



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 3 2004

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Executive Director's Column

With the remnants of another bones fest still clacking in my ears, I find my self with some mighty big shoes to fill. Everett Cowett wasn't just our Executive Director over the last five years, he was our visionary. The person who created and hosted the first Bones Fest, who brought us all together, and saw his dream of a bones player organization become a reality. Although he had the help and support of some important people like Fred Edmunds, Martha Cowett, Russ Myers and Steve Wixson, it was Everett's desire that made it a reality. I've been fortunate to have been with him during some of this time, and it is my hope that I can carry on

his tradition of enthusiasm for bones playing and bones players.

Bones Fest VIII certainly had its share of both. With amazing new players including Kenny Wolin, and Jeff Leffert, to old friends Bill Vitts, and Russ Myers (to name just a very few in both catagories), I find my self back home and sufficiently energized to continue to fuel my development as a player and your new Executive Director. Truly if there is one significant impact being a part of this bones playing community has had on me personally (and there are actually many) it can be seen in my playing, the result of

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Joe Birl

This article is a tribute to Joe Birl who was awarded the Meritorious Service Award at Bones Fest VIII for his contributions to bones playing. Joe is a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society and a special friend who let us use his 'Rhythm Bones' trademark in our Society's name. It is an honor to write this article about him.

While Joe is the oldest active RBS member, his enthusiasm, laughter and love of the bones makes him feel like one of our youngest. As we watched Joe play his new wood 'rhythm bones' at the last several Bones Fests, we all wanted to be that young and play that good..

Joe was born in Philadelphia on August 20, 1916. He went to school until the eighth grade and was set to go to high school when a job opened up. This was in 1931 in the midst of the depression so Joe took the job. His salary of \$7 a week went to his family.

Later he went to night school to get his high school diploma studying blueprint reading and things of that nature. At age 18 he started working in his father's machine shop learning how to work with different materials. He later worked for Proctor Electric who made irons and toasters. He wound up in the Allocation Department learning to work with distributors. All of these skills help him earn a living and also prepared him to patent his now famous

black plastic 'Rhythm Bones.'

Joe was playing the bones by the time he was ten. He said, "I taught himself— I just picked it up." Joe is left handed and played one handed. He had a neighbor by the name of Mr. Wrigley who was an older gentlemen by then who said, "

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Joe Birl teaching the bones at Bones Fest V

Editorial

Bones Fest VIII was another great event and the highlights will be included in the next issue of the newsletter. The minutes of both the Board and General Membership Meetings are included in this issue. Steve Brown is our new Executive Director and writes his first column on Page 1.

Our society's roots stem from two individuals, Ev Cowett and Fred Edmunds, each with a different style of bones playing. Ev plays traditional bones and Fred played percussive bones. Traditional bones playing has dominated previous fests with only a few of Fred's students keeping the percussive style alive. With Bill Vits and this year Kenny Wolin's percussive contributions we see more of a balance evident in Bones Fest I when Fred was alive.

I consider myself a traditional bones player and use the traditional techniques from Aaron Plunkett's instructional video but also the percussive techniques from Fred's instructional video. There are seven traditional bones instructional videos and one, Fred's, percussive instructional video. RBS owns the rights to Fred's video and Jonathan Danforth made a motion during the General Membership meeting that we do something with it. If you have ideas, please send them to me or any Board Member. Thanks.

I speculate there are tens of thousands of bones players in the world and to date we have found about 650. Most of the first group can trace their bones playing to the end of the minstrel era or from a relative who learned from a minstrel show. These people have gray hair and are getting old. In one or two decades they will be gone and the number of bones players will be small. The work of our society is clear - pass on bones playing to the next generation.

In this issue for the first time is a column edited by Constance Cook titled *The Young Bones Player*. She credits Adam Klein who was her initial inspiration and who has given very freely of his time and attention in many ways to foster bones playing in

a very poor inner-city school. She will use the experience she has gained at her school to lead us in teaching kids to play the bones. Give her your support. Tell her your stories about teaching kids. Use her experience to start teaching kids or organize programs like hers in your area.

Mel Mercier found the story of the young virtuoso bones player, John Forde. It fits in nicely with Constance Cook's new column.

