



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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Executive Director's Column

We, as an organization have been concerned and vocal about the future of our instrument, and rightly so. Creating opportunities for children to learn about the bones, sponsoring a regular article in the news letter for children, and nominating a committee to examine bones designed for children are excellent endeavors and I highly support them.

However, I think there is an area we are somewhat neglectful of, and that is the elder members of our society. Grey Larsen, in his book, *The Essential Guide to the Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, encourages readers, "...seek out the older players who may not come into your view so readily (as the younger players). The soul of the tradition rests in them, the ones who have lived the

music for 50, 60, 70 years. They may be highly accomplished or they may play roughly or slow, but they are the keepers of the deepest wisdom and eloquence that you can experience through the music."

The elder members were the torch bearers between generations. People like Ida May Schmich, John Perona, Ray Schairer, Hutch Hutchins, James Newman, Joe Birl, Shorty Boulet, Donnie DeCamp, Jerry Barnett, Gerard Arseneault, Bib McDowell, Walt Watkins, Charles Humphreys, Ronnie McShane, Sport Murphy, Everett Cowett, and many others too numerous to name, have contributed to carrying

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The Mescher Tradition Continues

Bernie Worrell and Jerry Mescher are proud to carry on the tradition started by their father, Albert Mescher, many years ago. Bernie & Jerry are both world champion bone players and both are inductees into the Old Time Country Music Hall of Fame.

In 1921 Albert Mescher, who was ten years old, was enjoying a trip to the Carroll County Fair with his family. As he walked around the grounds, Albert heard an unusual sound coming from the grand stand. He was fascinated by the sound but didn't know what instrument was making the sound. After he got home, he asked anyone who would listen what kind of instrument he had heard. He told them it was something that was held in the hands and played in time to the beat of the music. Finally, he asked a farm hand that came up from Missouri with a pair of bay ponies to help with the harvest. The farm hand said that it sounded to him like he must be describing the bones. In fact, he made a pair of bones for Albert from an old fork handle.

The next spring, a new Depot Agent was assigned to Halbur (Iowa). The Mescher family had a player piano in the parlor. One Sunday the Depot Agent was taking a walk with his wife and heard the piano. He dropped in to say hi, and Albert showed him the bones. The only thing the man knew about the bones was how they were held and with that bit of information Albert had his final instruction regarding the bones.

I've tried to play the bones with expert instruction (I'm Bernie's husband) and let me

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Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell

Editorial

Ten years of Bones Fests and eight years (almost) of the Rhythm Bones Society. Quite an accomplishment, and we deserve a pat on our backs.

When I did my first rhythm bones search on the internet in 1999, I found maybe 75 web pages with bones references. Today there are hundreds, and growing. We are making an impact on bones playing.

There is special issue titled Reflections that will highlight those ten Bones Fests. Sharon Mescher has volunteer to guest edit this issue, and she will make it really special. Read her letter to the membership below.

In two years we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of our Society, and we've only have a couple of years to design an appropriate birthday cake.

One of our traditions is the presence of Jerry Mescher and/or Bernie Worrell in six of our Bones Fests. Read their story beginning on Page 1.

This issue presents the next part of Beth Lenz's Master's thesis on bones. Her Table of Contents is included.

We received a box of bones from member Robert McDowell collected over the years (Bob wrote a bones history article that is summarized on Page 4.) Yes, we have a library of sorts where items of interest to bones people are kept. These items are earmarked for the Library of Congress (our contact Jennifer Cutting isn't ready for them right now.) The LOC will eventually also get an HD/DVD with lots of scanned photos, etc.

This issue has an insert that indexes Volumes 1 through 8 of the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter. It is impressive to see what our contributing authors and I have put on paper about rhythm bones in these few issues. Note that the newsletter is sent to and indexed by the Library of Congress and will be available to future researchers and rhythm bones

Letters to the Editor

Dear RBS Members: A heartfelt wish for a wonderful New Year to all of you!

As you may know, the next RBS newsletter will be one filled with personal reflections and pictures of the first ten years of Bones Fests.

