



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 1, No. 1 1999

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

Executive Director's Column

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

BONES FEST III was a huge success

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

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

Bones Fest III Highlights

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

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

(Continued on page 2)



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

(Continued from page 1)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 1, No. 1
Fourth Quarter 1999

Editor
Steve Wixson
wixson@chattanooga.net

Executive Director
Everett Cowett
evcow@aol.com

Web Site Coordinator
Martha Cowett
mccowett@mindspring.com

Board of Directors
Steve Brown
Sally Carroll
Everett Cowett
Mel Mercier
Jerry Mescher
Russ Myers
Steve Wixson

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

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

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

tape/CD coordinator.

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

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

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

(Continued on page 4)

Rhythm Bones Society Formed - Meet the Board of Directors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

Department, University College
Cork, Cork, Ireland, 352-21-902271,
email:
mmercier@mail.wesleyan.edu.

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

(Continued from page 2)

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

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

Rhythm Bones Y2K Compliant

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

Board Meeting Notes

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

Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910