Cherish the Ladies with Joanie Madden and her Irish whistles was in Chattanooga recently. After the free concert, Joanie walked down into the audience and started talking to people. I ask her why she did not have a bones player and she said "I love the bones, but there are so few good bones players." I emailed her about the Rhythm Bones Society but bones players take note and get good. She also asked me why I didn't come up and play with them. Of course, I wouldn't do that unless asked which makes me wish I had showed up early for the sound check to show her some 'good bones playing.' I wanted to

Letters to the Editor

Dear Mr. Cowett,

I have been given your letter for my father, Cliff Wood, and sadly have to report that he died last September 2003, age 103.

He played his bones until almost the last few weeks before his death and gave great pleasure to his family and all around him.

He was very interested to know that there were bones still being played, especially in the US, and I know he would want to hope that they still will be played in years, decades and even centuries ahead.

May the Bones Fest VIII be a great event to all in August.

Sincerely, *Monica van den Berg*, daughter of Cliff Wood.

(Editor note: There was a story on Cliff in RBP Vol 3, No 3.)

Steve, I got your mail via the band website. Have you ever heard our CDs? They are sold at Civil War reenactments and battlefield parks like Gettysburg. We play all the time at Gettysburg, in all the taverns or you

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 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.

can find us by doing a search on the *Camptown Shakers*. We do old time music and minstrel songs to the set up of a minstrel band with jawbone, fiddle banjo and I play bones and tambourine. I have a different style, something that I made up, sort of marching drum rhythm with bones. Didn't know how to do it, just played what came out. I play bones on about half the songs and tambourine on the other half. We are considered one of the most authentic (gut strings and all.) You might look at George Wonderlick's web page, "wonder banjos" as he makes all the instruments and a fine bones player too. We are so busy playing gigs (we will do the Philadelphia Folk Fest and such) and the dead heads love us. We would love to play live for you if possible one day, but we live way up here. I would love to hear 1000 bones played to our music. Get a CD from Tracy at serenade @delanet.com and check us out. I'm sure you will love playing along with us. *King Bennett*

(Continued from page 1)

being exposed to each and every one of you, beginner and expert alike.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Terry and Sally Carroll for taking on the difficult task of organizing Bones Fest VIII, something that I have done myself and recognize as overwhelming and deeply rewarding.

The future for our instrument and organization could not be brighter in my opinion. With young players like Sky Bartlett shining like Haley's Comet, and the fine work Constance Cook is doing with her school kids (see her new column in this issue), the fear of bones playing fading into oblivion is just a dark memory. And YOU, who think enough of the instrument and organization to make both a part of your life, for this I thank you.

And as we continue on with our favorite activity, please fill out the enclosed questionnaire and let us (the Board) know what you think. Please

Below is a photograph of the front cover of Yirdy Machar's CD. Yirdy is in front playing bones. From the left behind are Bjorne G. Schmidt, Malene D. Beck and Anders Trobjerg. Photograph by Henrik Bjorslev

Recorded Bones Music

I received a copy of a CD from member Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar. Yirdy is a Scotsman who lives in Denmark. Not many of you have met Yirdy as he has had conflicts with recent Bones Fests. However, those who attended the 2002 NTCMA event in Iowa got to meet him and compete against him in the Bones and Spoons Contest. They lost, he won. And with good reason. He opened playing with four bones in each hand, then did a spoon number and finished with a two bone number. He is also a one man act playing the button accordian and other instruments and filled in for several scheduled performers who failed to show. His article on the Iowa event and his win is worth reading (RBP Vol 4, No 4).

The CD is titled *Macbones and the B Band* and is one of those few CDs where almost all tracks contain bones (one track with spoons.) The songs are of Scottish origin accompanied with button accordian, banjo, bouzouki, darbouka, piano, etc with Yirdy singing lead vocals. To purchase, contact Steve Brown at 978-297-1104 or bones@crystal-mtn.com.

