



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 20, No. 4 2018

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Executive Director's Column

A friend of mine recently wrote saying, "this has been a bad year for losses" and again we are faced with another. Nicholas Driver, 3rd generation rhythm bone maker and player has passed away at a relatively early age. Nick took over the Driver rhythm bone making business from his father, wrote a Bone and Bodhran Tutor, and recorded the first long playing album featuring rhythm bone playing. His bones were known around the bone playing community for the high quality of tone they produced.

In 2001 he came to Bones Fest in Phillipston, MA, and charmed us with his grace, and great knowledge of bones and bone making. You will find

other remembrances in this issue. Rest in peace Nicholas Driver!

The All Ireland Bone Playing Championship celebrates it's 25 Anniversary in Abbeyfeale, West Limerick, Ireland on the first week end in May this year. They have reached out to previous winners, including champions, and are hoping to assemble the largest collection of rhythm bone players at that contest. Having competed, and judged this contest I can attest to the extraordinary hospitality, and high degree of musicianship displayed there. Some of Ireland's finest players of (Continued on Page 3)

Tim Reilly

I was born in East Lyme, CT, in August 1963. I liked drums when I was younger and started taking drum lessons in 7th grade, probably because of the Bicentennial. My teacher, Rob Impellesterri, was a star drummer in the high school band and he realized I was a very enthusiastic student. I went from basic rudiments to book studies and reading drum music, which is very different from reading tonal music. I was learning to read classical percussion charts and also drum set parts, so I was very saturated with my lessons. This was in 2-3 years of study, an hour every week. Then when I was in high school I was in the marching band during fall and spring and concert band in winter. This gave me an appreciation for reading music arrangement and memorization. That was the awesome thing about East Lyme High School's band in the 1970s-1980s: everything was practiced, memorized, and produced a state champion and East Coast championship marching band. I took that enthusiasm with me to community college by trying to write parts, going to see my younger brother and watching the drum line, visiting our old drum instructor, Gary Ribchinsky, and trying to stay connected to it. I gradually drifted away about 1985 while I was attending Central Connecticut State University, and I didn't play much at all for a couple of years.

I got a job at Mystic Seaport Museum in fall 1987 and I heard rhythm bones first in spring 1988, played by Rick Spencer, a staff musician there. I decided I wanted to really try to play that instrument and see

what I could do with it. A few movement lessons and I had learned the basic hand swing, the triplet (roll), and the taps. I started one-handed, right hand, and quickly developed the analogy of being on a drum set and using my right hand to hit the ride cymbal, usually on a drummer's right-hand side. I found I could play different rhythmic patterns in just one hand as well as the rudiments.

Then the trick was to learn the other hand. At the Sea Music Festival held at Mystic Seaport, I saw a female rhythm bones player, Cindy Peloquin, playing (Continued on Page 4)



Tim Reilly being interviewed at Bones Fest IX

Editorial

I am sad to announce the passing of rhythm bones maker and legend, Nicholas Driver. There was a story about him in 2001 in Volume 3, No 2 issue of our newsletter, and if you do an online newsletter search for 'Driver' you will find that story and lots of other of his contributions. For a live performance go to the list of audio and video on our website and click on Nick Driver.

Nick came from three generations of rhythm bones makers and was sad that his sons were not interested in them. His wife tells me his great nephew is a musician and the whale bones of Nick's great grand father have been passed to a new generation.

This is a different issue. Over the years we have recognized many rhythm bones players, some historic and some living. However within the ranks of our members are rhythm bones players with skills that likely match or exceed those other players, and they need to be recognized. So in each of future issue will be a profile of one of our members starting with Tim Reilly and Parker Waite (the only active member who attended Bones Fest I). Since they are alive they can tell us their story first hand instead of second hand by others. The next newsletter will feature Spike Bones who has entertained us for almost 20 years. This will be a fun ride!

Go to our website and you find that registration is open for Bones Fest XXIII hosted by Randy Seppala. Check out the announcement with his Fest graphic on the opposite page.

Letters to the Editor

My Dad played the rattle bones quite well. When I was a kid he showed me how they were held and played, but I never did play along with him. He passed away in 1988, and I retired in 2011. In 2014, I ran across a box that was his; in it were a couple sets of his old bones.

I decided that I should learn to play them and started practicing. At first I could only play along with one or two songs before my wrist and arms became tired. I burned a CD of appropriate music and started playing one pair while driving

to and from work. I felt that I was doing pretty well when I had a severe right shoulder injury and subsequent surgery four months later that took away the ability to play right handed.

The enjoyment of rattling out a beat to the music was strong enough to keep me playing left handed and trying to regain the ability to play with the right as well. Now two and a half years after the surgery I can manage a few songs right handed before getting tired, but can play left handed for hours and enjoy an almost daily session.



I am fully self taught and have looked for other bones players in my area to learn from, but have not found even one other bones player. I purchased a couple of new sets of bones online and I have made a few sets myself. I enjoy the different sounds from different woods and playing two different wood sets that play in what I call the same key so they compliment each other. *Dennis Marks*

I got started by being self taught. I have bones on two bungy cords. They are elk, deer and buffalo all a different sound. I'm on youtube you can see it youtube.com/watch?v=GgR7WfdCc_Q. Been playing for 30 years. Play street music at the 7 mile fair. A large flea market on week-ends. I can play with both hands also with a harmonica. I used to cross country drive a team of ponys in a covered wagon. Slept in it. My rattle bones got me a lot of free meals. These trips lasted 3-4 weeks. I still wagon train and if you listen you'll hear good Wisconsin music and the rhythm of the rattle bones. *Punka. a.k.a. Larry Fish*

Rhythm Bones Player

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

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

Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.org

Nicholas Driver Obituary

Nicholas Zeger Driver was born in Norbury, South London, England in February 1946 and died in December 2018. Under the nom de plume of China Hamilton he was an established artist and one of the leading fine art erotic photographic printers of the twentieth century.

Nick was an accomplished bones and bodhran player, having learnt to play the bones at the age of eight from his father, Aubrey Driver, who himself had played and made bones since 1920, with he learning from his father. Nick played on his Great-Grandfather's whalebone set of four and carried on and expanded the tradition of making bones from cows' shin in the 1970's, along with rosewood sets. He has made and sold many thousands of bone sets (and bodhrans) across the world and had (Continued on Page 6)

(Continued from Page 1) traditional Irish music reside there. Some of the very best bone players in Ireland come to compete in the contest, and the judges have included: Mel Mercier, Johnny Ringo McDonagh, Cathy Jordan, and Junior Davey to name a few. I have many fond memories of visiting Abbeyfeale, not all of them at late night pub sessions. If you are interested in attending, I would suggest going to the web site, www.fleadh-bythefeale.com and making contact.

What has come to be known as the Blues Bones Fest will be held in Clarksdale, Mississippi May 4-6 in the heart of Blues country. Famous as the site where Robert Johnson Allegedly made his famous deal with the devil at the cross roads, and the home of Muddy Waters aka McKinley Morganfield. Blues clubs and players abound, and it will be our opportunity to emersh ourselves in the blues, and the other music which would abound at a Bones Fest. Randy Seppula is our host and promises some good times and good music! Hope to see you there! *Steve Brown*

Bones Fest XXIII Update

I will be the Rhythm Bones Society's host in 2019 for Bones Fest XXIII and I am very excited about it. I need to thank the Shack Up Inn right up front for being the actual host for what will be a bone rattlin' event. Guitar camps, harmonica camps, singer songwriter camps, music festivals, celebrations, parties, weddings all happen here because it's an ideal venue for what ever people have happening. Bill and Guy and their friendly helpful staff coupled with the unique ambiance of the Shack Up Inn create a memorable experience for any occasion. The Shack Up Inn provides a great performance stage a professional sound tech an in-house bar, gift shop and lots of nooks and crannies for jams and workshops. One of my goals is to bring the rhythm bones back into the blues here in the Delta. Though we are focusing on the blues all other genres of music are certainly welcome.

Also, thanks to Hambone Gallery on Friday evening and Ground Zero Blues Club on Saturday evening for hosting

public bones performances, demonstrations, workshops and opportunities to learn to play and purchase rhythm bones.

There is a lot to do and see around Clarksdale and the Delta, especially at that time of year and I would recommend spending a few extra days at the Shack Up Inn and doing some day trips to Blues Trail Sights and nearby museums. Sunday has music going on all day starting with blues breakfast at Blueberry Café, Sunday ramble at Levon's and blues at the famous Red's Lounge on Sunday night. There is live music every day of the week in Clarksdale. I will have two

of my bands from Michigan on hand to provide back-up music; "Harp, Hart and Bones" doing old-time Mississippi Delta Blues; and "UP Gumbo" playing music from "Nolans", (New Orleans) and Louisiana and the Delta, as well as other special guests to be announced.

Rooms and shacks are available at Shack Up Inn for very reasonable rates (about \$100.0 per night with a two-night minimum). Get registered and "get youse a shack," get ready to "Shake em on Down" Clarksdale Mississippi Delta style. *Randy 'DaBonesMan' Seppala*



May 2, 3, 4, & 5, 2019

Based at "Shack Up Inn"

On the Historic Hopson Plantation

Highway 49 South - 3 miles south of the Crossroads Marker

Reserve a room or a shack: shackup@shackupinn.com

(662) 624-8329

Information available at rhythmbones.org

\$85.00 Registration Fee

Hosted by Randy "DaBones Man" Seppala - dabonesman@gmail.com

(Continued from Page 1)
with a band called Wickford Express and she was playing two-handed, and playing real bone rhythm bones! I was very curious and enthusiastic about this, so during the weekend I got a tutorial on the second hand while the Festival was going on. Then I had to make myself some rhythm bones I could play I had a co-worker make a set; they were smaller—about 5 1/2” long. I used those for a while and practiced in either hand, but then I made two wooden sets, one out of maple (still have these) and a set out of cherry. They were made from dead fall and firewood. I gave the cherry (left hand) pair away to a co-worker who was going to Japan for a year. He was learning the instrument. He was going to train as a chanteyman at Mystic Seaport, something I had done from 1990-1993. I learned a few songs with rhythm bones accompaniment and thought I was getting pretty good. Well....

In 1993 I left Mystic Seaport and Mystic and the U.S. and joined a ship, the *Picton Castle*, that was going across the Atlantic to become a sailing ship. She was a powered cargo vessel and was in England. So I flew to England and joined the ship's crew. This was a big moment in my life and in my life as a rhythm bones player, because I was away from the instrument being a crew member, not a “musician,” and I had a lot of time to think about it. I wrote some notes about what I learned about the instrument and its connection to sailing ships and sailors. This started me on the road to researching the instrument and appreciating it a lot more than I had. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Yes!

The trip took us from Ipswich, England, in March 1994, down the south coast to Falmouth. From there to Spain, La Corunna, where we put in from a storm (WOW!!). From there, in April, we went to the island of Madeira, owned by Portugal, off the African coast. From the end of April into May we made our Atlantic crossing, Madeira to Bermuda, in 15-16 days. We stayed in Bermuda another two weeks getting ready to go to Long Island. I thought we would go to Mystic, but U.S. Customs was in Bridgeport, CT. I joined in Sept. 1993 and left that ship in June 1994. I then went to Maine on a recommendation

to join the crew of the schooner *Mary Day of Camden*. She was known as a music boat. Gordon Bok had been her mate years before and I had met him in 1991 at a Sea Music Festival. That was a happy ship and we had concerts every Thursday. I played rhythm bones again that summer.

I got back to Mystic in the fall of 1994 and started working on my rhythm bones scholarship. I taught a formal class at the 1996 Sea Music Festival (SMF). By that time, I was working in the shipyard at Mystic Seaport as a rigger. I was collecting a lot of research and getting rhythm bones and faxes and email letters dropped in my mailbox at work. I was also beginning to make a lot rhythm bones for people. In 1999, I heard about the Rhythm Bones Society and the annual meeting of rhythm bones players. That year I had gone to Texas to see a girlfriend at a museum and was trying to get to Brightwood, VA, on the trip home to meet bones players. It didn't happen, I'm sorry to say. But that got me very fired up about joining RBS and learning more. My first Bones Fest was at Red Apple Farm in MA in 2001. I had sent a videotape the year before that a co-worker had made of me playing so I could be included in the list of rhythm bones players. I wrote my article, “The Bones at Sea,” for the newsletter in 2002 after separating my shoulder in a fall while on the way to Bones Fest VII. That was another breakthrough moment in my career, because I had written all about my research in a particular area and I had done the work of collecting it. I found my niche at last!! When I got to meet everyone at Bones Fest V and Bones Fest VIII, it just confirmed that I had a huge, related family who loved this instrument, and really liked the historical research I had done. It made me feel wonderful because I had gone out nationally to look for my place alongside other bones players. So that added a lot more fuel to an already raging fire. Then I met Kenny Wohlin though Jonathan Danforth, whom I had met at Bones Fest V. The three of us became a small band of brother bones players I think because we are close in age and have a great respect for the instrument and each other. I would go to NEFFA (New England Folk Festival Association) in Massachusetts when I

could and also Bones Fest when I could, which strengthened our bond. I continued in the shipyard at Mystic Seaport and also continued to make and play rhythm bones.

In 2008 I stepped down from rigging and became an interpreter (docent) at the museum and I was playing in a folk band called *Barnacle*. When I played in front of people I was always struck by their astonishment at seeing this instrument played. I really like that! That becomes the catalyst to talk about the rhythm bones and the organization and to lead people to the website. This continued for about eight years and then I heard plans that the whaleship *Charles W. Morgan* was going to be sailed, and I really wanted to be a part of this voyage. I was picked to be a part of the Seaport crew and I chose a project for myself: I would make a set of rhythm bones on board the ship while at sea. The bone I used had been given to me by a co-worker in 1990. I had kept it the whole time. He had passed away in 2002, and I sought to honor him by using this bone and crafting on the *Morgan*. I have two sets of old, solid bones of different sizes and thicknesses, but made from the same original bone, consisting of four sistered pieces. These are a memento of the voyage and a tribute to my departed friend.

Over the years, I have gotten to teach many people to play rhythm bones, including one student I've worked with for several years now. I have also taught large groups at festivals, and in 2013 I taught a large group of elementary school music students. I have had some adventures playing rhythm bones and have played in places like St. Lucia in the Caribbean, Madeira, Ireland, England, Denmark, and Bermuda, as well as on the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers. There always seems to be water involved. For a long time I played a set of rhythm bones I was given in 1996 that I matched together. They are 8” long and have two wider bones (ribs) on the left and two skinnier bones on the right. Mateo, the castanet master, noticed this configuration mirrored the pitching of his instrument, so I was aping the sound of castanets without knowing I was doing it.

I play on a drum pad with sticks (thick, practice style) all the time, and this builds my rhythm bone playing chops.

In the 1990s, while researching, I discovered that a 19th century player used to do military impressions on rhythm bones as part of a solo, so it stands to reason he could have been playing snare drum rudiments (Dan Emmett would have known these, too, since he did a stint and taught music in the army). So I think the rudimental niche, accompanying people, and as a historian of the instrument, particularly the maritime aspect, is how I contribute to the RBS.

One Christmas when I was young, I got a scrimshaw kit from my father. I was always drawing things and doodling away when I was a child, and my parents noticed this and tried to foster it. I did the scrimshaw, which consisted of a big, plastic, simulated whale's tooth that had a transfer design on it, and then other things took my interest. It was only when I became a staff member at Mystic Seaport that my interest in scrimshaw returned. I started with a cleaned beef bone on which I scrimshawed a picture of my father's ship, the U.S. Coast Guard Training Ship Eagle, and the ports of call he made on his cruises. Then I thought about splitting a larger bone to make a set of bone bones for myself. I had seen a "Mr. Bones" (John Burrill) playing bones on the streets of Nantucket Island in 1986, while I was crew on a cruise ship, and I thought how neat it would be to have bones, play them, and then scrimshaw them; it would be some interesting decoration, and they would play music! I got that idea into my head firmly and have never looked back. I thought of the scrimshaw as my little niche where I could do music and art at the same time. I have made and illustrated pairs of bones for over 100 people already. My base work will always have my monogram scrimshawed on them, usually on the inside of the "anvil" bone. I have found out that the more design on the bone, the more chance for it to wear off, so occasionally I have to do re-inking and re-coloring jobs for my customers. I was especially commissioned to make a pair of bones for Sgt. Patrick B. Reilly, U.S. Army, in 2003/4, to commemorate his birthday (Dec. 27). I also added some touches of my own: a ship flying flags representing his birthday numbers (12/27/64) in full color. These were solid bone, a little wider than most so I could

get more drawing on them (see photograph on Page 8).

I feel lucky to be able to do this work, and it makes me happy to see the faces of the people I've done work for when they receive their "whaling present." I have also done two sets of scrimshawed bones to honor the sailing of the historic whaleship Charles W. Morgan in 2014. I find it very rewarding drawing the designs and executing the work. At this writing, I've scrimshawed ships, human portraits, balloons, banjos, and unicorns. Lately I've gotten into 3-dimensional relief carving as a means of expression. I've done shamrocks and rope so far.

I am currently making a set or two of rhythm bones for a holiday order and also compiling research on the music of the Irish diaspora. One of my pet projects is the observation of Christmas with bones playing in the John Canoe Festival of the antebellum South, the Mummers in Philadelphia, and the Belsnickels around the New York area. I am also working on a project involving scrimshaw (bone carving) and musical instruments during the whaling epoch in America.

I like exploring different types of music when I play rhythm bones. At different festivals, I've done vocals (sea songs), classical, Irish, and contemporary music for my showpieces. This demonstrates my willingness to receive new signals and be willing and able to experiment. The time I spent in Barnacle working every week was invaluable for exposing me to new music and allowing me to express new ideas on how to play with support and enthusiasm. This year, I even got to march while playing rhythm bones in the Mystic Irish Parade, with a bunch of pirates! I suppose I could have used a drum.... At this writing, there are three rib bones on my counter patiently waiting to be turned into instruments. I recently created a 21-bone "xylabone" for a Halloween show at the museum, but other than that I haven't made a lot of bones this year.

I have very spiritual leanings to this instrument. I've noticed the way that it makes people dance and makes people (especially children) happy. I'm glad that I can participate in that exchange. I am deeply grateful for my extended RBS family that I get to see almost every year, and for the lessons that you've taught

me. I hope I can continue playing for a few years more, or at the very least instructing and encouraging new and practiced players to develop. This is a lesson I was taught at a young age. I have tried to be a good ambassador for this instrument. Thank you all. *Tim Reilly*

Discography

Ric Spencer. The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter. (1992)
 Sherri Mortimer. From Mystic. (1992)
 Don Sineti. Iron Men and Wooden Ships. (1996)
 Alchemy. Village Dances. (1997)
 Compass Rose. Shipmates. (2000)
 Brown Jenkyn. At Deep River. (2001)
 Musician Showcase. Live at the Voodoo Grille. (2007)
 Barnacle. Many Ports, One Sea. (2010)
 Mystic Seaport. Sea Music Festival #22, 24, and 38.
 Nicholas Zeger Driver of Suffolk, England, UK (see obituary in this newsletter)



Tim Reilly and whale bone ribs

Tim's comment upon learning of Nicholas Driver's passing, "It was an honor and privilege to meet him and I was hoping to see him again. I met Nick the same Bones Fest that I met Jonathan Danforth. Very sorry to hear this."

feel very comfortable with them and my "mash potato" style of playing. I seem to hold them predominantly between thumb and index finger and middle finger and fourth finger. The grip is always changing and the bones float around depending on the ring, tone, or pitch required. I like two handed playing so I can bounce back and forth. I kind of think of it as "taking the dogs out for a walk".

Back in the early 1980's I was living on Isle au Haut, a small island, part of Acadia National Park, here in the Penobscot Bay of central coastal Maine. I was a commercial diver, lobsterman, and ran the local electric power company at the time. During one of our dives my partner came across the carcass of a large whale about 50' down. Over time that day he sent up 2 large ribs and a couple of vertebrae.

As I hauled each rib aboard, the weight of it would heel the 36' lobster boat gunwales to the water's edge. When the ribs broke the water I saw the prospect of dozens of sets of rhythm bones before me. But I never did anything with them.

Then in 2006 at Bones Fest V I met Tim Reilly (see Page 1) and thought he would appreciate a rib. But I didn't get it to him until 2018 at Bones Fest XXII. Tim I hope there is material there you can work with. It is certainly aged!

Later in the 1980's another commercial diver, Carter Newell, was helping me collect data for a salmon aquaculture project I was trying to launch with another friend. It turned out Carter was also a great fiddle and rhythm bones player to my enormous surprise. Another bones player existed out there! Carter told me about Andy's Front Hall in Voorheesville, N.Y. And in their catalog they listed Dr. Fred Edmunds Tutorial on rhythm bones playing which I bought. That led to a correspondence with Fred. I think in 1996 Fred wrote and told me about Ev Cowett and his idea for a bones player get-together at his place in Greensboro, N.C. I told Fred I'd be there! And for me things haven't been quite the same since that 19-21 September 1997 weekend with Ev and Val, Dan, Tom, Martha, Russ and all the others there with me.

We all stayed at a motel. I would visit Fred in his room. He had lung cancer and at that point was mostly bed ridden. I remember a bible on his bed and a bottle

of bourbon beneath the covers. And I remember the incredible inclusive gathering on Ev and Val's deck with music of all genres blasting out from speakers as we all powered through whatever was playing together! It was a glorious get-together for me. And now all these years later I think I've been to Bones Fest I, III, V, VI, VII, X, XIII, XVII, XXII. And every single one was spectacular for me. But none more so than XXII hosted by Sky and Jessye with Ernie's help.

Another rhythm bones member I was in correspondence with early on was Nick Driver (see obituary on Page 2). Then I met him at Bones Fest V in 2001 where we jammed together. Prior to that I had purchased a set of his rhythm bone bones. Unfortunately over time I lost contact with Nick. I remember he had a wicked good sense of humor. I think Bones Fest V was also Donnie Decamp's first. Wow, what a delightful force of human nature he was. And now years later there is Sky Bartlett's huge presence in our group. I'm grateful for the on line video clips I can bring up that capture the sound and actions of these players. I also enjoy rewatching Gil Hibben's you tube clip. Also one of Ari Erlbaum titled "Exploding Stegosaurus Rhythm Bones" which I'm sure most of you have also seen.

Years ago I started making bones in all different configurations out of wood, bone, plastic and metal. I have worked with many species of wood. At the moment I'm making 2 pair for Tom Connelly out of rosewood from Brazil and teak. I like the range of sounds emanating from some rosewood boards. But there are many species of trees that also have melodic qualities. I've experimented with polyester resin Ivory look-a-likes which have a strong sound.

Back in 1993 I was out in Ontario, Oregon helping the Billings Montana Conceptual Sculptor Patrick Zentz assemble his "Snake River System" on location. I was cutting lengths of Aircraft Aluminum bar stock #6061 into tone bars for the piece. When they dropped and rattled on the floor I realized they'd make great rhythm bones. Scott Miller started offering that style on his "Bone Dry Musical Instrument Co." website.

I think that over the years the level

of playing quality has gone up by leaps (or clicks). We have some very talented musicians in our group. It is a sheer joy to hear them perform!

And we also have some incredible people in our midst which includes Jeremy Brown. I feel better just being in Jeremy's presence.

And thank you to all who attend, I'm grateful to get the chance to meet you!

Sincerely, *Parker Waite*



"Parker's rosewood bones that play themselves!"

Bones Calendar

Bones Fest XXIII. May 2-5, 2019, Clarksdale, MS, Randy Seppala is host. See Page 3 for more information.

NTCMA Bones Contest. August - September 2019 (dates not yet set), LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.



Parker Waite playing his rhythm bones. See Page 7 for a close up of those rhythm bones.



A good example of Tim Reilly's scrimshaw art. See Page 5, left column, for how he does it.

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested