



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 21, No. 4 2019

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This month's newsletter has given me an opportunity to share my thoughts on going to Ireland and competing at the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, something I've been interested in doing for some time. I first heard about the Championship from an article by Mel Mercier in this very Newsletter. The video tape I so carefully scrutinized in 2002 was originally purchased by RBS, and lent to a number of members. RBS has been a great support and inspiration to me, and I hope to all of it's members. From one article grew the inspiration to travel to Ireland, and from that one time, I have returned many times. I sincerely hope I can inspire others to

take the same path.

Our profiles this month include Sandor Slomovits, and Board member Skeffington Flynn.

I first met San when he wandered into my Folk Percussion Class at the Music Emporium in 1981. I was delighted to hear of his association with Percy Danforth, my mentor, and could easily see Percy's influence in his playing. Since that time San's work with children, apprenticeship to rhythm bones maker, Ray Sharier, and the true spirit he conveys as a person has been an inspiration to me. I hope you enjoy reading his profile. (Continued on Page 2)

Sandor Slomovits

In 1975, when I met Percy Danforth, the father of modern-day rhythm bones, I'd been playing folk music professionally with my twin brother, Laz, as the duo Gemini, for about two years. Like most good folkies of the day, we played guitars and sang. But around that time Laz also picked up violin, after having abandoned it in high school some years before, and we also both got interested in Irish music. Laz started learning the pennywhistle and I made a crude bodhran and we began playing jigs and reels in our shows. We were living in Ann Arbor and one night Laz saw Percy play rhythm bones in Donald Hall's play Bread and Roses. (Donald Hall was a renowned poet, playwright, essayist and critic, and from 2006 to 2007 was the fourteenth US Poet Laureate.) Laz told me about Percy very excitedly. "You won't believe what he can do with just four little pieces of wood!" I was intrigued and called Percy and asked if he would teach me how to play. He generously said he would, but said he'd been getting a lot of requests lately. Would I organize a rhythm bones class for him at the Ark, Ann Arbor's famed coffeehouse? I called Dave Siglin who, along with his wife Linda, were the co-founders of the Ark, and a couple of weeks later about twenty of us gathered in the Ark's living room and Percy showed us the tap and roll, the basic rudiments of rhythm bones playing.

I was not a quick study—to put it generously. Now, forty-five years later, when I introduce rhythm bones at our concerts or bones workshops, I show

people what I looked and sounded like for the first few days I played rhythm bones. I close my eyes, contort my face into a painful grimace and try to rattle the bones—silently—Marcel Marceau style. It's not much of an exaggeration. I was so discouraged with my lack of progress following Percy's rhythm bones workshop, that I put the rhythm bones away and forgot about them. But, in 1976 Laz and I were invited to play at the Fox Hollow Folk Festival in upstate New York. Percy was also invited to the Festival, to teach rhythm bones. Laz and I drove from Ann Arbor in our ancient Ford Falcon, while Percy flew out. We met up at the Festival and I hung out with Percy while he taught the (Continued on Page 2)



Sandor Slomovits from his 'Mr. Bones' CD

Editorial

We owe a big thanks to Steve Brown for this issue. I had a large project for my church (a children's Christmas video), and Steve stepped in to help. That said, this is not the first time he's made significant contributions to getting the newsletter out on time - just go the on-line newsletters and search for 'Steve Brown.'

This is a jam packed issue with profiles of Sandor Slomovits and Skeff Flynn and Steve Brown's article on how to compete in the All Ireland Bones Competition, so I will shut up now.

(Director continued from Page 1)

Skeffington Flynn is well known to all of you as a Board member. He first came to RBS at the Bones Fest in Alexandria, Virginia more than 10 years ago, and since that time has become an integral part of our organization, and a true "Ambassador of the Bones." I think you will enjoy his story.

And speaking of the Bones Fest in Alexandria 10 years ago, Bones Fest will once again return to the Washington, DC area sponsored again by Kenny and Teri Wolin. Their first Bones Fest as hosts was one of the best attended, and most exciting of all the Bones Fests (they were married that Sunday morning on the bank of the Potomac River with attendees forming a rhythm bones arch for the bride's processional). The allure of the DC area with its rich history, and large number of traditional musicians and rhythm bones players in particular will make for another exciting Bones Fest. I hope you will join us! *Steve Brown*

Bones Calendar

Bones Fest XXIV. Tentative, July 2020, Washington DC area. Details to follow.

