the days to come. What a blessing to be able to come together as a community.

On Friday, we introduced ourselves – though we ran out of time for everyone, which puts a note in my head for future Bones Fests. There were workshops, followed by a wonderful “History of the Blues” by Vgo. Kenny’s advanced workshop was certainly appreciated by all and you can see Stan Von Hagen’s enthusiasm later in this newsletter.

Friday evening we headed over to the Hopson Commissary for a Southern Buffet, with none other than the international sensation Watermelon Slim. The Hokum Cats played inside the Shack Up Inn after that, while several of us headed to the back porch for an acoustic jam. What a delight!

From a personal note, I need to say two things about my interactions with Jim Connor. First, he offered me a napkin at one point in the Mississippi heat, saying, “I thought about wiping your brow during the jam, but I didn’t want to throw you off”. What a dear soul! Second, I got to do a harmonica duet with him at some point at the evening. Afterwards he said, “that was obligato – you played the notes you were obliged to, and I played the ones I got to.” What a treat!

Throughout the weekend several of us were practicing a brand new piece by Mel Mercier. I won’t cover the names here as they are accurately represented elsewhere in the newsletter. I will say that it was an intense experience that I will never forget. We hope to upload content to the website in the future on what went into making it happen. As Beth Shelton quoted Mel, “the vision is the process”.

I won’t rehash the show at Ground Zero, as I feel others have covered it. The exception is that I realized that I really could have used some help. In fact, the RBS could use some help. During the General Membership Meeting Mel pointed to a lack of women on the board. Well, in a volunteer organization like this it often comes down to who is willing to serve.

As a result, I would like to announce

the Rhythm Bones Society Leadership Mentoring Program. I will try to both create a sign up form, as well as to reach out to several candidates that I feel are well suited over the summer. The idea here is that we need a pipeline of leadership candidates that can help continue to guide the RBS into the future. If you are interested and you haven’t heard from me, please reach out.

When Mary and I left Bones Fest, we flew to Ireland. I was able to serve as the adjudicator for the Junior All Ireland Bones Competition. That story will need to wait for another day. Until then, may your bones be with you! Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeff Flynn*

## **Letter to Editor**

I was exposed to the rhythm bones maybe 35 years ago at the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games ([gmhg.org/](http://gmhg.org/)) and had to learn to play them. My favorite rhythm bones to play are my cow shin bones, but have also played wooden rhythm bones. I have played rhythm bones along with the guitar, bouzouki and mandolin in a few Irish bands over the years. I did visit your web site and was blown away with the few YouTube videos I watched. It’s inspired me to practice using two sets of rhythm bones simultaneously. *Terry Schomer*

## **A BFXXVIII Reflection**

After returning home, I was thinking about all the fun I had playing the bones, jamming with others, listening to friends and new friends play the bones, and remembering the visiting and laughter with older and new bones society members. In the blink of an eye, I realized, for me, having the opportunity to sit with attendees, learn from them, share life’s experiences, and belly-laugh, was just as necessary as playing the bones.

Bones players. Who are these people? I would proffer that bones players who are seasoned, those just learning, or those simply curious, come together to enjoy the company of like-minded people, and/or lose oneself in unbridled fun. Personally, at the core of the Rhythm Bones Society is a group of people who instinctively know they are brothers and sisters in soulful spirit. *Sharon Mescher*



# Photographs from the Shack Up Inn and Hopson Commissary



Rob McC, Stan Street, Johnny McC, Josephine McC, Randy Seppala



Eddie Consolmagno, Rev Robert Reynolds, Randy Seppala



Jim Connor - Intermediate Workshop



Vgo Terry - History of the Blues



Kenny Wolin - Blues Bones Workshop



Michael Ballard and Dennis Riedesel - Beginner Workshop



Skeff Flynn, Tom Connolly and Mel Mercier Irish Bones Discussion



Watermelon Slim and Ron Bruschi at Hopson Commissary



Lots of Jamming



# Photographs from the Big Show at the Ground Zero Blues Club

(The blue color in these images comes from a blue spotlight. Must be blue for Blues!)



Bruno Giles, Jim Runner, Kate Barfield and Sky Bartlett and Ernie Duffy all performed with the band



Skeff Flynn with Mary Gunderson King



Tom Connolly, Vgo and Mel Mercier



Dennis Riedesel with Vgo



Jim Connor sings his most well known song - *Grandma's Feather Bed*



From Mountain View, Kieth Symanowitz buck dancing, with Jenny and Tom Sartain. Later Maggie McCabe, beginner rhythm bones player joins them on stage.



Skeff, Sharon, Mark, Kenny, and Mel perform Mel Mercier's *'Roll On'* composition



Vgo and Mary Lee and Frank Sweet



# Where Bones and Blues Collide. Celebrating the Rhythm Bones Society 25th Anniversary at Bones Fest XXVIII

Traveling south past Clarksdale on Mississippi Highway 49, the historic Hopson Plantation came into view, rising from the Delta's flat cotton fields. We turned west toward the Hopson Commissary, a century-old building, now a tourist attraction and event venue.

A collection of rustic sharecropper cabins and refurbished silos situated next to the tarnished Hopson cotton gin, The Shack Up Inn is one of the country's most unique, and The World's Oldest B&B (Bed & Beer. See a photograph of its performance venue on Page 8).



We were looking forward to spending the weekend with about 45 other folks from around the country and beyond, sharing the ancient and esoteric art of playing rhythm bones.

From The Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) webpage: "Rhythm bones are one of the oldest man-made musical instruments, likely prehistoric. Two slabs are held between the fingers and clicks are made with wrist and arm movement. They can be played one- or two-handed.

As the name suggests, they are made from animal bones, but also other materials like wood shaped like a bone. As one would expect, each material produces a different sound." [sic]

Rhythm bones have contributed to many musical genres, including 19th century minstrelsy, traditional American, Celtic, blues, bluegrass, and zydeco.

Bones Fest XXVIII, May 2 – 5, 2024,

was held in Clarksdale "Home of the Blues", Mississippi, where Deep South agriculture history and the South's distinctive blues music are featured and celebrated. It was a movie-like setting for this historical gathering.

At check-in, I met Steve Wixson, editor of the *Rhythm Bones Player* Newsletter, Secretary/Treasurer of the RBS, and "keeper of the flame," as my husband describes him. Steve welcomed me enthusiastically, but I informed him I was not a rhythm bones player – just a spectator. Steve assured me I would be playing the bones at some point during the weekend. I was doubtful, but he knew.

Festival host Randy Seppala presented a treat for the Thursday night jam session. Acoustic blues and Americana musician, Reverend Robert Reynolds played resonator guitar and vocals; Edwin "Fast Eddie" Consolmagno added his soulful harmonica; Detroit singer, Maggie McCabe, filled the hall with her expressive vocals; and Randy "DaBones-Man" Seppala played bones, washboard, conga, and a variety of other percussion instruments (see top right photograph on page 4).

As the rhythm bones players in the audience jammed along with the earthy acoustic blues, I had an overwhelming feeling this was no ordinary music festival. Bones Fest was a family reunion. Musicians from varied backgrounds, connected by their common interest, some having known each other since last century, were coming together once again for their annual jam session. All were welcomed into the family.

My husband, Mark Shelton, was invited to perform with four other players on a composition by Mel Mercier, one of the world's leading Irish percussionists. To honor the 25th Anniversary of the RBS, Mel wrote "Roll On," a chamber music piece using the traditional rolls and taps of rhythm bones. Featuring five individual bones players, the rhythmic intricacies wove through the players creating an exciting and dynamic ensemble.

The quintet included some of the bones family royalty: Skeff Flynn, Executive Director of RBS and rhythm bones champion, Sharon Mescher of the famed "Mescher Bones" group, and Mel Mercier, whose father Peadar Mercier performed with the Chieftains and was

Ireland's first professional bodhrán and bones player. Kenny Wolin, percussionist with "The President's Own" United States Marine Band, brought his classical training and flawless technique to the mix and presented an advanced workshop focusing on the blues shuffle. Mark Shelton, Dallas-area percussionist and first-time Bones Fest attendee has played rhythm bones in thousands of performances over the past thirty years.



Left to right: Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Mark Shelton, Kenny Wolin, and Mel Mercier

After hearing the rhythm bones quintet rehearse, revise, and refine, I asked Mel if I was hearing his original vision for the piece, or was it a process. He answered, "The process is the vision."