A bit of background behind the Reflections newsletter. The idea for this special edition came from the creative mind of Mel Mercier, and of course, Steve Wixson is doing the hard work of putting it together. Last fall Steve sent out a call for help in editing. I volunteered, but only if no one else wanted to do it. So, we are at the point of sending out another plea for each of you to send me your reflections. As a reminder, here is Steve's format for your writing: a) one to two sentences of your best memories about each Bones Fest that you attended; and, b) several sentences that sum up your thoughts about your experiences over the last 10 years of being a part of RBS. (Thirteen people have submitted their memories/ thoughts. From a personal point of view, I can tell you that I have enjoyed, immensely, reading these people's reflections. Each one has its own flavor and humor. I am looking forward to the publication of this issue!)

Just as we ponder over the passing year, looking forward to a new one, we are asking that you take a few moments and reflect on the year(s) that you have attended the Bones Fests - with anticipation for many wonderful and fun years to come. We will put together a memorable newsletter, and one, I believe, we all will treasure. Please send us me reflections as soon as possible! We look forward to receiving every one. *Sharon Mescher*. sjmescher@gmail.com, P.O Box 25, Halbur, IA 51444, 712-658-2211.

A newsworthy item. Martha Cowett is engaged to marry fellow bones player and RBS member, Joe Cummings. All of the Cowetts are happy about this. I don't know if this is appropriate for the Newsletter or not, but it is your call. *Ev Cowett*

I recently got some very nice bones by Clif Ervin. The yellow cedar pair is subtle and variable, not too loud. The teak pair is louder and more solid, but not as variable. Here's a nice recording of Clif playing with banjo player Dan Gellert: orphonon.utopiandesign.com/

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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.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.com

Blackeyed_Susie.mp3. See my link page for more details/ *Jeff Leffert*. bones.JeffLeff.com/links.html

Beannachtai na Nollag (Seasons Greetings) to Steve Brown, Steve Wixson and all members. With every good wish for a happy and peaceful Christmas and New Year. Keep up the

Website of the Quarter

www.frappr.com/rhythmbones. Check out Scott miller's frappr website and see a world map that shows where some rhythm bones players live.

Scott say, "Since the website came up, the Frappr people have added the ability to visit the RBS Yahoo Groups forum. This thing is pretty cool. So take a peak and let me know what you think. Rhythm bone players are now on the map!

"If you want to take over administration of this 'Rhythm Bones' Frappr group, let me know and I'll transfer it over to whomever. All the

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

on our instrument.

They have brought not only those that taught them, but generations before them through the years and into our consciousness by their playing, and stories of how they came to the bones and how they carried it on.

This year saw the passing of one of our founding members, Russ Myers, and I think of the number of older players who have passed on in my time Percy Danforth, John Burrill, Len Davies, Will Kear, Fred Edmunds, and Vivian Cox.

I think we might consider ways in which we can honor those older members, and learn more from them, to ensure they will live through us and into newer generations of bones players. It is these older folks who brought the bones to where we are today, and I think each and every one has something to bring to us as bones players.

As I was in the process of writing this article I had the pleasure of meeting John Hennessy at our local Irish session. John tells me he's been playing the bones for "83" years and is 88 years old. He plays one handed, in the Irish tradition, with a pair of wooden bones.

"I thought I was the only one left!" he said when we met. His understated quiet style drew me in, and I promised him a complementary newsletter as I left.

How many more of them are out there? Now is the time to give tribute and recognition to our older players

Comedian Shelley Berman Plays Bones

Members Gil and Linda Hibben have an interesting friend—actor, comedian, writer, director, teacher, lecturer, poet—Shelley Berman whose career took off in the 1960's. Like Gil, Shelley is an avid knife enthusiast and rhythm bones player.

Shelley said, "For me, in elementary school in Westside Chicago, a pair of twin brothers were making rhythm with a pair of sticks in one hand. I found a pair of sticks and tried the same thing. After several days of

getting nowhere, I began to hold the sticks firmly and snapping them with a twist of my forearm and wrist. There and back and there and back, and wow, to hear the clacking! Oh, the classmates were second generation Irish. Later, listening to real Irish music, the wonderful rattle was unmistakable bones."

He told me another story. "It's about an eighth grade teacher in Chicago and me as a thirteen year old loving my home made bones, fashioned from two xylophone bars I found in an alley where someone had thrown away an entire old xylophone. Oh, how I worked in the shaping of them with a small pocket knife and sandpaper -- hours and hours, until they were smooth and perfect and clacked tunefully.

And the teacher, seeing me carrying them in my hand, going out to recess to play them with my buddies, decided it was just another way for me to show off, and took them away from me. She would not return them at the end of the day, even though I pleaded. I never forgot that day."

Shelley told me he did play bones in his act in the early years of his career.

Gil discovered that Shelley played bones at a knife show. Gil was playing them and Shelley picked them up and they started playing together. The whole floor of the show got quiet for a while. *Steve Wixson*

Recorded Bones Music

The UK based Acrobat Music Company has released a nice compilation of bones playing songs titled *Brother Bones and His Shadows*. Brother Bones, whose real name was Freeman Davis, recorded during the late 1940s and all during the 1950s and became famous with his recording of *Sweet Georgia Brown*, a recording that became the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. There is an article on Brother Bones in the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, Vol 4, No 3.

There are 17 tracks on the CD with bones playing and whistling. The genre of the songs is swing. Freeman plays a variety of bones including

kitchen knives and frequently plays with three bones in each hand.

Acrobat includes some interesting liner notes

While his bones playing is great, people will enjoy his whistling. One track, *Listen to the Mockingbird*, has some amazing bird imitations.

You can get more information about the CD and hear samples at cduniverse.com (search for Brother Bones.) The CD is widely available, but one good source is member Scott Miller.

Scott's price for RBS members in the US is \$11.97 per CD plus shipping and handling. For details or further pricing contact Scott at scott@rhythm-bones.com or 314-772-1610.

Tentative Date for Bones Fest XI

Reserve the weekend of August 17-19 for Bones Fest XI. Dave Boyle, also known as bones maker *Black Bart* is proposing the Milwaukee area as the site. This is the weekend of Irish Fest, the biggest Irish Festival in the world, and people may wish to attend both. More details in the next issue.

Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the rhythmbones.com website. All events are in year 2007.

Le Vent du Nord, February 22, with bones-player Benoit Bourque in Lewiston, ME. His group is also plays in Arlington, MA, Randolph, VT, Lancaster, PA, Portland, ME and Montreal. Check website for dates.

2nd South Carolina String Band, March 3, with bones player Bob Beeman, Gettysburg, PA. They also play in Spartanburg, SC on May 25-6.

Bones Fest X. Tentative date is August 17-19. Details in next newsletter.

NTCMA AND Bones Contest. August 27 - September 2nd. The bones contest was scheduled for Sunday last year and not enough people showed up to have the contest. This year the contest will be on Saturday, September 1st. How about a bunch of us RBS members attend and make it a big

Tips and Techniques The Tap Roll

At the Saturday afternoon session at Bones Fest X, I started and ended my performance with what I am calling a *Tap Roll*. What I like about it is there are virtually no accent beats making it a gentle introduction and/or finish, though it has other uses.

My technique is exactly what we tell beginners not to do. We teach beginners to roll the hand over the wrist (the turn the door knob move.) What I find most beginners doing is keeping the fingers in a mostly fixed position and rotating the palm of the hand under the fingers. This is the wrong move for beginners, but the right move for the *tap roll*.

To me, this roll seems more like the action of a clapper in a bell. The speed of the roll is mostly determined by the weight and length of the movable bone which limits its use somewhat. The roll is much faster with my dominate hand, so the tension and speed the muscles place on the movable bone do play a part.

In my experience, it is difficult to switch back and forth between the *tap roll* to normal playing without actually stopping all motion.