Introducing The Young Bones Player Column

The Young Bones Players Column is for and about young players so that they may know about each other and meet, and for those bones players who chose to pass on their art to young people. I would like this column to eventually to be taken over by the up and coming young bones players of today. (Or maybe morph one column to two columns; for the young who play, and those who teach the young.) Bones playing is absolutely NOT dying out in this country, due to people such as the Cahills, Adam Klein, Ev Cowett, Rob Rudin, Stephen Brown, Jonathan Danforth and others. I have been teaching the bones and jug band in public school for many years now with the material and technical support of Adam Klein, who wildly inspired my students in Brockton, MA by playing virtuoso bones for them while singing. Today, all my students (750) play, with varying degrees of skill -- some very well indeed. I am now in a new school system in Lexington, MA, so will be starting all over again.

I am excited to announce that I will be presenting a workshop on "Bones playing and jug band in an elementary school music program," to Massachusetts music educators at the annual MMEA conference in March, 2005. I hope to have children there to demonstrate and help teach the teachers. I also hope to have the aforementioned players, Adam, Stephen and Rob to help present and teach, in addition to making that important link between educators and traditional musicians. (Nothing like a little public pressure.)

If you are worried about bones playing dying out, read the following article, and go out and teach another child. Write in about your experiences teaching children. Young players, write in with your stories, and join other bones players at the National and Regional Conventions. (You can get info at rhythmbones.com, of course, and also at the Rhythmbones group at yahoo.) If enough young people write in maybe a young players group will



Fleadh Spawns Bones Boy Wonder

He's too young to be that talented, he couldn't possibly fake artistic temperament at such a tender, young age. However, it's all there in abundance and wrapped in a four-year-old ball of energy in the name of John William Forde (see photograph on Page 8).

In the course of compiling a report on the May Bank Holiday Fleadh by the Feale for an issue of *The Kerryman* last May I spoke to one of the organisers, Anne Marie Dennison. She told me how well things had gone for the committee and that they were already looking forward to next year.

Before we finished our conversation she told me to look out for a young bones player by the name of John Forde. She said the youngster had won the junior competition during the Fleadh. The words she used in fact were: "He'll be heard of yet."

It wasn't possible to contact the Forde household on Monday and with a deadline looming a meeting was eventually arranged for mid-week.

After his mother, Noeleen, promised him a treat in the nearby chip shop young John began rattling Dem Bones in earnest.

The child is gifted with a natural rhythm but it wasn't from the wind he got it. His uncle, David Murphy was the runner up in the All Ireland Bones Playing Championship - a competition and craft nurtured by the Abbeyfeale 'Fleadh' committee over the past couple of years there. After last year's competition David gave his little nephew a set of bones and the youngster hasn't left them out of his hands since. Up to then he was 'tipping away at the bodhrán' according to Noeleen.

"People can't get over how good he is at such a young age, he's normally a shy child and we can't get over how he went up on the stage to play in the competition. He hadn't a nerve in the world and played away as cool as anything," said the justifiably proud mom.

An only child, John lives in Ballaugh South in Abbeyfeale with his

parents. His dad, Pat comes from the music rich area of Templeglantine but mom, Noeleen puts the musical influences down to the great bones man of the area, Patrick 'Sport' Murphy - who was honoured at this year's Fleadh.

"The bones were played in China before 3000 BC, in Egypt around that date, and in ancient Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe.

Numerous examples of Egyptian bones made of ivory and wood have survived, they were used in religious rites. We know they have spread around the world and exist in some form in almost every culture. They were a featured instrument in the American Minstrel Show during the middle 1800's, and have been played in numerous forms of traditional music in North America including blues, blue grass, French Canadian music, and Cape Breton music from Nova Scotia," that's according to expert and reigning All Ireland Bones Playing Champion. Stephen Brown

"There is a rich connection between the bones and traditional Irish music and they may have first been taken to America by Irish Emigrants. Little is left us as to how they developed in Ireland, although Mel Mercier of University College Cork is currently involved in extensive research on the use of the bones in Ireland and America and we may have some insight into this when it is published.

Truly a pub instrument, played casually and passed on by word of mouth, they have been kept alive by little pockets of players, the best inspiring others to play. Ronnie McShane played them in Sean O'Riada's group *Ceoltoiri Cualann*, and in the Chieftains, they were played both by Peadar Mercier, and Ronnie McShane on the earlier albums and by Martin Faye later on.