Mark Shelton said, "It's a rarity to hear an ensemble of bones playing in unison. The different timbres coming from the variety of materials form an interesting composite timbre. It's not your typical bones playing."

I overheard one attendee use the phrase "bones chords" to describe the cluster of timbres produced by the ensemble.

We stayed overnight in the appropriately named Dogtrot Cabin giving us an authentic sampling of sharecropper days gone by. Frogs skipped along as we walked the pavestones to our screened front porch. Birds sang and played under the eaves. With unpainted walls, an old clawfoot bathtub, and a back porch



swing, we were comfortable guests in the vintage shack.

After lunch on Friday, I headed over to the Hopson Commissary and met Tate Antici. He and his wife, Chelsea, are the owners of Hopson Hospitality. They host blues, rock, roots, country, and everything else bands from anywhere to entertain folks amid the blues relics and agricultural antiques.



Hopson Plantation, home of the first mechanical cotton-picker, is where Joe Willie “Pinetop” Perkins drove a tractor and played boogie-woogie and blues piano. I felt like I was walking on the hallowed ground of musical pioneers.

Friday night back at the Shack Up Inn’s “Juke Joint Chapel,” Joe McLerrin & The Hokum Cats entertained with their lively blues renditions and encouraged bones jammin.’ Joe’s young son played drums while his precious daughter stood next to her dad and danced to the energetic rhythms (see the top left photograph on Page 4).

Saturday morning, I listened to “The Irish Discussion” with Mel Mercier, Skeff Flynn, and Tom Connelly, rhythm bones maker from Cork, Ireland. Learning that written history of Celtic rhythm bones playing began around the mid-1900s made me wonder about unknown or unrecorded rhythm bones playing mysteries. The conversation about the All-Ireland Bones Competition held each May gave me reason to plan another Ireland vacation.

The Saturday night finale at Morgan Freeman’s Ground Zero Blues Club in downtown Clarksdale was an evening I’ll never forget (see photographs on Page 5). With an iconic setting, the crowd was friendly and excited. Folks ate Fried Green Tomato Sammiches with Gitback Sauce and Mississippi Delta Catfish Dinners while waiting for the show to begin. The rhythm bones family gathered for the farewell event, showing love and support

for each other as stories were told, songs were sung, and bones’ clickety-clacks reverberated through the venue. I felt the closeness of folks forever connected by a common thread.

The evening reached a highpoint as Reverend Robert played and sang with other musicians. Without warning, Mark put a pair of bones into my hands and before I knew it, I was swept into the ceremonial conga line parade, where fifty or more people improvised percussive patterns and wove through the partying crowd of the juke joint. With two sticks placed strategically between my fingers, I was happy Mark had shown me how to produce basic tones. Surrounded by expert players playing intricate rhythms, I could at least click along on the upbeat, smiling so big my face hurt.



Sunday morning, we said our good-byes and drove away. Traveling south through flat Delta farmland, we reflected on Bones Fest, the nostalgic setting, and the unique culture. Music has a way of connecting souls. We are grateful for the warm welcome into the Rhythm Bones Society family. *Beth Shelton*

[Beth is a writer of books and Internet posts that you can review on her website at <https://ebshelton.com>.]

## Reflections From Attendees

Bones Fest was an eye and ear opener. I had never attended in-person, but glad I made the decision to head to Clarksdale. Hearing and seeing the various styles of playing plus meeting folks that have a passion for playing this primitive percussion instrument was a both inspiring and fun. *Mark Shelton*

I have attended all but one Fest for 10 years. For me some of my best experiences have been the teaching sessions. I remember the 1st one (Beginner ) with, I think, Steve Brown at the Grand Rapids Fest in 2014. Since then, I have moved on to Intermediate, and in Clarksdale, the Advanced. Kenny Wolin’s session this

year was outstanding to me. Learning and practicing various blues riffs gave me insight, no only to blues rhythms, but also to several new variations that I can add to my playing. I was so enthused after this session that I practiced some of them almost non-stop throughout the rest of the jams. Thanks Kenny. *Stan Von Hagen*

Living in San Diego, I rarely have occasion to meet other RBS members, except at Bones Fests so I see them as, in part, a reunion of friends old and new. Sadly, as the years pile up, some of our members pass on. This year, Jeremy’s passing was particularly sad. His enthusiasm and joy in playing and meeting friends was amazing to experience. He will be sorely missed.

The Shack Up Inn is, in many ways, unique, eclectic and probably a bunch of other adjectives I don’t usually use to describe Bones Fest venues. It provided places to jam, teach, learn, mingle, eat good food, drink interesting local beer (and more familiar choices as well).

By the end of the weekend, my hands and wrists ached, I was tired, and I am looking forward to doing it again next year, God willing. *Michael Ballard*

Many thanks for once again giving me a trip of a lifetime! I loved this Bones Fest from start to finish!

The music played and organized by Randy was superb. I felt really privileged to be getting private concerts and workshops from world-class talents like the amazing Jim Connor, the incomparable Watermelon Slim, the fantastic family group the Hokum Cats, the multi-award-winning Maggie McCabe, and the articulate and talented multi-instrumentalist Vgo.

To sum it up – the Bones Fest was a fun-filled, friendly festival of music and sharing, with world class talent performing, in a unique part of the world. And I felt the spirit of Jeremy hovering over us all weekend, quietly smiling and clicking away. Slán go fóill, *Tom Connolly*





From left to right, standing in front, Keith Symanowitz, Tom Connolly, Mary Lee Sweet, Kenny Wolin, Susan Riedesel, Bruno Giles, Frank Sweet, Mel Mercier, Ellen Stern, Randy Seppala, Sky Bartlett, Mellisa French, Ernie Duffy, Stan and Jean Von Hagen, Jim Connor with banjo, and on stairs, Pat LaBree, Cindy Connor and Vgo Terry with small banjo. On stage, Ron Bruschi, Marie Bruschi, Michael Ballard, Sharon Mescher, Kate Barfield, Dennis Riedesel, Maggie McCabe with guitar, Spike Bones Muhrer, Heidi Hess-Bynum, Tom Sartain, Nikki Shaner-Bradford, Jim Runner, Jessye Bartlett, kneeling, Becky Shannon, Erin Sharkley, kneeling, Travis Kostell, Skeff Flynn, Mary Gunderson King, Jenny Sartain, Steve Wixson, Randy French, and Mark Shelton.

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 26, No. 3 2024

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Musician and  
Storyteller*

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*Bernie Worrell*

## Executive Director's Column

Fall is here. A season of death and rebirth. It is with a heavy heart that I need to acknowledge the deaths in our community. Jerry Barnett, Stan Von Hagen, Bernie Worrell, and Tommy Cowett have all passed on since last I wrote to you all. You will find memorials both in this newsletter and on our website.

Having acknowledged the deaths, where will we find the rebirth? Rhythm bones have brought so much joy to my life. I have a concept of Bones Ambassadors that I believe I have shared with our community before. In the 1900's I can point to a handful of rhythm bones players that kept our tradition alive. Without them, I would not be playing rhythm bones today.

I think of Percy Danforth. A man who is rumored to have sold over 30,000 pairs of rhythm bones in his lifetime. Percy took every opportunity to introduce

folks to rhythm bones. Many current and former members of the RBS learned about rhythm bones from Percy. Jonathon Danforth, Percy's grandson, has served on our board, contributed to our website and continues to participate in upholding rhythm bones playing traditions. Search YouTube for "Shake Your Bones" by the Jethros – you're in for a treat.

I think of Joe Birl, who allegedly sold over 100,000 pairs of rhythm bones in his lifetime. He is the only known rhythm bones player to hold a patent with the US government on a modification to the rhythm bones. He came up with the idea to add a notch to make them easier to hold. He also created a Bakelite mold so he could mass produce rhythm bones and for many years you could find his rhythm bones in music stores. His (Continued on Page 2)

## Phillip 'VGO' Terry - Musician and Storyteller

VGO, (Phillip Terry) is an award winning Florida Old Time Music Championship multi-instrumentalist and singer. He can play about 130 instruments and has perfect pitch. His interest in the stories and the history of music led him down the path of learning the classic blues and the music of the Civil War era.

Among the Florida Old Time and Folk Community, VGO's music and storytelling skills are considered top-notch. His knowledge of old time traditional music is deep and authentic. He is a treasure to the music community.