As the commercial says, try it—you'll like it. *Steve Wixson*

Robert McDowell's Bones History

As we reprint part of Beth Lenz's Master's Thesis, we cannot overlook member Bob McDowell's article titled "*Bones and Man: Toward a History of Bones Playing*," published in the *Journal of American Culture*, Vol 5, No. 1, Spring 1982.

The article covers some of the same ground as Beth's thesis and comes to the same conclusion—namely bones came to America from Europe and not Africa.

Bob said, "When I wrote that article, it was on a dare of sorts. I specialized in African literature at the University of Texas at Arlington (and had done my dissertation in that field.) Once, sitting around with friends at an

African Studies conference, I broached the subject of bones, African musical instruments, etc. Some said, "I'll bet that the bones are of African origin." At any rate, I went home from the conference, dabbled in the field of African musical instruments for a while, dug around in minstrel studies, and so forth. The result was this article. I enjoyed writing the piece, but make no claim for heavy scholarship in connection with it."

Bob begins the article with how he became a bones player at age eleven. He was inspired by an traveling evangelist bones playing preacher. He carved a crude set of bones from wooden laths and began to master a few basic rhythms.

He then introduces bones from a musicology point of view before examining bones and minstrelsy. Almost half of his article cover the minstrel era beginning with Frank Brower, the first minstrel bones player (see Vol 6, No 1 for more information on Brower), the rise of minstrelsy, and the spread of minstrelsy around the world. These are covered from a rhythm bones point of view, a view that many modern minstrel era writers almost completely overlook.

He transitions with non-minstrel bones stories before spending the rest of the article on the history of bones playing.

He summarizes a body of African and then European literature. He backs up in time through Roman times, Egypt, Ur and back to the Chinese ruler Fou Hi, who some call the father of music, and Bob likens as an earlier 'Brother Bones.' Rhythm bones from that era have been dated to 3,468 BC.

He included a photograph of William Sidney Mount's painting titled *The Bones Player*.

He concludes, "In the history of mankind, Brother Bones has demonstrated extraordinary endurance and versatility and a capability for infinite transformation. He has visited the most remote recesses of our civilization—from the Australian Outback to Brother Welch's little Foursquare Church of the Open Bible [Bob's early church in Iowa.] Like Tiresias, he has "seen" all—mourning and mirth, delight and dread..."

What a bizarre journey—from Fou Hi to Berryman, a span of nearly five-and-one-half-thousand years, a voyage marked with blood ritual and cruelty, a journey shrouded at times in mystery, marked at times by barbarism. But is also a journey betraying amazing human energy and inventiveness and artistry, and one encompassing moments of sheet ecstasy derived from hearing the rattle of bones."

He includes a length bibliography.

Bob said, "I would really like to see something fresh from one of the young graduate students like Beth Lenz." Well Bob, many of us are anxious to read Mel Mercier's PhD thesis, a work in progress.

Bob hopes to make it to a Bones Fest. He plays in a jazz band. He plays ivory and animal rhythm bones.

If you would like a copy of Bob's article, please contact me. *Steve Wixson*

History of Bones in the US—Table of Contents

The second part of Beth Lenz's thesis begins on the following page. To put the reprinted text in context, the Table of Contents from her thesis is below.

The thesis is 312 pages, double spaced, in length. At this time, only Chapter I and Appendix A will be reprinted in the newsletter.

Introduction, Acknowledgements, List of Figures, List of Appendices, Chapter I. History of the Bones in the U.S., II. How to Play the Bones, III. Danforth's Style of Playing, IV. Other Styles of Playing, V. A Conversation with Percy Danforth. Appendix A. Bones and Similar Instruments in Other Cultures, B. Biographical Sketches of Nineteenth-Century Bones Players, C. Methodology, D. Sources for Illustrations, and Bibliography organized in seven categories, 1. Africa: Slavery and Indigenous African Musical Practices, 2. Minstrelsy and the Musical Life of Slaves in the U.S., 3. European Folk Traditions in America, 4. Bones and Similar Instruments in Other Countries, 5. Sound Recordings, 6.

History of Bones in the US—Part 2

[Part 1 of this article appear in Vol 8, No 2 issue of the newsletter.]

While there is little evidence to support the African origin theory of the bones, there is enough evidence to outline a fairly complete argument that the bones reached the U.S through British immigrants and later reached Africa through touring minstrel troupes from American and Great Britain.

Soon after minstrelsy became popular in American, American minstrel troupes toured in Great Britain. Minstrelsy quickly caught on there and British troupes sprang up. Subsequently, both American and British troupes traveled to southern Africa to perform in British colonies there. In fact, amateur minstrel shows appeared in Cape Town as early as 1848, and in Durban ten years later, seven years before the first professional minstrel troupe reached Durban. The amateur performance was given by a company which called itself the Ethiopian Serenaders after an American troupe of the same name which had visited London in 1846. This suggest that British citizens who traveled to South Africa brought knowledge of minstrelsy with them, even though professional troupes had not yet toured in South Africa.

In his article *Of Gospel Hymns, Minstrel Shows, and Jubilee Singers: Toward Some Black South African Music*, Dale Cockrell states that nineteenth-century accounts from South African newspapers noted the performance of occasional shows and concerts for nonwhite or mixed audiences. Cockrell suggest that blacks were allowed to attend minstrel shows as well. Cockrell also quotes an article from the *Natal Mercury* of December 28, 1880, recounting a performance by the Kafir Christy Minstrel, a troupe made up of “eight genuine natives, bones and all.” These accounts strongly support the possibility that black South Africans had some contact with minstrelsy.

Cockrell has also found etymological evidence for the European/American origin of bones

found in southern Africa:

In the Killie Campbell Museum in Durban, there is a set of bones, supposedly played on the diamond fields at Kimberly in 1871 by a former Durban resident, a white man to judge from his name. A comparison between these minstrel bones and their likely manner of playing with the “Zulu bones” documented by Kirby in his treatment of the native instruments of southern Africa shows that the instruments are essentially the same. The Zulu name for this instrument—the “amatambo”—suggests that there may have been confusion as to which end man in the minstrel show played “bones” and which one played the “tambo.”

Evidence of influence from American minstrelsy in one former British colony raises the question of whether or not similar influences may be detected in British colonies elsewhere in Africa. Out side of South Africa, no evidence has even been found that documents the presence of the bones (or any other vestige of minstrelsy) in Africa. Evidence strongly suggest that the bones were brought to Africa by touring minstrel troupes. The picture is not complete. However, unless one also examines how and when the bones reached American. While no written documentation has come to light which explicitly states that the bones came to America with European immigrants, circumstantial evidence suggest this as a strong possibility.

Documentation does exist that substantiates the existence of the bones in Western Europe since the Middle Ages. (See Appendix A. *Bones and Similar Instruments in other Cultures.*) What is of particular interest is the use of the bones in Great Britain, particularly among members of the lower classes. It is these people who in all probability brought the bones to American. Such people in Great Britain were part of two musical traditions which were hundreds of years old. One was a tradition of ballad singing and the other an instrumental tradition associated with dancing. From c.1600 the fiddle was a popular instrument used in dance music. Other instruments included the hammer dulcimer, pipes, tin whistle,

“squeeze box,” and a wide variety of small, portable, home-made instruments, including the bones. When members of Great Britain’s lower classes came to American, they brought their music with them.

Immigration from the British Isles to America began in the early seventeenth century and lasted until the mid-nineteenth century. The people under discussion here were not Puritans, but were from the labor, farm, and servant classes. Many came to America as indentured servants, some came to escape poverty and famine, some were criminals sent by Great Britain, while others were political refugees.

Conditions in America were often no better than those in Great Britain. Immigrants from Great Britain’s lower classes tended to settle in remote areas considered undesirable by other people, areas as far removed as possible from urban centers where one faced problems similar to those experience in Great Britain. The hills and mountains of Virginia, North Carolina, Vermont and New Hampshire became the new homes for these people. After the Revolution they moved further west into the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee.

The roots of their culture lay in the nonliterate strata of British society: their music was a part of an oral tradition. When this is considered, along with the fact that they tended to live secluded lives, it is not surprising that accounts of their way of life, including their musical practices, are practically non-existent. Frederic Louis Ritter (1834-1891), one of the first people who attempted to compile a history of American music, was highly misled in this regard. An immigrant to America himself, he was unaware of the musical traditions carried on by British immigrants of the lower classes.

The people’s song is not to be found among the American people. The American farmer, mechanic, journeyman, stage-driver, shepherd, etc., does not sing,—unless he happens to belong to a church-choir or a singing-society: hence, the American landscape is silent and monotonous: it seems inanimate, and imparts a melancholy impress, though Nature has fashioned it beautifully.

Yet evidence that these people had musical traditions of their own is

found in the work of Francis Child (1825-1896) and Cecil Sharp (1859-1924). Child was an American scholar who collected ballad texts in England and Scotland from 1882 to 1898. Englishman Cecil Sharp later collected ballad tunes from the British Isles. Sharp discovered the existence of British ballads in America, and in 1916 began collecting ballad tunes and texts in the southern Appalachian mountains. The ballads collected by Sharp in Appalachia were among those collected by Child in the British Isles, although changes had occurred in the ballads which reflected the immigrants' new experiences in the New World.

Sharp also found dances and dance music from the British Isles preserved in southern Appalachia. The fiddle was the most common instrument used to accompany dance in Great Britain, as well as in America as early as the Seventeenth century. Evidence suggests that other instruments were used as well. According to *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, hammer dulcimers were "almost certainly" introduced in America by English colonists before 1700. Dulcimers were used primarily to play dance music, and were often included in string bands. It is highly likely that people living in Appalachia made their own instruments, although general knowledge of this was not prevalent until the nineteenth century when hammer dulcimers became more popular and were also made by commercial makers.

Just as the dulcimer and fiddle were brought to America by British immigrants, along with a body of ballads, dance music and dances, so could have the bones made their way across the ocean to America. These traditions still exist today in both the U.S. and Great Britain, including the use of bones with different combinations of the instruments named above in the performance of dance music.

Common factors of instrumentation and repertoire may be found in the music of Great Britain's lower classes during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the music of British immigrants who settled in

Appalachia. This, in addition to evidence that the bones were brought to Africa by American and British minstrel troupes in the mid-nineteenth century, is strongly supportive of the theory that the bones were brought to the U.S. by immigrants from the British Isles rather than by African slaves.

The bones have been a part of three musical contexts since they were brought to the U.S., they have been used by black slaves in the South, by performers in the nineteenth-century minstrel show, and by folk musicians in the performance of dance music in the Appalachian area. The role of the bones in each context is unique and warrants close examination.

Like other instruments played by slaves, the bones were made by the slaves themselves. The bones were made with sheep and cattle ribs.

Many contemporary accounts describe the music making activities of black slaves in the South. Such activities took place in the evening when work was done, as well as on Sundays and holidays such as Christmas. The following account was written by Issac Holmes while visiting Louisiana in 1821.

In Louisiana, and the state of Mississippi, the slaves have Sunday for a day of recreation, and upon many plantations, they dance for several hours during the afternoon of this day. The general movement is in what they call the Congo Dance; but their music often consists of nothing more than an excavated piece of wood, at one end of which is a piece of parchment, which covers the hollow part in which they beat; this, and the singing ... of those who are dancing, and of those who surround the dancers ... constitute the whole of their harmony.

Similar accounts also mention the bones, often in combination with the fiddle, banjo, or both instruments. An elderly Virginia woman wrote:

When I was about ten years old a family from Fluvanna County settled within half a mile of us. They had several slaves who sometimes came to our house at night and gave us music, vocal and instrumental, the instruments being banjo, jawbones of horse, and bones (to crack together, two held in one hand.)

In a Northerner's letter written from Savannah, Georgia, dated March 28, 1853, the writer describes Negroes as having "two accomplishments ... —whistling and playing on the bones—both of which are going on under my window at this moment, as they always do."