Inspired by Peadar Mercier, many younger bodhrán players of the 70's also played bones such as Mel Mercier, and Johnny McDonagh, developing unique styles. As the drum developed through the 80's and 90's younger players showed less interest in them, although Cathy Jordan plays them regularly and well.

One of the areas in Ireland with a

healthy population of bones players is in West Limerick in and around the town of Abbeyfeale. This is almost entirely due to one exceptional bones player Patrick 'Sport' Murphy. Sport continues to use the same pair of bones he has played for over 60 years, and has made a name for himself as the best player in Ireland. In the early 90's, the town of Abbeyfeale began sponsoring a yearly Fleadh, and in an attempt to make it unique to their area, began sponsoring the All Ireland Bones Playing Championship as part of the Fleadh.

Sport Murphy has won the championship numerous times, although the area has other great players including Paddy Donovan of Ardagh, himself a two time champion, David Murphy of Abbeyfeale and Brian Hickey of Adare. Although the number of contestants has varied from year to year, 2003 saw the largest number of contestants including for the first time contestants from outside Ireland. The bones are two pieces of bone, generally cows ribs, or wood, they are curved slightly," according to Mr. Brown.

I was delighted at what I heard in Abbeyfeale on the Wednesday evening I met him and I asked John Forde to play a bar or two for my travelling companion. He shook his head in a blank refusal but I told him that she'd kill me on the way home if he didn't play for her. He consented and gave a few bars and, with a hint of a smile in my direction which implied that he'd just lifted a heavy sentence from my shoulders, he charged

Website of the Quarter

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1919122>.

Notice of this NPR radio story titled *The Legacy of Blackface* was sent to us by member Norm Conrad. It reviews the origins of blackface and minstrelsy and tells how it still effects life today. While bones are not mentioned, bones are played at the beginning and end of Part 1. The bones player is Percy Danforth from the CD *The Early Minstrel Show*.

How to Win the NTCMA Bones Contest

1. Start Practicing Now
2. Make Motel Reservations Early
3. Hook Up With Jerry Mescher
4. Find Backup Band (See #3 Above)
5. Choose Tunes In Different Time Signatures
6. Wear A Nice Costume
7. Smile When Performing
8. Clog Dance While Rattling
9. Enjoy Yourself

I was inspired to compete after hearing folks talk about the contest last year at Bones Fest VII in Louisville. But instead of heading off to Iowa after Bones Fest ended, I felt I should first take a year to get better prepared. And I'm glad I did. It wasn't so much that I needed to improve my bones playing (although I DID improve greatly from studying the Bones Fest VII video), but I wanted to settle in on an effective strategy.

The first thing I did when I got to the fair grounds was hook up with RBS member Jerry Mescher. He gave me a personal insider's tour of the fair grounds, introduced me to many nice folks, walked me over to the registration area and showed me the ropes.

I arrived Wednesday night because I wanted to enter the Band Scramble Contest. This is where you write your name and instrument on a slip of paper, drop it in a box, then the names are formed into groups. I thought it would be a lot of fun - and a great way to meet other musicians for a backup band. I was lucky enough to be grouped with a wonderful guitar player, Lyle Johnsen, and a dynamite banjo player named Lee Muller. We put together around half a dozen numbers and performed a set that smoked.

For the Bones Contest, I selected three tunes, "Jambalaya," (Cajun), "Waltz Across Texas," (waltz) and "Lay That Pistol Down" (reel). I played RBS member Parker Waite's aluminum bones on the Cajun tune, eight wood bones on the waltz, and also clogged a little on the last.

My goal for entering the contest was to at least place among the top

five winners. The main reason I went to the festival was in hopes that my placing in the national contest might elevate the status of bones playing among musicians where I live.

What I enjoyed more than anything else about the festival was discovering that everywhere I played bones (the Bluegrass Cafe, Callison's Circle Jam, the Band Scramble, Jem's Open Jam Tent, American Heritage Stage, Main Stage, Patio Church Stage, Irish session, Bluegrass Stage, the Bones Contest, and the square dance), my band mates and the crowd absolutely loved the sound. That alone made the trip well worth the effort.

Tips & Techniques Back to the Basics

Let's return to basics - what are the fundamental movements in rhythm bones playing? For years I agreed with Russ Myers who says there are only two movements, the tap and the triplet. However, as I now play the duplet and the quadruplet, I realize that these are separate movements.

The duplet is not a double tap as some call it (though that name will likely continue to be used). The name double tap implies that two taps are created with forward motion of the hand for both sounds. The duplet is one sound with the hand going forward and one sound with the hand going backwards.

What distinguishes the duplet from the triplet is the arc of movement of the hand in space. The arc of motion for a triplet is a circle or an ellipse with a slight downward motion at the start of the backward arc (Barry Patton teaches a triplet variation with a figure eight arc.). The arc of movement for my duplet is a short circular arc movement that retraces itself on the backward motion. Steve Brown says his duplet (double tap) motion has the bones moving parallel, that is his arc is a straight line in space.

There is also some finger control required by the ring finger (while we teach beginners that the ring finger doesn't do much, as we advance we note that it is very involved.)

Music is created using the basic

(Continued on page 8)

New England Regional Bones Fest

October 30th, 2004

**Red Apple Farm
Phillipston, MA.**

Preliminary Schedule

9AM-10AM-Coffee and Donuts
10am-Noon Discussion and Presentations
Noon-1pm Lunch
1pm-2pm Informal Jamming
2pm-5pm Public Performance (only registered participants will perform)
Live Music provided by the Reiner Family Band

Cost To Rhythm Bones Society Members is \$10.00 per person and includes: Coffee/tea, donuts, Lunch-Choice of hamburger or hot dog, potato chips, desert, and use of the Farm.
Bring a salad to share.

Pre-register

Make checks payable to
Red Apple Farm

Send to: Steve Brown
36 Royalston Road North
Winchendon, MA 01475

Questions: 978-297-1104
Bones@crystal-mtn.com

Bones Calendar

October 30. New England Regional Bones Fest. Contact Steve Brown
Summer 2005. Bones Fest IX. Place and time to be determined. See next newsletter.
August 29-September 4, 2005. NTCMA annual Festival with Bones and Spoons Context on September 3rd.

Minutes of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Everett Cowett at approximately 7:30 pm on August 21, 2004 in the Community Center of St. Anne Plaza, Reston, VA.

The minutes of the last meeting were not read since they had been published in the newsletter. The Treasurer presented an interim report noting there are 117 paid members and there is about \$1700 in the bank. A motion was made and approved that the report be accepted.

There was an election of Officers and Board Members. Ev presented the recommendations of the Board (see minutes of Board). There were no nominations from the floor and a motion was made and approved that these people be elected by acclamation.

Ev Cowett presented the Meritorious Service awards to Mel Mercier and Joe Birl. Steve Wixson accepted for Joe and announced that the next newsletter would have an article on Joe.

There was a call for new business. It was moved by Jonathan Danforth, then seconded and approved that a committee be formed to figure out what to do with Fred Edmunds Bones Instructional videos that RBS now hold title to.

There being no more business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:50 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Steve

Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors

The meeting was called to order by Everett Cowett on August 20 at 1:45 pm in the Art Gallery at St. Anne Plaza, Reston, VA, with all present except Jerry Mescher. Russ Myers and Mitch Boss were present as visitors.

Motions were made, seconded and approved to not read the minutes of the previous General Membership and Board meetings. The Treasurer present an interim report noting there is about \$1700 in the bank.

Sally Carroll reviewed the program

for Bones Fest VIII. Changes include workshops and the public performance on Sunday afternoon.

There was a discussion on the purpose of our Fests. A motion was made and seconded to setup a subcommittee to prepare and distribute a survey questionnaire to poll the membership as to their desires for future Fests. Steve Brown will chair.

The Board affirmed Meritorious Service Awards to Mel Mercier and Joe Birl. Ev will present these on Saturday night.

There is a need to clarify procedures for on-line motions and meetings. Steve Wixson will study and present an email motion for on-line discussion and approval.