Recognized as an accomplished storyteller and as a blues and old time musician, VGO continues to perform and do "historic impressions" for museums and historic events.

He says that he plays music from ten-and-a-half of the last eleven centuries. "I've been singing for six decades and playing for over five decades." But he can't sing and play without telling the stories of the music.

VGO started collecting and playing string instruments at age 11, when he was living outside Washington D.C. He studied with Nehemiah "Skip" James, Mississippi John Hurt, Eddie "Son" House, and several others performing at The Ontario Place in N.W.D.C. VGO has also met and played with

Rev. Gary Davis while partnering with Richard Leiberson, later of the Central Park Sheiks. VGO played with Booker T. Washington White in 1969 then in 1970 he moved to London, U.K. and joined the Patriarch of Glastonbury. His band, under Stephen Delft, luthier, played live shows and on BBC-2 TV. In 1974 VGO returned to the U.S. and partnered with E.M. "Mother" Scott. There is a photograph of VGO in performance with (Continued on Page 4)



Vgo and a few of his many instruments

## Editorial

September 25, 2024 - What a day for the Rhythm Bones Society celebrating our 25th Anniversary with an email that was sent that day. It is on Page 3, and shows our founding members, 25th Anniversary graphic with the individual Bones Fest graphics, the group photograph from our 25th Anniversary Bones Fest, and two clickable links, one by Tom Connolly showing the history of RBS, and second, the 2024 RBS Ensemble video produced by Michael Baxter (see their Posts on our Homepage).

Phillip 'VGO' Terry has share his instruments and storytelling with us at three Bones Fests. One of the many instruments he plays is rhythm bones, and his story begins on Page 1.

There has never been a page like Page 4 in this newsletter noting the passing of, Jerry Barnett, Tommy Cowett, Stan Von Hagen, and Bernie Worrell. Jerry was a member in our early years, Tommy was part of the Cowett family who started our Society, Stan was a late, but active member, and Bernie was part of us for most our 25 years. They will be missed.

There was a review of the book, 'Tambo and Bones' in the Vol 26, No 1 issue, and I plan to review of the book, 'The Birth of the Banjo,' in the next issue. Both reviews seek to show the importance of the instruments to Minstrelsy since some writers barely mention them. If this interests you, please contact me so we can write something scholarly.

### (Continued From Page 1)

estate owns the trademark on the term "rhythm bones" and it is through their good grace that we are allowed to use the term. Joe was an incredible player, and unfortunately, like many others, he is sorely missed.

I could go on about several other giants that kept our tradition alive in the 1900's. Ev Cowett comes to mind. The man that organized the very first Bones Fest, and who was the first Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society. When he organized the first fest he thought that he might be one of the last rhythm bones players in the US. But he managed to find others, and to bring them together. He trained just about his entire family to play rhythm bones, and unfortunately, we

mourn the passing of Tommy Cowett.

So where will we find rebirth? Steve and Jennifer Brown recently lost the happiest rhythm bones player of all, their son Jeremy. Yet Steve is already planning to host a rhythm bones workshop at the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) in 2025, as he has done for so many years in the past. Steve's presence as the longtime Executive Director of the RBS, along with his steadfast commitment to NEFFA, his tireless efforts in making and selling rhythm bones, and his fostering of relationships in Abbeyfeale with the All Ireland Bones Competition and Fleadh By The Feale Committee are almost incomparable in the effort to keep rhythm bones playing alive in the 21st Century. This is where we see rebirth.

Michael Baxter has decided to use his skills in videography over the past few years to produce collaborative rhythm bones playing videos that bring together players from several continents. This year might be his best effort yet. You can see both a trailer and the full video on the RBS homepage. Huge thanks to Michael and everyone involved. This is where we see rebirth.

Board member Tom Connelly runs Irish Bones. Hand crafting rhythm bones for a diverse customer base, shipping to a variety of countries. He is also our most active Facebook contributor, routinely engaging folks on anything related to the bones. This is where we see rebirth.

Martin O'Donoghue, from the Fleadh By The Feale committee recently reached out to me to see if there were American rhythm bones players interested in attending the All Ireland Bones Competition this year. Anyone interested? Reach out to me if so. I intend to go, as I have for the past 3 years. Board member Dean Robinson has been there every year that I have been. Together, we have developed relationships with rhythm bones playing community in Abbeyfeale. A little birdie told me Steve Brown was considering making the trip back this year, as he has done so many times in the past. This is where we see rebirth.

This newsletter features Phillip 'VGO' Terry. VGO is a singer, storyteller, and multi instrumentalist. As you read this featured article, you can't help but be struck by the depth and breadth of VGO's passion as a chronicler, re-

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

searcher, and historian. VGO has shared some small piece of his experiences and chronicles at multiple Bones Fests, most recently in Mississippi. This is where we see rebirth.

For my part, I perform publicly on rhythm bones (among other things) with some regularity. I am always happy to give a demonstration, always happy to talk about rhythm bones. I always have an extra set somewhere, just in case I meet someone who takes to them. Whether I sell them or donate them, I want to be sure I can pass the tradition along. This is where we see rebirth.

We've had quite a bit of loss in recent years. I miss my old friends. I hope to make new ones. I miss the old rhythm bones ambassadors. I hope to help train new ones. If you are interested in getting more involved in the RBS in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out. This is where we see rebirth.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*



# The 25th Anniversary Celebration Email



RBS Founding Members on September 25, 1999



A printable version of the above 25th Anniversary Graphic is attached



# A Rewarding Journey of Celebration

When the Rhythm Bones Society Board was preparing for our 25th Anniversary celebrations at Clarksdale, Mississippi, I think I volunteered to put together a few slides showing pictures of events down the years. Steve Wixson has done an astounding job all these years keeping records and publishing the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, so I thought it would be a simple task to put some of these gems together for people to enjoy. Then Steve said he would put a slot in the agenda to celebrate as a group, and I got the job of putting the PowerPoint slides together.

I love PowerPoint – I use it in my work all the time. I also use it (to the chagrin of my graphic artist friends and colleagues) to create artwork for advertisements, brochures, learning aids, booklets and even videos and cartoons. In 2021, I used it to create the booklet for my son’s wedding and almost got hired for another one as a result – until my other son noticed the home-printed booklets began to suffer a bit in the humidity of the post-wedding celebrations...

So, I was delighted to help out with the presentation for the celebrations. Of course two things conspired against an easy task – the first, the old adage that the cobbler’s kids have no shoes. I can run off presentations for my work very quickly and easily. When it was for the RBS, a group who are very near and dear to my heart and for whom I wanted to do the best possible job, a combination of perfectionism and procrastination set in and I got to Clarksdale with the presentation only half completed. The second thing then kicked in – I became immediately immersed in Randy Sepalla’s wonderful Fest and was so late completing my slides that Skeff Flynn and Steve Wixson had to juggle the agenda. Sorry guys!

In the end it went great. Despite at least one slide not being complete, and some errors and omissions, the session we had in Clarksdale remembering the years past and the people passed, was one of those warm and loving exchanges that the RBS is defined by.

Since the Fest I have been meaning to clean up the slides and make them a bit more representative of the amazing history and people of the RBS. I got the chance when Steve Wixson was putting together a celebratory email, and I suggested we include a link to the updated slides. Thereby talking myself into another bout of perfectionism and procrastination!

For me it is a real honour to be part of the Rhythm Bones Society. It is a privilege to serve on the Board. When I was reworking and formatting the slides this past week I felt as if I was re-living every single Bones Fest. I recognized so many faces of the people I know, and I felt I knew so many more because I have heard so much about them. It was like sorting through and organizing a family album, and then delving further back the family tree – but I felt it was a better experience because there is no other family I know that is so bound together by their love and respect for the simple and beautiful instrument that is the rhythm bones.

I hope you enjoy the brief look back through 27 years of history, and keep clicking your rhythm bones so that some of us can keep clicking our keyboards to remember, celebrate and support the rhythm bones for the next 25 years of Bones Fests. *Tom Connolly* [In the email it was the fourth image in the left hand column, a Post on our Homepage, and finally rests in the ‘History of RBS’ Exhibit in our Online Museum.]

