



# 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

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## 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

*(Continued on page 6)*

*(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."

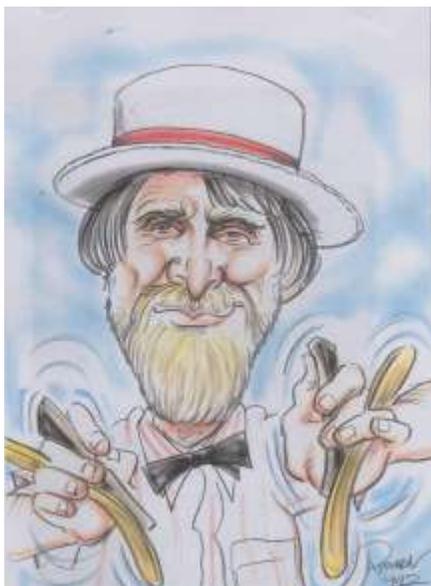
From the back of the DVD; "Old Doc and his rowdy band on minstrels perform before a live audience. Dressed in authentic clothes of the 1850s, this long-time band from the Atlanta area performs 13 authentic minstrel songs with a fiddle made in the 1870s, an authentic minstrel banjo made in the 1850s, 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

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

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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



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*