NTCMA Festival, October 3-6, 2020, Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

All Ireland Bones Competition, May 4, 2020, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Read Steve Brown's article in this issue and go and compete.

(Slomovits continued from Page 1)

hythm bones for much of each day of the weekend Festival, and Laz and I gave him rides to and from our accommodations to the Festival site. By the end of that weekend I was a semi-competent rhythm bones player.

I was also very lucky, in two important ways. I was able to practice and play rhythm bones with live music very frequently. My brother, who has a rock steady sense of rhythm, was willing to let me learn on the job—at our rehearsals and on stage with him at our concerts. "Laz even wrote two songs especially for me to play rhythm bones to, I Can Feel it in my Bones and Percy's Song (which is largely comprised of Percy's own description of how he learned to play rhythm bones as a child) both of which we still often play in our concerts." Laz and I also formed a friendship and a musical collaboration with Percy. We often invited him to join us on stage for our Ann Arbor area shows, and so I got many additional opportunities to study and play with him. I picked up so much of Percy's playing style and mannerisms that, many years later, when I met Jonathan Danforth – Percy's grandson and RBS's longtime web guru—Jonathan paid me the ultimate compliment when he said I looked just like Percy when I played.

(My brother also tried learning rhythm bones at the same time that I started, and also didn't get far at first. When I picked them back up at the Fox Hollow Folk Festival, Laz also tried again—with little success. Percy was very wise and kind. Noting my brother's frustration, he told him, "Laz, no duo needs two rhythm bones players." Laz took Percy's counsel to heart and focused his attention on the more than half dozen other instruments he plays.)

In 1980, for Percy's 80th birthday, I organized a concert/birthday party at the Ark. The musicians lineup, all people who Percy had played with, included my brother and I; harmonica wizard Peter Madcat Ruth; famed jazz scholar, pianist, and band leader Jim Dapogny; the renowned Grammy Award-winning composer William Bolcom; and Bolcom's wife, mezzo soprano Joan Morris. (Bolcom and Morris had invited Percy to join them at a number of concerts,

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.org

including ones they gave at Alice Tully Hall in NYC and at the Royal Albert Hall in London.) The birthday party concert was a huge success, with performances by all of the musicians and Percy joining each of them.

Percy lived to the age of 92 and was still playing in concerts a half year before he died. A couple of weeks before Percy passed away, Laz and I played a concert at the senior citizens' home where he and his wife, Fran lived. I had a chance to thank him publicly one last time for the huge gift he had given me when he taught me to play rhythm bones.

One of the other gifts that came into my life as a result of my meeting Percy, was my friendship with Ray Schairer. Ray was a lifelong dairy farmer and woodworker who made all the bones that Percy sold to his thousands of students. Percy introduced Ray and his wife Jane to me sometime in the late 1970s and I stayed in touch with them over the years,

buying bones from him and commissioning him to make several limberjacks and instrument cases. In 2002, I asked him to help me with another woodworking project. My eight-year-old daughter, Emily had been playing violin for about a year and I wanted to build a wooden music stand for her. Knowing I had neither the tools, nor the skill to do that, I asked Ray if he'd be willing to build one with me. He agreed, and that's how began another of the most significant friendships of my life. Ray and I worked on the music stand together, and on my visits to his woodshop, he asked me to help him make rhythm bones. I happily did, and he in turn taught me his process for making the bones. Ray and I stayed friends for the remaining nine years of



his life, making hundreds of rhythm bones together, and I also helped him publish his memoir, *Barefoot Boy: A Year in the Life of a 1930s Farm Boy*. Before he passed away in 2011, Ray gave me all his bones-making tools and I have continued to make rhythm bones to this day. (Although, in 2009, along with my good friend Lon vanGeloven, an engineer and manager at Ford, who has extensive machining and computer skills, we brought bones-making into the 21st century. We bought a small desktop CNC machine and have been using it ever since to cut bones from a variety of woods. But I still sand rhythm bones with the same custom-built machine that Ray devised and used for thirty years before he gave it to me.)