# The 25th Anniversary RBS Graphic

The 25th Anniversary RBS Graphic is the second image in the left column and larger on Page 5, and presents the individual Fest Graphic for each of the Bones Fests held during the 25 years of RBS. Note that Bones Fest I and Bones Fest II were held prior to the founding of the Rhythm Bones Society. Also note that Steve Brown started the Fest Graphic tradition at BFV, and the graphics for Bones Fest III and IV were created by Tom Connolly.

There is a copy of the 25th Anniversary Graphic suitable for framing at <https://rhythmbone.org/documents/25thForPrinting.pdf>.



## Dr. Stanley Von Hagen Obit



It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Dr. Stanley Von Hagen who died peacefully on Friday, September 20, 2024. He was 86.

Stan was a distinguished and treasured professor of pharmacology and statistics for many years at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey before his retirement.

Stan was an accomplished rhythm bones player attending many Bones Fest with his wife, Jean. He learned about rhythm bones from the Carolina Chocolate Drops and then found RBS. Their first Fest was in Grand Rapids, MI in 2014 and they attended every Bones Fest since then except BFXXI in San Antonio. Steve Brown notes, "A great member, a great player, and incredibly nice person. He will be missed."

Check out his Personal Profile Page at <https://rhythmbones.com/player-profiles/von-hagen-stan/>

## Tommy Cowett Obit



Tommy Cowett was born November 29, 1963, and died August 28, 2024. When the Cowett family performed, Tommy would accompany them on guitar though he did play rhythm bones, and being a drummer in a puck rock band, he played them like he played the drums - hard and fast.

He was a Founding Member of RBS, and was one of the few at Bones Fest I. We last saw him at the Virtual Bones Fest XXIV.

## Bernie Worrell Obit

Bernie (Mescher) Worrell, age 80, died Wednesday, September 4, 2024. Her formal Obituary with comments by her husband Tom is at <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/name/bernice-worrell-obituary?id=56235910>.

She and her brother, the late Jerry Mescher, performed as a duo in a most unusual and entertaining style. Her Personal Profile Page is at <https://rhythmbones.com/player-profiles/worrell-bernie>



[nie/](#) and tells that story along with some of the awards she won and video of the two of them performing. They are shown in matching uniforms in the top photograph in the middle column, later with the addition of Jerry's wife Sharon, and with Sharon after Jerry passed.

## Jerry Barnett Obit



Dr. Jerry Barnett passed away on October 20, 2024. Jerry was a regular at the National Traditional Country Music Association Festival winning the the Bones and Spoons Competition and being inducted into their Old Time Hall of Fame. We first met Jerry at Bones Fest IV and he attended a few others. Jerry was great with cowboy songs, 'The Old Chasm Trail' in particular. Also a good storyteller.

## Michael Baxter's 2024 Ensemble Video

The last image on the 25th Anniversary Email on Page 3 is the 2024 Ensemble Video produced by Michael Baxter and friends. This exciting video is going on our Homepage so in one click visitors see what playing rhythm bones is about.

Here is what Mike said about it: "Thank you to the talented musicians and performers that made this RBS Ensemble the best video yet. Sometimes sequels don't live up to the original, but this one surpassed the previous two. Annika Mikolajko-Osman's ragtime piano took it over the top. She, Tom Braatalien, Harry Zulch, and myself spent many hours recording the music. It turned out far better than we expected."

The players are Annika, Mike, Tom Connolly, Bruno Giles, Skeffington Flynn, Steve Litsios, Scott Miller, and James Yoshazawa.



# 25th Anniversary Rhythm Bones Society Graphic



25th Anniversary Rhythm Bones Society Graphic showing individual Fest Graphics for Fest III thru XX-VIII. There is a version suitable for framing at <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/25thForPrinting.pdf>



VGO on guitar with his rhythm bones instructor, Hank Tenenbaum, during the History of the Blues Workshop at Bones Fest XXIII in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Vgo's story starts on Page 1.

(VGO continued from Page 1)  
 Mother Scott in the April 1980 issue of the National Geographic magazine. (pps 570-571)

VGO has played several well known music festivals including the Gambier Folk Festival, National Folk Festival, Smithsonian Folk Life Festival, Rutgers University, Smithsonian Institution Museum of History and Technology, Baltimore City Parks and Recreation, TV, Radio and before the United States Congress. VGO has appeared at the Florida Folk Festival every year since 1982.

In 1981, along with F. "Fritz" Kirsch, he formed the 97th Regimental Band to explore the music and culture of the U.S. Civil War. They played all over the United States and showcased in Branson, Mo.

VGO was in the ABC miniseries "North and South" part 2, second day, second hour. VGO was once a live exhibit at the American Museum in Bath, U.K. as a genuine "American Folk Singer."

He has performed many live shows from Bristol, Road Island to Grass Valley, California including Fort Dodge, Iowa, San Angelo, Texas and Gettysburg to Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. His has performed at the Garage Mahal in San Antonio, Florida; The Pioneer Florida Museum in Dade City, Florida; Pinellas County Folk Festival and The Whistle Stop cafe in Safety Harbor, Florida.

Legends of music that influenced VGO's music and stories, Nehemiah "Skip" James, 1896 - 1972 gospel & blues, virtuosic guitar finger picking. Reverend Gary Davis 1896 - 1972, was blind, could play in any key, sang and played blues and ragtime instruments with passion and skill, did delta, ragtime, gospel and show songs, remains one of America's truly great folk artists. Eddie James "Son" House, Jr. 1902 - 1988, was an American blues singer and guitarist, noted for his highly emotional style of singing and slide guitar playing. Mississippi John Hurt, 1892 - 1966 country blues singer and guitarist, fast, highly syncopated style, world-renowned master of the acoustic guitar delicate vocals, inventive finger picking on guitar, and warm

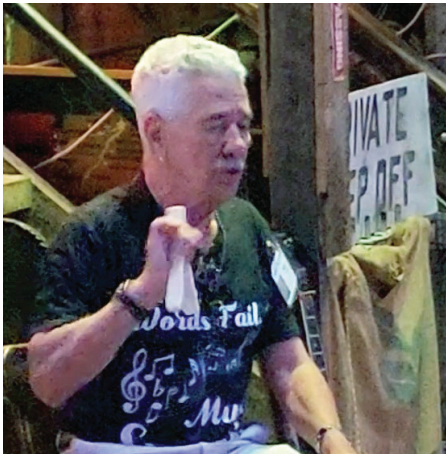
(Continued on Page 4)



personality.

E.M. "Mother" Scott 1893 - 1979. Mother Scott had sung and played guitar since the days of the traveling minstrel shows, first as a teenager in bordellos in the South and later with Leadbelly, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Smith. After she took up music again in the 1960s, she played and sang with Kris Kristofferson, Alice Cooper, Joan Baez, and Judy Collins, among others. Mother Scott was also known as a crusader for senior citizen's rights.

**Transcription of VGO's telephone interview with Mary Lee Sweet in July 2024**



ML. Tell me how you learn to play the bones?

VGO: Back in the mid 70s, I was invited by the Folk Lore Society of Greater Washington to make a presentation about music from the Caribbean, particularly from the island of Andros in the Bahamas, Joseph Spense and the Pintar family, and songs from Trinidad Tobago, a strove Tuesday festival. It was held in the ethical culture center of Washington, DC, on upper 16th street, a huge modernistic building with a large open space. Ethical culture is analogous to a church. After the presentations were made, everybody sat around in a big circle on the floor and they went around each group or individual presented a song and as I was presenting some other thing that I was offering suddenly this fellow plops down next to me playing rhythm bones, and I was quite startled and shouted out 'bones.' That turned out to be Hank Tenenbaum.

I had heard rhythm bones before in a Blind Blake's recording of Dry Bones

Shuffle which I played for you all a few weeks ago at Bones Fest XXVIII. I had the idea of what they could do but had never seen them played before. So I globed onto Hank like glue and sought to learn every thing he could teach me which was not only how to play them but how to make them. I also included him in my public performance and he became a regular sidekick of mine with 'Lucy and VGO.' We had a saxophone player, Rich Greengold who played with us frequently around Washington DC at any rate.

Then when I moved to Florida, I became involved with Civil War reenacting, and one of the places we did a reenactment was a farm outside of Brookville, Florida. There had been several horses that died on the property and their skeletons were still there, and I retrieved rib bones from said skeletons. I took them home and cut them into appropriate size pieces so I could have actual bone rhythm bones. Up until that time I had been playing mostly on pieces of pine that I had collected from renovations done in Georgetown, DC.

I wanted to have a more traditional sound, and I had also started to explore the different ways of holding them. Hank had shown me a little pamphlet from the time of then from the time of the Revolution or a little before the American revolution that not only spoke about, but had drawings demonstrating the proper way of playing the bones according to the dancing masters of the day. This was to stand in balletic fourth position with the opposite legs and arms forward. But with the rhythm bones wrapped around the index finger. Presumably the instrument was to give a softer and expression of less volume. But I also had learned that the Irish put two fingers between the bones, the index and the middle and played more toward the end of them making a thicker sound. I experimented with a number of different sonorities possible with the instrument.

After Hank had given me rudimentary education in it, I did a lot of exploration and research on my own to see what I was comfortable with playing them. I was watching him in other groups other than playing with me. I had learned that it was not popular thing to jump into a jam, so I hadn't actually played out with a lot of people with me playing rhythm

bones.

I had experimented with recordings I had made and records that I played and stuff, but I did not make many exploration in public with them other than I used them for my own accompaniment of my own unaccompanied accapella singing. That essentially the story of it.

ML: Wow! So how did you happen to be giving a presentation on Serbian music?

VGO: When I was in high school I had gone to a number of fiddler's conventions in Virginia and North Carolina, and one of them, Union Grove, and I participated in the contest of Bands. The band that won that that year was the



New York City Ramblers with Winnie Winston and Jody Stecker, and I can't remember the other players. Winnie Winston was a very accomplished 5-string banjo bluegrass player, but I was more interested in Jody Stecker and his guitar playing, and became quiet interested in his further research into world music. He had gone to the Bahamas and Osaka particularly for Folkways records and later Verve Records to record Joseph Spence and the Indar family. I had acquired several of those records, and was quite enamored with the singing some of which was religious music of different stripes. I had great interest in Joseph Spence in particular because as an accompanist his

guitar playing was fairly singular, I won't say unique, but a unique finger style, and I had struggled to learn a lot of that stuff.

The group singing, Spence, rarely bothered to learn the words. He sang a bass part in sort of a growl. When some of the folk lore students, masters and doctorate students that I had spoken with that had to do a lot of world history listening and were expected to do analogs to Joseph Spence around the hot in tots among the world. [VGO demonstrated a growl.] So I had involved myself learning that music, and at the same time I had a friend in DC from Trinidad who had given me tapes of collections of the contest winners from the annual Trinidad parade contests. I had learned quite a number of those.

I don't know who was aware of what I was doing, but I was singing these out of the street and in cafes and different places where I played. So I wasn't doing it in my closet. It was kind of a surplus to that I should be invited not being a member of the folklore society of Greater Washington. I had gone there to see a bunch of notables they brought into town including Frank Warner and some others. Frank Warner had collected 'He's got the whole world in his hand,' Hang down you head Tom Dooley, and a number of songs that went to the mainstream of American consciousness at the time.

So I knew what they did and I had gone out to certain gatherings and festivals of the parks of northern Virginia. In fact at one of these, Prince Williams's Park I believe it was, I had bugged a number of the cabins and large meeting rooms that they were holding events. I set tape recorders going in each of these buildings cause I knew I couldn't be at all of them. I brought home 16 hours of recordings that I later listened back to and collected further music from.

The Folklore Society of Greater Washington is an outstanding resource, and they digitize decades of their concerts and various other stuff which is available on the Internet so I have been told. Hank has been after me to get onto it and listen to that stuff and see if I could identify who I am hearing on it, but I don't have the kind of connectivity. I am studying other things and haven't had time to that kind of research. I still to this

day sing a fair amount of that material that I collected and other things that I had sort of recently discovered in the last 15 years or so.

I had learned a guitar piece by Joseph Spence that he called 'the Lord is my Shepherd' and the more I listened to it the more I thought he did not make this up but had to hear it in church. In the Bahamas the church of England is the mainstay. I started looking it up and I did have connectivity at that time and I found of all people, Harry Secombe from the Goon Show, singing four of the verses which comes from the 23rd Psalm. I made up my own fifth verse to make sure it had all the 23rd Psalm in it, and later Pat LeBree found for me a songbook of religious material which had it in it with all 5 verses. My daughter had given me a song called 'rise up Singing' which had the words for it and attributed it to a Scott's Prayer Book from 1658 or something. I come to learn at the death of Queen Elizabeth, they played it at her funeral because it was her favorite hymn.

I had a number of tyins. When I was in England, living in England, I was an apprentice to a luthier there who lived on Cable Street or just off Cable street, East End. He repaired instruments for the incredible String Band who would do world tours and when they'd come home they would fill up the room with a hundred road cases of the various instruments they carried around with them.

They had a show closer tune that they used all the time that they had gotten from Joseph Spence and the Pintar Family, *I Bid You Goodnight*. [Singing] "Lay down my dear brother lay down, lay down and take your rest. Why don't you lay your hear on my Saviour's breast. I love you, but Jesus loves you the best. Bid you good night, good night." [end singing]. That was one of the first things I had learned of Joseph Spence playing. The singing of that group, can't remember all their names right now. I now long since lost all those records in my perpetual moving.

I was once cataloged, named and identified as an itinerant museum curator because wherever I would go I would wind up with a collection of string instruments and various other kinds of

instruments, art work and music books and whatever. The most of it has gone by the boards, but my memory is relatively good (it's not as good as I'd like it to be). I've always marveled at brain operations where they take electric probes and run it around on the surface of the brain in an open skull and people can suddenly clearly remember events in their life.

Once I was at a fiddlers convention, and Tom Ashley was there and he won again the ballad singing contest which he had done years something like 38 years. As I was wondering around the ballpark where they held the even, I came across Tom sitting there entertaining a bevy of young ladies sing some of the most squirrely, dirty songs that I have ever heard - none of which I can remember.

ML: Have you talked to Hank recently?

VGO: I texted him when I learned that Dr Bernice Johnson Reagon had died. I don't know if you know who she was. For one thing she was the founder of a group called 'Sweet honey in the rock.' She also was the head of research into the diaspora, at Smithsonian, Library of Congress. I saw her when she was 17 or 18 years old with the 'The Freedom Singers' that came thru Washington with a show that included Julius Lester who has since become known for writing books. He was quite a performer. He was the first man I ever saw who played slide guitar with a knife.

Bernice was a force of nature at that time, and she went on to academia and so forth. She steered a very different path than I did. I was aware of what she was doing but I never had much interaction with her afterwards because her allegiance to academia was such that she was impressed by what was published and what was on paper and so forth. I was quite happy with the oral tradition that we didn't justify thru peer review.

VGO: Have you ever run across the Anthology of American Folk Music put out by Folkways in 1952. It was on 6 long playing albums. I was introduced to that in the early 60's, and listened to all of it much of it many times. I recently got another copy of it and I look thru the list of performers that were presented there. I added up and I think I wound up meeting or playing with or seeing about 54%



of them alive. Back in the 60's, Peter Stansfeld said at that time everybody who was listening to that Anthology was hearing music that was only about 30 years old having been recorded in the late 20's or very early 30's. At that point we were calling it old time music and its hard to image we would call the Rolling Stones or Beatles the same at this time when we are nearly twice the length of time as it was in the 60's.

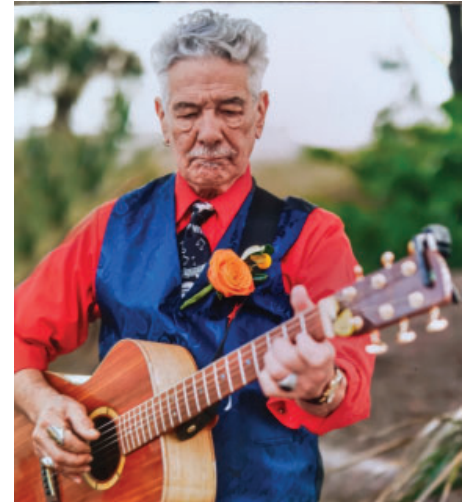
Part of the advantage of living in Washington at that time was researchers were going out and trying to discover those artists and bring them to the Library of Congress to document. That is how I got to meet Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, and Sun House, Mat? Sliscom and ... I wound up playing on the same stage as many of them at the Ontario Place, various festivals around. Not necessarily with them. In 1976 at the Bicentennial, Mother Scott and her children and I think Hank were apart of that, and went to Ft McHenry, Baltimore, and went on stage five minutes after

midnight on July 4th and played for an hour. Later that day, I'm thinking it was that day, we were on the mall on a pyramid of platforming, and Peter, Paul and Mary were the group descending those platforms as we were ascending.

I had met Peter Yarrow my freshman year at college because one of my band-mates in college, Christopher Hayden Gust had been invited to sit in on the vetting process for the 1600 or 1800 album or whatever it was called. We were sitting in the control booth with Peter We were on the floor and he was busy listening to the various takes. He would listen to a 4 second segment of 5 different recordings and then he would say I want her voice from 1. I want Paul's voice from 3. I want my voice from 5. I want the guitarist from 2, and they linked the album together like a crazy quilt. It was insane to me how the finished product had nothing to do with a contiguous performance.

[Mary Lee Sweet is a rhythm bones player and she and her husband, Frank

on banjo perform 19th Century music as a duo called Backintyme (<http://backintyme.com>). She is a fan and friend of VGO and introduced him to the Rhythm Bones Society. Check out her player profile page at <https://rhythmbones.com/player-profiles/sweet-mary-lee/> ]



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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 26, No. 4 2024

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## Executive Director's Column

Winter is here. A season of death and rebirth. It is with a heavy heart that I need to acknowledge the deaths in our community. Jerry Barnett, Stan Von Hagen, Bernie Worrell, and Tommy Cowett have all passed on since last I wrote to you all. You will find memorials both in this newsletter and on our website.

Having acknowledged the deaths, where we will find the rebirth? Rhythm bones have brought so much joy to my life. I have a concept of Bones Ambassadors that I believe I have shared with our community before. In the 1900's I can point to a handful of rhythm bones players that kept our tradition alive. Without them, I would not be playing rhythm bones today.

I think of Percy Danforth. A man who is rumored to have sold over 30,000 pairs of rhythm bones in his lifetime. Percy took every opportunity to introduce

folks to rhythm bones. Many current and former members of the RBS learned about rhythm bones from Percy.

Jonathon Danforth, Percy's grandson, has served on our Board, contributed to our website and continues to participate in upholding rhythm bones playing traditions. Search YouTube for "Shake Your Bones" by the Jethros – you're in for a treat.

I think of Joe Birl, who allegedly sold over 100,000 pairs of rhythm bones in his lifetime. He is the only known rhythm bones player to hold a patent with the US government on a modification to the rhythm bones. He came up with the idea to add a notch to make them easier to hold. He also created a Bakelite mold so he could mass produce rhythm bones and for many years you could find (Continued on Page 2)

## More Musing About Types of Rhythm Bones

Last year I wrote an article about the size and shape and material of bones (RBJ Vol 25 No. 4). Since then I have been working on a more definitive and comprehensive article - but the subject is so huge I think I will be at it for another while! So meanwhile here are some things I discovered and re-discovered in the last few years about this topic. I hope you find it interesting.

I've seen and heard really small bones made in Yorkshire before the first World War (from whalebone I think). They were small so they could be carried in a soldier's limited pocket space through both World Wars. They are 5" long, 3/4" wide and 1/4" thick. I have since discovered that my neighbour from two doors down, Jack, has a pair he bought when he was in a skiffle band in college in Dublin in the 1960s-70s which look and sound almost exactly like the World War bones. I keep trying to meet up with him to compare the two pairs and photograph and video them together, but Jack travels a lot, This month he is in – guess where? Yorkshire!

The smallest bones I have been asked to make were 4", last year by a lovely man called Brian Walker who lives in Florida. I made them from the thoracic vertebrae – more about this in a later article!

And the smallest bones I have ever made were

from a failed attempt to make goat shin bones! I had searched for suitable goat bones for more than 10 years and only in 2016 did I finally get decent ones from a gentle creature called Rug who died of natural causes. The "failed" pair I made a few years (Continued on Page 4)



These rhythm bones were made for Tom Connolly by Parker Waite. The two narrow ones are Teak, the wider ones are Rosewood. Sanded to 1200 grit, and finished with WATCO Teak Oil. Parker said, "The pattern is my modification to Joe Birl's plastic rhythm bones."

## Editorial

I was working on my Editorial when our Executive Director's Editorial arrived, and it got me thinking. Our membership numbers are down from earlier times, though dues are enough to pay for our very large website, pay for printing the newsletter as a member benefit, and having the financial strength to hold annual Bones Fests that typically though not always are break even events. As Skeff points out we have lost many old timers who made important contributions to our society, and newcomers have not taken their place.

We might conclude that after a quarter of a century we are slowing down except that attendance at Bones Fest is strong. Maybe we need to refocus our direction.

This is an unusual issue that has six pages instead of the normal eight. The newsletter is printed on two 11 x 17 inch sheets paper that when folded to 8.5 x 11 size has four pages for each sheet. Most of our readers read the newsletter on our website so that restriction no longer exists for most readers. Initially color printing was expensive and used on the outside two pages (except for the Bones Fest Highlights issue). Color now costs nothing for whatever we put on our website. Members will still receive a paper copy that may have one or more blank pages.

Founding Member, Mel Mercier's challenge to look as 19th Century rhythm bones playing to help us see our future may be an answer, and I am excited about starting a project to do just that as part of the rebirth Skeff has written about in this issue. Many of can contribute to this Project, and I hope you contact me with your ideas.

**(Editorial continued From Page 1)** his rhythm bones in music stores. His estate owns the trademark on the term "rhythm bones" and it is through their good grace that we are allowed to use the term. Joe was an incredible player, and unfortunately, like many others, he is sorely missed.

I could go on about several other giants that kept our tradition alive in the 1900's. Ev Cowett comes to mind. The man that organized the very first Bones Fest, and

who was the first Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society. When he organized the first Fest he thought that he might be one of the last rhythm bones players in the US. But he managed to find others, and to bring them together. He trained just about his entire family to play rhythm bones, and unfortunately, we now mourn the passing of his son Tommy.

So where will we find rebirth? Steve and Jennifer Brown recently lost the happiest rhythm bones player of all, their son Jeremy. Yet Steve is already planning to host a Bones Workshop at the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) in 2025, as he has done for so many years in the past. Steve's presence as the longtime Executive Director of the RBS, along with his steadfast commitment to NEFFA, his tireless efforts in making and selling rhythm bones, and his fostering of relationships in Abbeyfeale with the All Ireland Bones Competition and Fleadh By The Feale Committee are almost incomparable in the effort to keep rhythm bones playing alive in the 21st Century. This is where we see rebirth.

Michael Baxter has decided to use his skills in videography over the past few years to produce collaborative rhythm bones playing videos that bring together players from several continents. This year might be his best effort yet. You can see both a trailer and the full video on the RBS homepage. Huge thanks to Michael and everyone involved. This is where we see rebirth.

Board member Tom Connolly runs Irish Bones. Hand crafting rhythm bones for a diverse customer base, shipping to a variety of countries. He is also our most active Facebook contributor, routinely engaging folks on anything related to rhythm bones. This is where we see rebirth.

Martin O'Donoghue, from the Fleadh By The Feale committee recently reached out to me to see if there were American rhythm bones players interested in attending the All Ireland Bones Competition this year. Anyone interested? Reach out to me if so. I intend to go, as I have for the past 3 years. Board member Dean Robinson has been there every year that I have been.

Together, we have developed relationships with the rhythm bones playing

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

community in Abbeyfeale. A little birdie told me Steve Brown was considering making the trip back this year, as he has done so many times in the past. This is where we see rebirth.

For my part, I perform publicly on rhythm bones (among other things) with some regularity. I am always happy to give a demonstration, always happy to talk about rhythm bones. I always have an extra set somewhere, just in case I meet someone who takes to them. Whether I sell them or donate them, I want to be sure I can pass the tradition along. This is where we see rebirth.

We've had quite a bit of loss in recent years. I miss my old friends. I hope to make new ones. I miss the old rhythm bones ambassadors. I hope to help train new ones. If you are interested in getting more involved in the RBS in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out. This is where we see rebirth.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

## Wilma Myers Obituary

Wilma Myers, wife of the late Russ Myers, passed away on September 12, 2024 as reported to us by her daughter, Jeniffer. Russ and Wilma were hosts for Bones Fest III where the Rhythm Bones Society was founded. We did not get Wilma on stage, but as shown in the photograph she knew 'how to hold them.' She was a retired OBGYN head nurse.



## Walter Messick Obituary



Walter Messick passed away on February 28, 2022, and his formal obituary is at <https://www.dispatch.com/obituaries/b0058918>. He was primarily a creator and seller of handcrafted dulcimers, and his instruments won numerous awards and were sold around the world.

He also made a variety of other folk instruments including the uniquely shaped rhythm bones shown in the photograph above. In a story in our newsletter, he said. "I made a jig for my band saw where I could cut hundreds at a time, and then sanded and finished them. I made thousands of pairs of bones selling them at craft shows and later on my website."

## Bones Fest XXIX Preliminary Information

Bruno Giles (with help Steve Brown) is the Host for Bones Fest XXIX. It will be held Natick, MA, a suburb of Boston on August 7-10, 2025. Historically, the East Coast has had the most attendees.

Bruno has secured the Fest Hotel, and the venues for meetings and workshops.

More details will be released soon including the Registration Form and the Registration Fee.

Below is hotel reservation information.

Book your group rate for  
BONES FEST 2025

If you have questions or need help with the link, please do not hesitate to ask. We appreciate your business and look forward to a successful event.

Event Summary:

BONES FEST 2025

Start Date: Thursday, August 7, 2025

End Date: Sunday, August 10, 2025

Hotel: Courtyard Boston Natick for 159.00 USD per night

Last Day to Book: Tuesday, July 8, 2025

Telephone: (508) 655-6100

Reservation Link: <https://www.marriott.com/event-reservations/reservation-link>

There is a bus from Logan airport, an express to Framingham, about a mile from the hotel in Natick. Someone will pick you up at the Framingham station.

## 19th Century Rhythm Bones Project

As part of our 25th Anniversary celebration, former Board Member, Mel Mercier, challenged us to look back to 19th Century music to see our future.

Russ Myers, when he was recorded for posterity by the Library of Congress, was shown a Broadside announcing a German rhythm bones player performing at the Bronx Theater in 1740. We need to get a copy of this broadside.

With this information, we should expand the challenge to the 18th and maybe 17th century rhythm bones music.

If you are interested in researching this challenge, use the Contact Us page.

## Rhythm Bones at a Drum Circle

There are many drum circles around the country, Pioneered by a number of musicians, many of which studied with Babatunji Oltunji, Master drummer from Nigeria. One of the hallmarks of the drum circles is an inclusiveness in regards to experience, instruments, and playing level. I have had very good success, playing rhythm bones at drum circles, and people seem to be fascinated with them.

As with anything, it's probably best to check in with the leader of the drum circle and ask them if it's appropriate to play rhythm bones in that context. Drum circles vary with rules and expectations. Again, most of the drum circles that I've been to are very inclusive and welcoming.

The drum often seen at drum circles is a Djembe, A large, and very loud drum taken from the African tradition. Some of the other instruments might see at a drum circle could be shakers, tambourines, And other handheld percussion. You also see a variety of drums, not only those from the African tradition, but some other traditions as well, such as native American frame drums, Doumbecs from the Middle East, And The Irish frame drum the Bodhran. Once I saw a base, Tom Tom from a drum set, and it was played with Sticks.

But how do rhythm bones fit in at a drum circle? It's really important to go with the flow of the music, and and not take it as your personal solo time. In some ways it's relative to many of the music that we play we don't want to overwhelm the rest of the players or deviate from the basic rhythm. Many of the drum circles that I've seen request you to leave your ego at the door. Remember, this is a group experience and not a place to show off. This is true for all the musicians attending a drum circle not only rhythm bones players. It's a community.

You don't see many rhythm bones players at a drum circle. In fact the only other person I know that plays rhythm bones are the drum circle is Bruno Giles, excellent drummer, harmonica player, and of course, rhythm bones. For several

(Continued on Page 4)



**(Continued From Page 3)**

years in a row, I attended the eastern mass rhythm festival and offered a rhythm bones playing workshop, which was very well attended. So now we see some of the drummers picking up rhythm bones.

How do you find a drum circle in your area? Of course you might find some listings on Facebook. For some reason, drum circles very often are found at universal Unitarian churches. There may be specific people in your area that organize drum circles. In our area, David Curry does a lot to organize a variety of drum circles in amazing environment. One drum circle was held at the fruit land Museum in Harvard mass, outside with a gigantic bonfire, and has organized the Easter mass rhythm festival. One thing that you might encounter, with a lot of noise, the rhythm bones may get drowned out. Volume at a drum circle can go from really quiet to very loud. They also vary in size some as large as 40 or 50 people, and some all the way down to a few drummers. It would make sense to investigate first where are they and get a sense of how big they are. The drum circle I've been attending in Fitchburg at a Unitarian church, only has about 10 drummers on a good day, so quieter drum circles definitely would complement rhythm bones.

There's nothing like playing rhythm bones with a group of drummers, especially when they haven't seen them before and are excited about them. I'm always available for questions, and would love to hear your stories! My cell phone number is 978-7272899. Have fun! *Steve Brown*

(Musings continued on Page 1)

before that, sourced from a butcher called Billy(!), but the goat was quite small and I still have that pair – very hard to play without seriously damaging your wrist – they are only 3 ¾” long and are tubular. They look more like tiny tubular bells! The bone is really thin but very hard.

The biggest bones I have seen were in Padstow in Cornwall, rib bones, about 11” inches long and 2” wide at the base. I recently read an article in the Rhythm Bones Society archive called “Bones and the Man - Toward a History of Bones

Playing” written by Robert E McDowell in the Journal of American Culture <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/McDowellHistory.pdf> where Robert said:

“The great performer Frank Brower, who introduced bones to the professional minstrel stage in 1841, sawed into twelve-inch lengths the rib-bones of a horse.”

Robert goes on to say that this size didn't last long in the Minstrel era and bones were reduced to between 6” and 8” which are the lengths that the vast majority of bones seem to fall between.

As a general rule the longer the bone, the thinner and narrower they should be, and conversely if you have heavy or thick bones, then I think they work much better if they are short. I have a short heavy set made for me by our RBS colleague Parker Waite in March 2020. One pair of the set is teak, the other rosewood. They are quite dense and heavy, beautifully polished, with tapered thickness from top to bottom, and a notch at the top for easy gripping – Parker told me it is his modification of the Joe Birl pattern. They are loud!

The first pair of bones I made in 1979 are about 5.5” long and quite thick, about ½” to ¾”, and 1” to 1 ¼” wide. Of course I had no clue what I was doing at that time – now I know a little more but I learn every day. At Christmas just past I bought Tomahawk steaks and made a pair of bones from the rib. They were beautiful, a very consistent 1” wide all the way down, a little thick at almost ½” and the bone itself was quite thick. I've looked for rib bones for many years that are not too thick on the outside but that have good thick bone with little marrow. Very difficult to find here in Ireland, as most cattle are slaughtered at about 2 years old, but the Tomahawk bones delivered and I will have to eat more steak I think! One “issue” with the Tomahawks was that they were quite curved, so following advice from Stephen Brown I paired them off with different straighter partners. Steve told me how it is quite common to have one straight bone and one curved bone.

Most recently, last week in fact (early January 2025), a man called Billy Scribbles joined a conversation in the RBS Facebook page and he introduced us to a Catskills woodsman called

Mike Todd (1877-1960) who played rhythm bones that I can only describe as “clappers”. Billy is recreating them. They are straight, but with nice flared out tops so they can be held easily, and they taper out to a thicker section towards the bottom then taper back in. They have a very pleasing soft sound, very different to my ear from other wooden rhythm bones.

My favourite wood for making bones is olive. It is just beautiful to see, to feel, and to work with. When you carve and sand it, the wood is very forgiving and co-operative – it almost feels soft while working it, yet when finished the bones produce nice clear clicks and clacks. It is really difficult to get good pieces of olive here in Ireland for a reasonable cost but I managed to get some last year and made a few pairs. I thought they were great and I decided to get a second opinion so I sent a pair as a gift to the famed Johnny Ringo McDonagh. Here's what he said: “Yes I tried them there's a nice tone off them and I liked the grip on them, around the same time I got a Bodhran off Brendan White, so I will do a little demo for Facebook, I've been tied down with stuff so I'll do it when I get a chance, many thanks for them, wishing you all the best from now on, regards, Johnny.” I am looking forward to Johnny's full review of the bones and also of Brendan's bodhran! I also discovered since then that sometimes you can buy olive salad utensils whose handles can make really lovely bones. I tried lots of them, and had success with a few. If you can get salad utensils where the handles are about ¼” thick with a slight curve, grab them! Cut the handle off, and with some patient sanding and shaping you will produce beautiful bones. I am always on the lookout in high-end kitchen stores – I have found the cheaper utensils are not nearly as good.