Old Business: Sally Carroll, chair of the committee to study changes to the By-laws to increase the size of the Board, reported that two members did not favor any changes, so no further work was done. The motion was made, seconded and approved to re-activate the committee to considered term limits and other was to improved the structure of the Board.

Mary Lee Sweet discussed the possibility of Stephen Foster Culture State Park for Bones Fest IX. It is located some distance from the airport and transportation is a problem. The advantage is they would take care of most of the planning and execution. She will gather more information and submit a proposal. It was suggested to add a item to the survey as to how many people use air transportation to attend Fests. Steve Wixson noted that San Slomovits has also expressed interest in hosting Bones Fest IX. Steve Wixson will send him a copy of the preliminary Host Guide and see if he will submit a proposal to the Board within one month.

Ev Cowett announced that he was stepping down as Executive Director. The Board sitting as Nominating Committee made the following recommendations to be presented at the General Meeting; Steve Brown, Executive Director, Gil Hibben, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer and Sally Carroll, Ev Cowett, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher for Board Members.

There was a discussion of

producing a video DVD of Bones Fest highlights for distribution to Public Television stations throughout the country. There was not sufficient time to discuss this idea.

The meeting was suspended at 4:20 pm to continue Sunday morning.

The meeting continued in the Gazebo of the Marriott Hotel at 1:00 pm with all present except Sally Carroll and Jerry Mescher. Visitors present were Sky Bartlett, Mitch Boss, Ernie Duffy and Bernie Worrell.

There was a discussion of BFVIII. The level of bones playing is up. The workshops are working, but should start early in the morning with no big break between Saturday morning and afternoon sessions. People want more jamming time. There is a desire for a place to meet after the day's activities are over (an afterglow). Several members wanted wine and beer served and the Board concurred. There is a need to study the relationship between the Host and the Board. We need to get proposals for the following year's Fest so they can be discussed during the Annual Board meeting. The Board requested that the Secretary send a letter of thanks to the Bookstore.

The committee to figure out what to do with the Fred Edmunds materials was organized with Mel Mercier, chair.

Gil Hibben noted the Board needs to define authority of motion making at the General Membership meeting. Gil will study and submit an email motion on the subject.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to fund an upgrade to the website to support audio and video.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to issue membership certificate in both 8 1/2 and business card sizes. This has been requested by several members.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to issue a Membership Directory with members specifying what information they would not like to have included.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:54 pm. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

(Joe Bir—Continued from page 1)

Joe why don't you play with both hands." Joe says, "That was the only bones advice I ever got from anyone."

At 10th and Pine there was an old black man who played the bones and he would walk the streets with a guitar player who was blind. Early on, he was about the only bones player that Joe ever met.

He made his first bones from wood from a hardwood floor. Later he went to Zapf's Music store at 5th and Tabor Road (still in business today and selling bones) and bought his first pair of bones made out of pine painted black.

Joe never played with a group, but at that time the craze was amateur shows. There were many theaters in Philadelphia that had a stage. People improvised themselves as booking agents and hooked up with several theaters. A booking agent would assemble a group of 10 to 15 amateur performers and Joe was one of them. They would go to a theatre and a few of them would perform and get paid a few dollars. The others in the group who did not get to perform would get 50 cents. The theatres had a house band and Joe would play along with them. He would wear overalls with a plaid shirt and sometimes with a straw hat. Joe never won first prize, but did win second or third with a prize of \$2 or \$3. It was the depression and professional performers who were out of work performed as amateurs winning most of the events. He still has some postal cards notifying him of an upcoming event (most people did not have telephones in those days).

Joe's bones would slip out of his hands when he played them. Being a clever fellow and experienced in making things in the machine shop, he began to design a new type of bone made out of plastic

Joe calls himself "a dreamer." He was working in his father's machine shop and tried making bones out of some scraps, but they didn't sound very good. He received some plastic looking material call spaldite (still in use today) and shaped it into bones. The curve in the bones was copied from the wood bones he bought from Zapf Music Company. He cut out his

famous grooves by grinding and filing. Joe shortened his bones to reduce cost. The 'Rhythm Bones' were born.

At Bones Fest III, Joe told the fascinating and frustrating story of how he patented these bones. His patent attorney, Mr. Fairbanks, was very helpful in the process. Joe had already made a blueprint for his bones. He made his application, submitted it and was turned down three or four times. He then decided to visit the Patent Office. When he showed the Examiner the bones, he said "I didn't know it was like that." The Examiner changed a few words and approved the application. Joe received the papers with a nice seal on it several months later. He gave the Society copies of all of the documents to preserve.

It took a few years for Joe to get enough money to do anything with his patent. He searched for a molder, but all they wanted was his money. He finally found molding company headed by a Mr Strauss who made a few bones for him. He worked on ways to clean up the molding marks and finally had his method perfected.

During that time were hundreds of music distributors specializing in various instrument and Joe got together about 14 around the country. He sold bones in tooth paste like boxes containing a set of four inside. He had a display carton where twelve of the boxes would fit. Distributors would buy maybe a half a gross a year.

Joe says that he did not make much money selling the bones nor did he lose much either. Joe estimates he sold over 100,000 bones. I wonder how many of these bones are out there still being played.

Brother Bones made bones popular for a time and Joe got to meet him and give him some of his bones. Read that story in RBP Vol 4, No 3.

Many people know this story from Bones Fest III. Joe was in attendance when Mel Mercier came to the microphone to tell about his bones playing and then play for us. He told of playing with two pair of unmatched bones, one of real bone and the other a black plastic bone. Unfortunately over the years the plastic bones had broken

while carrying them in his back pocket. Little did Mel know that Joe who had made and patented these bones was sitting on the front row not four feet in front of him. Needless to say, Mel returned to Ireland with many pairs of Joe's famous bones.

Joe had a few plastic bones left when he arrived at Bones Fest III, but quickly sold them to attendees. I have contacted a few music stores over the past year trying to find these bones, but they are all gone. Steve Brown found a few for sale on Ebay and they sell for \$10-\$15.

Joe is still making bones, but now out of pine. They have the patented groove. He painted a few of them black, but prefers the natural color of the wood. Several RBS members have bought these wood bones. Joe is looking to sell his wood bones on the internet, so watch out Ebay!

This year Joe was a volunteer for the Philadelphia Folk Festival (one of the biggest in the country with 2,500 volunteers). In his spare time sold 38 pairs of his new wood bones.

Today, Joe is still teaching people how to play bones and has found a new way to teach. Over the years he has had trouble teaching some people the bones playing motion. He now has the student raise their hand straight into the air and rock the hand back and forth (notice how the elbow moves). Then the student lowers the hand into a normal playing level (where the elbow is more fixed), but keeps the same motion going. Joe tells them, "Now you've got the motion that is required." People can now get the feeling that they could never get before. Joe says he's thought about this teaching problem for years and just recently thought of this. I tried it as he described it on the telephone and it works. I will try it out on the next student I teach.

Joe still plays bones all the time and says "I get a big kick out of them. I enjoy them and it keeps me young. You work your bones and stay young."

My first bones were real bones made by my butcher father. Over the year, I had more than one pair of Joe's 'Rhythm Bones' and I bet many of you reading this did too. I paid \$4.50 a



Four-year-old Bones Playing Champion, John William Forde from Abbeyfeale pictured beside the famous Fr. Casey landmark in the Co. Limerick town's square. See story on Page 4. Photo: John Reidy / The



Mel, Mercier, AnnMaria Dennison, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy and Steve Brown following Mel's presentation to Sport of the RBS Meritorious Service Award. Steve Brown won 2004 Bones Competition

(Tips & Techniques continued from page 5)

movements described above plus the quadruplet (described in RBP Vol 6, Nos 1 and 2) plus silence. Variations are created by the intensity of play, the actual arcs inscribed by the hand in space (they don't have to be in a two dimensional plane), type, weight and

length of the bone itself, the number of bones played in one hand, and all of the subtleties that make music musical. The two handed player can play the same rhythm in both hands or play different rhythms in each hand.

There is a fifth basic for the two handed player, hitting two pair of

bones together. This movement in castanets is called the choque and for bones players it is taught by Fred Edmund in his bones instructional video.

If you play something other than taps, duplets, triplets, quadruplets and silence, send a Letter to the Editor and

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested