

# Transcript of a Telephone Interview with Bonnie Rideout

S. How did you meet Percy?

B. I was a freshman in college and was fiddling and went out to the Wheatland Festival. My guitar player, Charlie Wilkie, said you've got to meet this guy, he's like an institution out here. His name is Percy Danforth. I said is this the son of a band teacher? Charlie knew his son, Mac, who was a band director with a crew cut and was a strict teacher. I figured Percy was going to be this strict military guy. Turns out he had fluffy white hair and was the most loose, gentle person you would ever want to meet.



I went over and he was doing his bones demonstration, so we sat around and watched. Charlie introduced me to him and we played a tune right there on the spot for his demonstration. He had a real good time playing with me, so we invited him over to our picnic table at the end of the night when everyone was jamming. And we just struck up the most amazing relationship that started from there. He kind of adopted me into his fold like he did to so many people, like a little granddaughter. Wheatland for me was 1982.

I met his wife, Fran, who was an amazing person and composer, and they were living in a Senior place.

He asked me if I would like to join him when he played for seniors. He just reached out to everybody. It didn't matter what age you were. Every person to him was a special, unique miracle, and it didn't matter if it was a little wide-eyed six year old or playing a really top notch professional. We partnered for the seniors together. And he was so proud when he played with the symphony.

I used to go over to his house, and he gave me a lot more lessons. I used to practice where I lived on campus at U of M while going to Music School. I had to walk to the North Campus, and I practiced the bones while I was walking so I'd get good at it - 45 minutes every day. I kept practicing and got good enough to play with him. We'd do little sets together with me playing the fiddle and then we would do bones back and forth.

So then he asked me to go with him to the Wheatland Festival to play with him next year, and then I went to Wheatland every year with him. I drove with him in his big car. I remember one time coming back late at night and he was driving about 20 or 25 miles per hour. This car pulled up and it was a group of guys that had been to the festival, and they didn't know it was Percy driving. They just pulled up right beside him on a two way road. One guy rolled down the window and said "Hey do you need some help." They noticed it was an old guy and they thought he was drunk.

I think my favorite Percy story is at the festival, and it was something you always looked forward to, going to the Festival. It was run by wholesome people (all vegetarian food everywhere). They had been sprout sandwiches. We got our little food coupon that the festival gave us and walked from booth to booth for lunch. Percy would look at the food and say "I don't want that. No, I don't want that." He gets to the very end he just looked at me said "I want a hot dog." That became our joke for ever when we'd go to any concert or festival. He'd say I wonder what the food there's going to be and I know he'd be wanting a hot dog. That is the kind of person he was. He was very funny and super generous with his time. Anybody who wanted a lesson - he wouldn't charge them anything - he was just that kind of

guy. Always accessible, always available.

He sold his own bones. I still have all my Danforth bones that he signed for me. He always signed his name on them for people. I have the soft wood, the hard wood, the whole thing. I play bones on my shows though I am retired from touring.

He was really special and people embraced him. And someday the footage that that my dad took of Percy and that sits in his basement will come to light.

S. Tell me about Fran

B. She was a trained musician and composer. She was more frail and died before Percy. She stayed home while he went gallivanting around. She published some works and played piano beautifully. A very musical family. Mac was a great musician.

S. What were the best festivals you went to?

B. Wheatland by far. I'll look around and see if I can find some pictures. When you drive 40 miles per hour to Wheatland it takes 5 hours and you have a lot of time for talking.

S. San Slomovits took Ray Shairer's tools and is continuing to make Danforth Bones.

B. Fantastic. I really like the soft wood ones because they are not as penetrating when you play with acoustic instruments. They are hard to microphone because you are moving around.

I like sound of the pine ones and I remember him saying hold on cause we'd be tuning and he tune to us. And the whole audience would laugh. Actually he did tune. He knew his bones so well - the design was great. He'd always say fun things from the stage and make people laugh.

S. What was his most challenging piece of music or style of music?

B. He used to tell me about it and I never saw him. One of the highlights was I think it was the Philadelphia Orchestra, and he was filling in. I think that was really challenging, but I don't know what he played. He could have been doing Philip Sousa, but I don't know. I remember he had a terrific time with the percussion section teaching them the bones when they were on break. But it's a good thing to follow up on. I don't know if there is a recording of him.

I found it difficult, and Percy was so good at it, to playing bones slowly in triple time especially like the waltz. It's really easy to play to fast stuff. He had such control.

I remember him setting up his little stand and putting his tape player on. Playing along and drawing people in. He would pass out test bones to everybody to give them a little lesson. That was his stick. Everybody would try and at the end of the session if they wanted to buy a set, they could. Then everyone would turn their bones back in. He would sell some. By the end of the day at these festivals there would be people walking around trying it. He reached out to people that way.

When I was with him I would play with him in place of the tape recorder. It would be a 15 minute set, and it drew more people in since it wasn't just a tape recorder. I just made sure that I played different rhythms for him to show jug tune, triple time and other rhythms.

The Strathspey is conducive with Scottish fiddling with what they call the Scottish Snap. a sixteenth and a dotted eighth. It takes a guitarist a certain amount of time to figure it out what the Strathspey is - it's not an easy thing for a rhythm player to play along with. With the combination of him and Charlie Wilkie, a great rhythm guitar player, it was probably the most challenging thing because Percy had never heard a Strathspey before. So it was kind of

neat to be able to teach him something, but it only took about 10 minutes.

S. His son Mac said Percy never made any real money from bones.

B. It was never about that. He was just so passionate - he had a mission that was to get the bones recognized as a musical instrument and get people playing it. He had no ego. He didn't care whether he played on stage with Joan Baez or someone (She was at Wheatland once, well known but not famous yet). It didn't matter who he was playing with. He would go into schools, nursing homes, or anywhere to get the name out. He'd call me up and say are you busy this weekend. I'd say I have to work until then. He would say "I'll pick you up from work then, and bring your fiddle."

S. His son Mac said he had three occupations, Architect, Engineer, and Teacher, and teacher was by far was his favorite profession.

B. I did go to a couple of schools actually, but those were during the week though, usually classes. He was really good at getting kids all fired up but not out of control. He was a born teacher. He loved being a teacher and he smiled with his eyes. He literally had twinkly eyes, and kind of a mischievous look that he would have. He touched kids that way, but everybody that way.

S. Did he play with well known musicians, Joan Baez?

B. Yes, she was at Wheatland once and he played with her. She was somewhat known, but not yet famous. There would be headliners that would come to Wheatlands and they would invite Percy up on stage with them. He was an institution there and everyone knew Percy. He was invited on stage a lot. I'm pretty sure Marcy Marxer met Percy at Wheatland, but maybe not. He played a lot of festivals, but Wheatland was his big one with people coming from all over.

S. Philadelphia Festival supposedly had a rule where you could only be invited 3 times and Percy came 7 times.

B. Percy was one of the guys that did it so much that people would ask him to join them on stage because it was just so unusual. He'd fit in with anybody. He could play any style and could fit in with them. And he would listen. They would start and if he hadn't played with them before he would just stand and listen until it came around again and then he would just jump in. He would get the rhythms and just fall right in. He always blended well and did not stick out.

S. [Steve read a list of festivals he attended.]

B. He got around. He would also do little things happily in Ann Arbor, the Art Fair and the Ark.

*Steve Wixson, July 19, 2016*