On the subject of making “cheap” wooden bones, I had a request two years ago from a teacher in Scotland for cheap bones for a class of children who had special needs. I remembered making a pair in 2017 for a man in Portugal called Diogo Fernandes, who also had a limited budget. I went to the local hardware store, got some pine stripwood – used here for edging around wooden floors – and created curved pieces by soaking them overnight then bending them

around a series of nails to keep them curved. When they dried out in a few days the curve stayed. You don't need much of a curve, and I discovered if you bend pieces about 3 feet long you can get enough of a curve without straining the wood too much. I was very dubious about whether this would work – I am pretty sure the stripwood was not pure pine, but made up of pine pieces and glue pressed together – but it worked! So I made four pairs for the Scottish kids and did a series of videos of the process. I checked in with the inimitable Junior Davey (5 times Irish Bodhrán champion and 2 times bones champion at Abbeyfeale). Junior teaches many kids to play, and he thought the pine bones, about 6 inches long or maybe a little shorter, would be very suitable. I will check in and see how they are getting on over there in the wilds of Scotland and report back at a future date!

I have also seen metal bones and have made a few attempts myself. On one trip to a kitchen store looking for olive, I came across two large spoons with a bright copper-like finish. The handles were beautiful, and had a good weight to them, so I bought them to experiment with and forgot about them for a couple of years. Then I got to know the wonderful Annika Mikolajko. Those of you who know of Annika will know that as well as being a fabulous musician she makes very creative use of bones – her most famous trick is to hold one against her cheek and tap it with the other, giving some lovely echoey sounds. Annika first bought an aluminum pair from me that I had made by hammering a piece of extrusion into shape, and when I told her about the “copper” ones in 2021 she had to have them! They give a lovely ringing sound and are more like bells than bones to my ear.

Over the past few months I have reached out to a few well-known players to get their thoughts. Here is what three of them have said:

**Rossa Ó Snodaigh** of the legendary band Kila:

“Tom a chara, tá súil agam go bhfuil biseach ort anois. (Translation: Tom my friend I hope you are well now)

Bone length: Best if they are at least as long as the bottom of your hand to the tip of your middle finger. Heaviness comes

into play thereafter and the longer and heavier the less flexible and slower they become to play.

Wood V Bone: Bones have a very bright clacking sound due to the cavernous quality of the dried out interior. This allows them to be heard in most settings. They can of course be played softer by changing where the two bones percussively connect.

Wooden shaped bones have a soft clucking sound which is more useful when playing in smaller sessions.

Rossa Ó Snodaigh”

**Tommy Hayes**, another legend:

“Hi Tom

I have 2 pairs of Nicholas Driver bones that I have had for at least 45 years not sure what length they are as I'm away from home at the moment but they are the right length for me

I also play wooden ones and it really depends on what sound I require on a recording or live

I should also add that I usually play 3 bones as I prefer the sound dynamics

Cheers

Tommy”

**Stephen Brown**, bonemaker extraordinaire:

“Hey Tom ... I've always found that length is somewhat determined by the bone I am using. Leg bones tend to be cut on the short side, intense to include that large portion at the end, which is not ideal. I hope this is making sense. I try to get the bones as long as possible 10 inches if I can. Then I can trim off the parts that I can't use. 7 inches is the goal, lately I've been going under 7, but still trying to make it as close to 7 as I can... I have several pairs that the Drivers made including one that Aubrey driver made...there are a number of companies that go over 7 inches and in some cases to 8 inches, and I think of Mardeen of Shooting Star bones. Some of the old Danforth bones can also be over 7 inches 7 1/2 or more ... wood is so much easier to work with than bone and you can pretty much make them the length you want . Whereas with bone you really have to trim off the unusual parts. Anyway hope this is helpful, take care, Steve.”

I love developing and messing around with bones materials and designs,

and I also love to discover older more traditional instruments.

And I still stick to the seven things I have learned about the size, shape and material of bones, which I mentioned in the last article:

1. Bones players preferences vary hugely.
2. Nice looking bones are no good if they don't play well.
3. Some ugly bones play beautifully.
4. Lots of lengths, widths, curvatures and weights can produce great action.
5. Even bones made to a standard pattern from non-bone material have individual characteristics.
6. There are many different opinions of the same pair of bones.
7. The bones decide.

I hope you enjoyed reading this, and later this year I will keep working this year on a more in-depth article. *Tom Connolly*

## Facebook Update

What an incredible year we've had on this Facebook group for the Rhythm Bones Society! We've had over 140 posts, over 460 comments, and over 1,700 reactions from over 250 plus members! It's an exciting time.

Tom Connolly has been our top contributor this past year, and we hope he'll lead us in 2025. There have been posts about making bones, playing bones, and just generally our particular outlet of expression.

I would love to see more videos of us playing. It seems to me that the basic mechanics of bones playing are more or less common to us all. Of course there are some techniques that belong only to a few of us, but it is really what we each decide to do with our techniques that is most impressive to me.

So as we head into 2025, let's share our performances! Let's use this Facebook tool to shine a light that our fellow bones players can follow.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

## Who is 'The Bone Player'

I first saw an image of "The Bone Player" back in 2016 while attending the New England Folk Festival in Mansfield MA. I was wandering around looking for a unique musical instrument and decided to search for some musical spoons when I discovered Steve Brown's Rhythm Bones Table. After talking me into purchasing a pair of bones, he slid a postcard reprint across the table of William Sidney Mount's famous painting which I would later learn, proudly hangs in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. It depicts a well-dressed African-American joyfully playing the rhythm bones. As an amateur genealogist, I was immediately intrigued and wanted to know more about this person. But after many tries over the years, I found nothing, until recently.

Again I tried, beginning my search on Ancestry.com, along with a quick Google search, only to find that someone had indeed identified the elusive man in the painting. The Bone Player's name was Andrew Brewster, born around 1820, and lived in Brookhaven NY. This revelation came from the book titled "The People in the Paintings of William Sidney Mount" written by Katherine Kirkpatrick and Vivian Nicholson-Mueller (<https://www.arcadiapublishing.com/blogs/news/the-people-in-the-paintings-a-nineteenth-century-long-island-artist-features-people-of-color>). Their book explores the diverse subjects depicted in Mount's artwork, particularly focusing on his portrayal of Black and multiracial individuals. The Bone Player, owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is one of eleven paintings featured in the book.

According to online sources, Andrew was 47 when William Mount painted him. It is unknown if Andrew actually played the bones or just modeled for the painting, but since many people in the households of the Brewsters and Mounts were musicians, it seems more than likely that he did indeed play them. Mount painted "The Bone Player" and "The Banjo Player" whose name was also discovered to be George Freeman. He was commissioned to paint them to be made into lithographic prints to be sold in Europe.



Bruno tells us that the model for The Bone Player is 'Andrew Brewster'

The most striking aspect of Mount's work was how he portrayed people of color in the early nineteenth century. Unlike the usual portrayals of the time, where the subjects were usually shown in the most unflattering manner possible. Newspapers also often drew Black people in racist cartoons with exaggerated features. His work was finished several years before the Civil War, at the height of tense slavery debates. Mount's painting depicts his subjects in a more humane and almost elegant manner. The expression of pure joy on Andrew's face in playing the rhythm bones is something all rhythm bones players can relate to.

Over 150 years after the Bone Player's name had been lost to history, the unknown musician can finally be recog-

nized and celebrated

We can almost hear, someone asking him back in 1856, "Andrew Brewster, will you play the bones for us? The painting reveals his answer

For more information about Andrew Brewster, "The Bone Player" and other subjects of the paintings of William Mount, please check out "The Art of William Sidney Mount: Long Island People of Color on Canvas", written by Katherine Kirkpatrick and Vivian Nicholson-Mueller (The History Press, September 2022). *Bruno Giles*