A resident of Eutaw plantation in South Carolina during the Civil War recalled that every day of Christmas week

In the afternoon, the Negroes danced in the broad piazza until late at night, the orchestra consisting of two fiddlers, one man with bones, and another had sticks with which he kept time on the floor, and sometimes singing.

In addition to impromptu music making at slave gatherings, slave musicians often performed for the entertainment of their masters and their guests. In fact, some slaves were purchased solely for this purpose. Masters sometimes "rented out" their slave musicians to play for other whites.

In 1982 Robert Winans published a study of the prevalence of music among slaves in the mid-nineteenth century, based on musical references in ex-slave narratives collected by the W.P.A. in the 1930's. Winans' study suggests that wherever there were concentrations of blacks in the mid-nineteenth century, fiddle music was common. His study also suggests that the banjo and bones were known throughout the same geographical area as the fiddle, but at a lighter density.

What type of music slaves played is also of importance. Few contemporary accounts exist which describe slaves participating in musical activities of obvious African origin. Such accounts usually date back to the late seventeenth century when slaves were already playing the fiddle. An early account that mentions the bones is yet to be found. Contemporary accounts which mention the bones do not appear until the mid-nineteenth century after the minstrel show had become popular. Rarely were instruments played only to accompany singing; the bones (as well as other instruments—most often the fiddle and/or banjo) were associated with European/American culture.

Information extracted by Winans from the ex-slave narratives includes a list of dance tunes and songs most often remembered by the ex-slaves interviewed.

Turkey in the Straw, Miss Liza Jane, Run Nigger Run, Sally Ann, Arkansas Traveler Swanee River, Molly Put the Kettle On, Sally Goodin, Old Dan Tucker, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Dixie, Cotton Eyed Joe, Hop Light Ladies.

Most of these pieces are also associated with both the nineteenth

(Mescher Tradition—Continued from page 1)

tell you, I'm impressed that Albert could not only figure out how to play them with virtually no help but that he could master them and invent a new way of playing.

Albert developed an advanced style of two handed bone playing. His contribution to bone playing was the development of the offset. The offset is a syncopated rhythm with the right hand playing three beats and the left hand filling in a fourth beat. When the hands are synchronized the rhythm has a unique sound. The offset is great for the verses with a more traditional style used for the choruses.

Jerry also started playing the bones when he was ten years old but he had his Dad to watch and learn from. He made himself a set of bones from a peach crate. At noon and six o'clock he would run into the house, stand in front of the radio in the kitchen and practice with the "Polka Time" broadcast. Albert's dad had bought him a pair of Ebony bones from the Sears and Roebuck catalog so when Jerry got into shop class in high school, he knew what he wanted for a project. His instructor located some Ebony wood and Jerry made himself a great set of bones. He also had a teacher and advisor named Sister Margaret Mary. She felt that Jerry could do well with a speech and demonstration centered on the bones. Sure enough, Jerry did well with the speech and got the highest award available at the state competition, but more than that, he got a de facto agent. Sister Margaret Mary was very instrumental in making it possible for Jerry and his father to play with the Lawrence Welk troupe when they came to Carroll, Iowa.

Finally they entered a competition, held by Vanita Rich, for a chance to audition for the Ted Mack Amateur hour. They won the competition and traveled to New York to try out for the show. They had worked up an arrangement of "The Jolly Polka" with choreography by the Nuns. Dancing the Polka, while playing perfectly synchronized bones, was quite a hit and they were scheduled to be on the show in June 1961. Unfortunately, at the last minute, they couldn't get

permission to use the number for their act – so they had to come up with a new song and arrangement. For the show they played "Under the Double Eagle". Because we were able to find the kinescope of the show in the Library of Congress we have a tape of the show. Albert died in 1967 so I never had a chance to meet him; I'm so glad we have the tape and can enjoy that performance.

Jerry played the drums for a Polka band that played for dances in an around Carroll, Iowa. During many of the sets he would be featured for a special number. In the 1980s he went to the Old Time Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa. He found out that they had a bones contest and he really enjoyed not only the contest but the chance to jam with all of the great musicians that attend the festival. The attendance for the festival is from 30 to 40 thousand participants per year and it draws traditional musicians from around the world. Jerry won the contest and began giving workshops and performing at the festival. It was around this time when Bernie and Jerry began to perform together. But I've left out how Bernie learned to play the bones so I better back up for a minute.

In 1970 Bernie and I moved to Keesler AFB in Biloxi, Mississippi where I was assigned for training. It was about that time that Bernie's airline (Bernie is a Flight Attendant) was hit with a strike and she had a lot of time on her hands. One afternoon she felt as if her Dad were in the room telling her to pick up the bones and give them a try. She had watched Albert and Jerry practice for years, but she had never been able to play the bones. This time she picked them up and was able to get something out of them. She really got excited and asked her Mother to send a complete set of bones. On her visits to Halbur she began getting lessons from Jerry. Her first performance in front of an audience was at Good Shepherd parish in Miami, FL. The parish was having a fund raiser; she asked Jerry to come down and play for the show. Jerry convinced Bernie that they should do something together. Bernie said it would have to be something funny –

so they picked "I like Bananas, Because They Have no Bones". Jerry started the performance with "Red Wing" and then played "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and the two of them finished with "I like Bananas". They were a hit and they were a team. They played the same performance for their high school alumni fund raiser, at Kuemper High School in Carroll, IA.

Jerry encouraged Bernie to come to Avoca, and finally in 1999 she joined him for the Old Time Country Music festival. She got a lot of encouragement from the musicians and fans at the festival and she made the plunge and entered the Bones contest – she won!

The next year she and Jerry gave a workshop and were assigned to perform on many of the stages at the festival. From then on Bernie and Jerry have performed at the festival. Bob Everhart, who began the festival and the association many years ago, has been an avid promoter and supporter of Bernie and Jerry. His dedication to preserving Old Time Country Music and traditional instruments fits in perfectly with Bernie and Jerry's commitment to preserve their family tradition. As Bob has added new festivals, he has asked Bernie and Jerry to perform; most recently, they performed at the festival in Fremont, NB (October, 2006). In April they'll be performing at the Oak Tree Hall of Fame Festival in Anita, IA.

Because Bernie lives in Miami, FL and Jerry lives in Halbur, IA, synchronizing their music beat for beat is a challenge. They can make it work because there are arrangements for each song. Their Dad, Albert, arranged each song and practiced and polished the performance until it was the way he wanted it. He and Jerry then practiced the song until they could play it the same way every time. Some of their Dad's arrangements they like the best are: Red Wing, Hot Time, Four Leaf Clover, In the Mood (by Crazy Otto), Down Yonder and San Antonio Rose. By video taping Jerry on all of these songs and others, they were able to capture the arrangements. Playing with the video, Bernie was able to learn the



Albert Mescher and his seventeen year old son Jerry Mescher performing on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour television show in 1961

arrangements. Bernie and Jerry practice every day on their own and they polish their performance when they are together at the festivals, during family visits and of course at Bones Fest. Sharing the tradition and history of the bones between numbers is spontaneous, but it is based on the work Jerry did many years ago when preparing to speak about the bones.

The tradition continues as they find and arrange new songs, perform, and conduct workshops.

For their work in preserving and promoting this traditional instrument and musical style Bernie and Jerry were inducted in the Hall of Fame. Both Jerry and Bernie have dedicated their Hall of Fame awards to their dad because of his love and passion for the bones, and because of the unique style of bone playing he created. The Hall



Jerry and Bernie performing at NTCMA in Iowa



This old wind-up minstrel bones player toy sold at auction for \$37,500. Found on the internet by Jeff Leffert. For more information, check out bones.jeffleff.com.

of Fame is located in the Pioneer Music Museum in Anita, Iowa. Information about the Hall of Fame and museum can be found on the web: <http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com>.

Bernie and Jerry are active members and supporters of the Rhythm Bones Society. Jerry makes terrific sets of bones out of many different types of wood (of course he prefers Ebony but has been surprised at the quality of bones he can produce with less expensive wood). *Tom Worrell*

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Address Correction Requested