



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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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

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. 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 kajun 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. Eddowes'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*

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Address Correction Requested