



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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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

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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

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

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 a 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 6th, 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