I will turn 71 in January of 2020 and I still play rhythm bones in every one of my more-than-one-hundred yearly concerts. Rhythm bones have brought me enormous pleasure and satisfaction over the years. It is the instrument I play and improvise on most freely. It is the instrument with which our audiences, ranging from preschoolers to senior citizens, are the least familiar. I love introducing them to this ancient art. It is also the instrument that my brother and I use to tame our toughest audiences—middle school and high school age students. We've learned to always begin our shows for these audiences with rhythm bones. They capture their attention in a way nothing else we know.

Besides my experiences playing with Percy, I've had many other wonderful bones-related highlights. Here are two of my favorites. In 2005, Laz and I played a family concert with the Grand Rapids Symphony. The Symphony's principal percussionist is Bill Vits, longtime RBS member and another of Percy Danforth's protégés. Bill learned to play rhythm bones from Percy when he, Bill, was a student at the University of Michigan. Laz and I always include Laz's song 'I Can Feel it in My Bones' in our concerts with orchestras and I always take a rhythm bones solo on it. But for this concert, in addition to that song, I asked Bill if he'd be willing to do a rhythm bones duet with me. He agreed, and our impromptu, freewheeling bones jam was the highlight of the show. It may still be the only rhythm bones duet ever played in an orchestra concert.

In 2010, at the Wheatland Festival, (Michigan's biggest folk festival) where I've often taught rhythm bones workshops, I was delighted to encounter a former rhythm bones student of mine. I'd met Gail Brayden, a cardiologist from Marquette, Michigan, when I played concerts and gave rhythm bones workshops in 2005, at Marquette's annual FinnFest, at the invitation of RBS member, Randy Seppala. Gail learned rhythm bones from me over the course of that weekend festival, and a year later, in May 2006, she won the all-Ireland Bones Championship; one of the things that I am most proud of in my long history with the bones.

My daughter, Emily, is now twen-

ty-five and a fabulous singer and violinist. (Totally objective evaluation from an enormously proud dad.) She's been playing concerts with me, with my brother and me, and with many others, since she was eight years old. And she's on her way to becoming a terrific rhythm bones player. The beat goes on! *Sandor Slomovits*

Profile of Skeffington Flynn

There's a story that gets told in my family about when I was a toddler. I had a Red Flyer wagon and I was putting cans from the pantry into it. In between making additions to my haul, I had a pot, and a spoon, that I was banging on the back of the pot while shouting, "I'm making a lot of noise, I'm making a lot of noise!" Well here we are a little over 40 years later and I suppose I'm still the same person, making a lot of noise. My choices of instrument, and my technique have evolved, for sure, but I'm still doing my best to make a lot of noise.

I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. My first real instrument was the trombone which I played in 4th and 5th grade. I typically walked home from school and I remember that trombone case being about the same size as I was. This might have put into my mind an early notion to find something more portable,

Like a lot of kids, I took piano lessons after that. My father, Charles Robert Flynn, was a musician as well. My parents didn't want me to be a junior, so they named me Charles Skeffington Flynn, and they called me Skeff from the very beginning. To this day, when someone calls me Charles, I know they are reading my name off of a form. Most of the time that means that they want money, so I'm in the habit of saying "No, he's not home right now, can I take a message?" As for the piano lessons, they didn't quite inspire me, but they did help me along my musical journey.

At the age of 15 I decided I wanted to learn how to play the bass guitar. All the credit goes to my mother for supporting me. We went to Bill's Music in Baltimore and found a suitable instrument, one that I still have and play to this day. (<https://www.facebook.com/VforVelcrOhm> – some tracks even feature bones!) I

remember that I didn't like the color, or that I wanted a different instrument, but it turns out that Mom had it right. We bought a Charvel P Bass copy and it was one of the last Charvel basses to be made in the USA. At some point, I replaced the bridge, but I have not found another bass under a thousand dollars that sounds or plays better. Good work Mom!

Over the next two years I did everything I could to learn the bass guitar. Again, credit to my family for supporting me in my journey. I was able to study with Jim Charlsen on the bass. What a wonderful teacher, an incredible mentor, and a really solid human being. With such an incredible supporting cast, I was able to make it into Berklee College of Music after just two years of study on my instrument. During this time I played both with a speed metal band – The Sowers of Dischord (I still laugh at that name) – and a rock band named Prodigal.

Getting to Berklee was an amazing feat! But I have to admit, I wasn't ready. I routinely say that if I had gone to Berklee at 19, my life might be very different. At 18, my whole identity was wrapped up in being a bass player. I now understand that I am both a person, and a musician. This is a very different perspective.

When I got to Berklee I placed out of many of the entry level Music Theory classes. I also placed out of some of the introductory Bass labs. Honestly, I was ranked or placed higher than I had expected to be. I was asked to audition for ensembles, something I had not envisioned as a possibility. I hastily prepared a piece – A Night in Tunisia – which I failed to execute in my audition. Berklee at that time had a numeric system for rating players after auditions, I don't know if they still use this system but I certainly hope they don't. I scored straight zeros across the board. The effect was demoralizing and I did not do another ensemble audition again in my time there.

I should be clear that my time at Berklee was not all bad. I played in an experimental jazz band that was a lot of fun, The Iodine Stories. We had a few memorable gigs and it drilled into my head that I need to find a portable instrument. Our drummer lived in Allston. Typically if you have a drummer who can play at his residence, you go to him. The drummer usually has the most equip-

ment and is usually the loudest player, so if they have an established practice spot you go to them.

One night while practicing for a gig, the final episode of "Cheers" aired on TV. You may remember that the show was set in Boston and as a result the streets were packed. In order to get to the drummers house, the guitar player and I took the subway and then the bus. Going home was another story. At the time I had a 4x10" speaker cabinet on wheels, and a 4 rack space head to go along with it (pre-amp + power amp). The cabinet alone must have weighed over 70 pounds, with the head adding another 30. Getting on the bus back home wasn't a problem. Getting on the subway, however, was a different story.

As the guitar player and I were getting my amp onto the subway (the horn players never helped), I had a young woman run into me full speed as I was anchoring the top end of pulling up my amp. I was set, to pull the weight, she was not. She bounced off of me, and frankly, I had little sympathy. When we got everything on board the train (the guitar player had a smaller amp to load as well) we realized we had made a mistake. On Boston subway cars there are some entrances that have access to both sides, some do not.

We arrived at our stop, and realizing that our door was on the wrong side and that we would need to move up I called out "excuse me, pardon me", and everyone on the train just looked at us. Needless to say, we missed our stop. At the next stop I said the exact same things, "excuse me, pardon me", but I powered on through. I had my bass in a gig bag slung over my shoulder and the guitar player later told me that I hit everyone in the face as I passed – doink!, doink!, doink!, doink! I have no regrets, except possibly that I didn't do it at our original stop. We had to walk about 5 blocks (thank goodness the amps were on wheels) to get home.

I left Berklee after 5 semesters. At the time I felt as though I didn't want to play my bass anymore. I still loved music, but the experience didn't encourage me to keep on as a bass player. I moved back to Baltimore for a while but then felt the pull to move out west. I then moved to San Francisco for about a year and a half.

While I was in San Francisco I cemented my love of percussion, routinely playing the bongos at parties and jams. I was also fortunate enough to get a gig as a guitar tech for a group called The Mermen. This was enlightening! Here was a group of musicians that had been together for more than 10 years. They had a record deal, they had a loyal following, and they still all had regular jobs. I was fortunate enough to see how their contracts were structured and I want to be clear that they were a model of success to me. Success meant that they had their own sound person, they didn't have to haul their own equipment, they were fed well, they drank good beer, and they got paid around \$200 a show. This reinforced to me that while I always wanted to play music, making a living might be something different.

After moving back to Baltimore I decided to get back into school. My father passed in '98 and one of the last things he said to me was "get your degree". Since I already had so many credits in music, I decided to pursue a music degree at Towson University. In my first real music class back, which was a jazz lab, I remember another bass player calling out chord changes to me. He could see that I was lost, being a bit out of practice, and his help was invaluable! It struck me that no one at Berklee would have done the same. The environments were very different.

I decided to pursue a minor in Business and I must admit that my business classes always felt like a relief. "What, I just need to read the book and tell you what it says?" No problem. That was nothing compared to the constant improvement required from my music classes.

I finally graduated in December 2002. I struggled to find work. I spent 2003 into 2005 teaching bass students (between 5 and 20 a week), playing bass in a rock band, and working a full time 40 hour a week job, whether that was serving coffee as a barista, or moving pianos.

In the Spring of 2005 I started my current career. I was hired as an entry level support representative to a company called CTSG in Washington, D.C.. I quickly moved up the ranks and was managing the department a few months later. That company was acquired by another, which was acquired by another, etc., etc.

In the Fall of 2007 they closed the office I was working in but they didn't lay me off. As a result I was able to move to a family home in Hedgesville, WV in February of 2008. I had never lived outside of a city limits before. While I had been visiting this cabin my whole life, I wasn't sure how it was going to go.

Early on I met a group of spoon playing karaoke junkies. At the time there were 4 generations of spoon players in their family. We were asked to play at Rosemont Elementary in Martinsburg in the Spring of 2009. The Spooners asked me if I would talk to the kids. I said that I would be delighted. I would give them not only a 5 minute talk on how to play the spoons, but a 5 minute history lesson as well. As I researched the history of spoon playing I found the bones. I started watching players like Dom Flemons and Rowan Corbett on YouTube and I said to myself, "I have got to learn how to do that!" This is the video that made me decide I needed to get into this:

<https://youtu.be/oLazWX8uxPU>

I then found Scott Miller's store and ordered some Danforth bones:

<https://www.bonedrymusic.com/>

The video that really got me on my way was this one:

<https://youtu.be/mU31eqwC3w4>

Finally I had an instrument that I could take with me wherever I went! Focusing primarily on rhythm and song structure, I was able to sit in with anyone!

A few months later I attended Pickin' in the Panhandle, a music and BBQ festival that was held in the Eastern Panhandle of WV for several years. There I met my good friends Tim Quigley, and Bill Newland. Tim is the founding member of a group called The Shedhoppers. We jammed together at the festival and had a wonderful time. Tim invited me to join. I had no idea at the time what an important role the Shedhoppers would play in my life.

The Shedhoppers get together every Wednesday night. We are one part social club and one part jam session, with a community outreach component. Mostly we play in people's homes, or sheds, but we also play at local businesses and community or charity events when the fit is right. One of the incredible things about the group for me in the early days was that no one told me you shouldn't play bones on every tune! Because of

this, I developed a simple style that supports the music. I will take a solo when called upon, but getting underneath the group and laying a foundation is far more important to me. Playing with all acoustic players, I have had to be very conscious of my volume and dynamics. This led me to adopt the "half mast" position of bones playing as my default, something I have covered in workshops over the years.

The Shedhoppers offer a supportive environment where people can play, learn, sing, and really enjoy true fellowship and a sense of community. The Shedhoppers were also a huge part of Bonesfest 19! (More on that to follow.) Tim built something amazing with this group. He built a community where musicians feel connected and supported. It's the very thing I had hoped for when I had the realization that I wanted to play music for the rest of my life, but that I didn't need to make a living playing music – I wanted to make a life playing music. This spring will mark 10 years that I have been a member, and now a leader, of this group. Grateful doesn't quite capture my feelings.

<https://www.facebook.com/shedhoppers>

<https://youtu.be/FVcTlgBRO0k>

I learned about the Rhythm Bones Society in 2009 but wasn't able to make it to the Bonesfest in Louisville that year. Nonetheless, I was persistent. I attended my first Bonesfest in Alexandria in 2010, about a year after I started playing. I found myself welcomed with open arms into an amazing musical community. Kenny and Teri Wolin hosted that year and I was honored to join the "Bones Honor Guard" at their wedding! I also had the opportunity to give Rowan Corbett a tip on his technique! (Don't take this as boastful, there are probably a hundred things Rowan could show me, I was just elated to be able to offer him one.)

I have attended every Bonesfest since, including in 2015, when I hosted Bonesfest in Shepherdstown, WV. The Shedhoppers turned out to show their support. They hosted the Thursday night jam, helped out in workshops, and played a huge role in the Saturday night concert! I was fortunate enough to join the board of the Rhythm Bones Society in 2011. Aside from hosting Bonesfest 19, I have contributed to the production of an RBS brochure and have given workshops at

a number of Bonesfests. I hope to keep making positive contributions to RBS in the coming years!

The friends and the community I have found through the bones continues to amaze me and I feel blessed any time I reflect on it. I have had the opportunity to help RBS Executive Director Steve Brown with workshops and bones sales at the New England Folk Festival in 4 of the last 5 years. I have given countless impromptu and many formal bones workshops, including a spoon workshop at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2015 (where I snuck in a bones demo).

The rhythm bones have brought a great deal of joy to my life and as such, I am, always happy to share. A friend of mine jokes that I could be in the process of being sworn in as President of the United States, and if someone in the crowd shouted "Excuse me sir, but what are the clicky things?", I would almost certainly stop the proceedings for an impromptu bones lesson. As someone who has actually printed business cards with the title "Bones Ambassador", that sounds about right. Besides, I'm making a lot of noise!

How to Compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship

Over the years many folks have asked me about the possibility of going to Ireland to compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, and the particulars about being there. It truly is enticing, not only to attend a festival setting in Ireland, but the idea that bone playing is known and accepted there are certainly two of the reasons I originally attended. I've been fortunate to have competed, and judged the contest a number of times, and so I thought I would give you my thoughts about going and preparing for the contest. Last year was the first year that two handed bone players took all three spots in the competition, and it's no secret that the organizers are actively encouraging participants from outside Ireland to compete, but more on that later. This article is intended to inform the reader about competing in the contest and the various aspects of being in Abbeyfeale and attending the festival. It should be noted that the information in this article is to the best of my knowl-

edge, and experience. If the reader has questions or comments, I would be more than interested in hearing them. I have great affection for the place and the people of Abbeyfeale, and if this helps any of you to under take this endeavor, I would be delighted.

Perhaps a little history to give you a reference point. About 26 years ago the town of Abbeyfeale sponsored the Limerick County Fleadh, a sort of music competition sponsored by the organization, Comhaltas Ceoltori Erriennann. After two years of sponsoring the Fleadh, the town decided to hold their own festival, Fleadh by the Feale (Fleadh Ceoil or Feast of music). As many of these small festivals are held in Ireland it was decided to make their festival more unique by holding the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship as part of the festival, largely due to Padraig ‘Sport’ Murphy, a local bone playing legend. A children’s contest, called the Junior Bones, was also scheduled. Along with the contests various other events were planned including a “Busking” or street performers competition, an art show, classes on various instruments, children s competition on various instruments (which was later dropped) a Ceili or dance, and concerts-both small and a larger concert featuring a nationally known performer. In addition there would be a Session trail- informal music “sessions” held throughout the town, in the various pubs. This is the basic structure of the Fleadh by the Feale today, held during the “may Bank “holiday week end, the May Bank Holiday being the first Monday in May.

Where is it?

To begin with where exactly are you going and how do you get there. The contest is held in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, Ireland, in west Limerick, almost as far as you can go in Limerick, before you reach County Kerry. It is approximately an hour or so drive from Limerick City, and a little more than an hour from Kilarney, both being major cities in Ireland. It’s always been my choice to rent a car at the airport. This affords you to see the sights around Abbeyfeale, an easy drive to Dingle Peninsula, the Ring of Kerry or even take the Tarbert to Kilimer Ferry and up the Clare coast to see the Cliffs of Moher. But public transportation is doable, bus from the airport

to Limerick City, provided that you have landed in Shannon Airport, the closest International Airport, and another bus to Abbeyfeale, or the train from Dublin to Limerick, and a bus to Abbeyfeale, if you have flown into Dublin. I would prefer Shannon, but sometimes the flights are cheaper to Dublin.

Where do you stay?

There are a number of places to stay in and around Abbeyfeale. Leens Hotel is in the center of town, great if you like being where the action, not so great if you’re looking for quiet and relaxation. From my first visit my choice has always been the Park Lodge Bed and Breakfast on the Kilarney Road. About a mile out of town, they are close enough to easily get to town, and far enough to provide an oasis from the craziness of the Fleadh. The owners are friendly and knowledgeable , and provide the best breakfast in Ireland. There are several other options for bed and breakfasts, and a youth hostel in town. It should be noted that the Fleadh by the Feale organizing committee has offered two nights accommodation at the festival for the first five International competitors to register. Inquiries should be made to Martin O’Donohue email martin@theatticstairs.ie .

The Contest

The Championship is usually held on Monday and is the last official event of the Fleadh. You must register and pay the entrance fee (usually E10) by Friday before the contest by 5pm. These rules are usually not written in stone and I have seen people register the day of the contest. The contest is scheduled around 7:30pm, and bone playing starts after a short concert by local musicians. Prior to the contest , the names of the competitors are drawn from a hat to determine the place to compete. After each competitor has finished, the judge tallies the scores, and announces the winners. For most years prizes have been awarded for the top three competitors. In some years, the committee has expanded the awards to include a fourth place. After the contest, many of the competitors adjourn to a local pub to congratulate the winner, kibitz over the result, play tunes, and have a few pints.

In previous years, the Junior Bone Playing Championship was held on Sunday. Most recently the Junior Bones has

been held just before the Adult section. This tends to be shorter, and with fewer competitors. In the past, Junior competitors have been as young as 5, but always 18 or younger.

Competitors have come from all over Ireland, and a number of countries, including: England, Scotland, France, Denmark, Canada, and the United States. Though the winners have almost all been Irish, a number of international competitors have placed, including three 1st place finishers, all from the United States.

The Judge

Judges are hired by the Festival Committee usually based on an expertise in Bone playing/Bodhran (Irish Drum) playing, or traditional Irish music in general. Dating back to the beginning of the contest, Judges associated with Comhaltas were hired. Later the festival committee approached individuals they deemed having an expertise. Past Judges include Seamus O’Kane, Mel Mercier, Tommy Hayes, Gino Lupari, Ronnie McShane, Junior Davey, Steve Brown, Cathy Jordan, and Johnny McDonagh. Judges mostly have judged both the Junior and the adult competition.

Format and Judging

This might be a good place to mention that there are very few bone playing competitions. Though we know that contests of this nature have been held since colonial times here in the States, the actual structure, and format of the contests are really unknown. The bones have not been a part of the National contests in Ireland, as they are not univervally played or accepted. Abbeyfeale, though, is a different matter. Even in the early days of the Abbeyfeale contest, the format and rules were really left up to the individual judge, and this would change year to year. We do know that in more recent years the format for the contest has been set by the Organizing committee. In my first year of competition, players selected two tunes of dissimilar time signature. For example, a jig (in 6/8) and a reel (in 4/4). In the video’s I have of Sport Murphy competing, he played a horn pipe, and a slip jig. Martin O’Donohue of the Fleadh committee has been nice enough to furnish us with the current rules as they were in last years contest:

Bones Rules

Junior Bones: play two different tunes: reel/ jig/ hornpipe

Senior Bones: play a jig, two reels one into the other, and one tune from the following:

Hornpipe or Polka, Slide or March

Beyond these rules there really are no other rules, or judging guidelines. In other words, it is clearly up to the discretion of the judge as to how he/she determines a winner. In my years I developed a point system with categories to award points. I began to realize how subjective judging is and suffice it to say that it really comes down to the individual judge, what they think is important, and what they like.

One more thing about the Contest it's self. Over the last two or so years the contest is streamed live on Facebook. This has been a fantastic way to see the contest as it is actually going on. As it is streamed live, you can make comments on the live stream, and cheer on your favorite! Just go to the Facebook group, Fleadh by the Feale, like it, and you will have access. Last years contest is available to watch now.

How to prepare

Remember that the basis of this contest is traditional Irish music. It may be a bone playing contest, but the context is the music. The better prepared you are by knowing the music, the better chance you have of doing well, in my opinion. I used to tell my students at the Boston Irish Music School the three most important things in learning Irish Music is: Listen, listen, listen, a paraphrase of the three important things in real estate (location, location, location). Only by listening attentively to the music can you assimilate into the flow, get the feel, and react to the intricacies of the music. If you only approach it as a mechanical time construct, you lose what binds the music and the musician, the feel or flow, that which is impossible to describe, you can only feel it when it happens. When I first prepared for going to the contest I had one video tape of two years of the contest. I would put that thing on every day, play along, and listen. I soon acquired numerous recordings by countless musicians, and listened at home as much as I could. When I went someplace in the car, I listened, when I was at work, I listened, I took every opportunity I could

to listen to the music, and internalize it. It should probably be noted that this didn't happen over night for me, and that I started getting a serious interest in Irish music and the recordings around 1975.

As you can see from the above rules, Irish music is categorized into tune types as they relate to dances. Know your tune types! The rules state only 6 tune types, there are a number of others. Most are distinguished by time signature. Jigs are in treble meter ie 6/8, 9/8, or 12/8, Reels are in 4/4, Hornpipes 4/4, Polka's in 2/4, "slides" a type of jig is in 12/8, and marches can be in 4/4, 2/4, or in some cases 6/8. A word of warning, in this part of Ireland Polka's are played extremely fast. Sport Murphy didn't like them much and wouldn't play them often. Just play along with some recordings, preferably from this area, and you can get the feel of it.

Accompanists are supplied by the organizing committee. They are excellent musicians, usually local. There is, however, no opportunity that I was able to find to practice with them. There are literally thousands of Irish tunes, and a word of warning, often the musicians will not know the name of a tune that you know it by, but will recognize it if they hear it. Some contestants have brought their own accompanist, there's no rule against it, that I know of. Sometimes the accompanists are in the pubs over the week end and you can get a chance to play along with them then. This year I noted that the festival organized opportunities to play in which the bone players were invited to. This is also a great opportunity to get to know the musicians and play along.

Perhaps a word on style. Irish bone players almost exclusively play with one hand. Because they don't have the other hand to add to what their dominant hand is doing, they have developed intricacies with the one hand that many of us two handed players don't develop. There is no better example of this than Sport Murphy, David Murphy, and Paddy Donovan, all local players. I have always felt that the local style is the perfect marriage between bone playing and the music. It is truly beautiful, and a sight to behold and hear for the bone playing aficionado. Tommy Hayes says his jaw dropped the first time he saw Sport Murphy play.

Two handed playing may have it's own appeal, and over the years a number of two handed players have done well at the contest, especially last year where all three spots went to two handed players. Remember, though, the Judge has the last word, and their opinion reigns.

On the Road to Abbeyfeale

Hard for me to talk about Abbeyfeale without getting a little choked up. I have met some of the best people in the world in Abbeyfeale! I came to them from another country, and they took me in, and made me feel at home! The Fleadh has always been a draw to people around the country, but the bones are an Abbeyfeale phenomenon. The contest has always drawn more local people both as participants and observers. And it's always a joy for me to return.

There are a good number of Pubs in Abbeyfeale, and most of them will be holding sessions. The Fleadh committee puts out a list, which includes the musicians that are featured at the session. Usually the sessions are in the evening, but some are scheduled in the afternoon. Sessions can run all night and into the morning. At some point the door is locked and it's hard to get into a session at 2 or 3 in the morning, but it can be done. My advice, stay where you are after 1 or so and you won't have any problem.

Rhythm bone players aren't universally accepted at sessions in Ireland. Though they are common in Abbeyfeale, other parts of the country aren't used to having them around. Best to feel your way into a session, ask if it looks like a closed session. Play one tune and see what kind of reaction you get. My method from my first visit was to stand outside the pub and see if I heard bones, go in if I do, and gradually get next to the bone player and see if they are friendly and welcoming. My favorite session of all time was at the Ploughman standing between Dave Murphy and Paddy Donovan, each taking turns playing until about 3.

Well that's about it. I hope to return to Abbeyfeale myself one day, perhaps this year, maybe not. If you go, be sure and go to the Winners Circle Pub, have a pint, and tell Tommy O'Connor I sent you! Slan go foil! (bye for now) *Steve Brown*, Two-time winner



Photographs; Upper left, Skeffington Flynn, Upper right from Bones Fest XIX, the Tin Roof Pickers Band with Paul Young, Andrew Montgomery and Ben Denny, Bones Fest Host, Skeff Flynn, and the Shedhoppers with Tim Quigley, Mary Gunderson-King, and Bruce Reich, Lower left, The San, Emily & Jacob Trio with Sandor Slomovits, Emily Slomovits and Jacob Warren.

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested