

NICHOLAS DRIVER'S  
BODHRAN & BONES  
TUTOR



Gremlin

# NICHOLAS DRIVER'S BOTHKRAK & BONES TUTOR

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#### i) INTRODUCTION

The first lesson to be remembered is that bones are played with the same action as that of a bell clapper. One bone is struck against the other; they are never rattled together by a vibration of the wrist.

Bones should, if at all possible, be played two to each hand from the start. Double handed playing is the ultimate art, and the interrelationship between the hands increases the versatility and dimension of the sounds that can be produced. If the hands are trained together from the beginning, it will be easier than introducing the other hand later.

Bones are basically the same shape, whether they are wooden, bone, or cowrib. The shape is slightly curved along the length, and thicker at one end than the other. These either natural, or shaped, features are important. The curve is for the reason that, when played with the curves opposite each other, only a small area of contact is made. The thicker end gives weight at the bottom, which helps the swing, and deepens the sound. The action is one of moving the whole arm, and describing an ellipse in the air. Imagine you are holding a hand bell, with the mouth pointing downwards; the bell would have to be rocked to cause the clapper to strike. Instructions given are the same for either hand, but only the right will be illustrated.

#### ii) HOW TO HOLD BONES

Take two bones, one thinner than the other. Place the thinner bone, thin end up, between the first finger and thumb, with the dome of the curve *away* from the thumb. Place the second, heavy bone thin end up between the two middle fingers, with the dome of the curve *towards* the thumb. The thumb bone should be kept at a shorter length than the finger bone, so that the bottom of the thumb bone will be about one inch up the face of the finger bone. Close the finger around the bone. Hold the thumb bone tightly so that it is still, and leave some movement in the finger bone.

(Please see fig j).

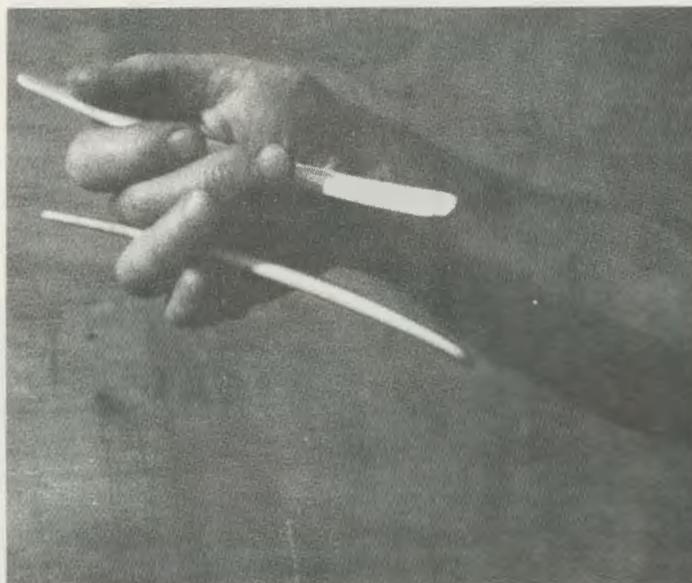


fig.j

#### iii) HOW TO START PLAYING

Do not hold the finger bone too loosely, or it will move out of alignment when trying to play. Now, rotate the arm, so that the loose bone falls away from the thumb bone with gravity. (Please see fig k).

fig.k



Now turn the arm back again, so that it falls back onto the thumb bone. (A small click should be heard). (Please see fig 1).

fig.1



It is this basic clapper action that produces the sound. As the speed of the arm is increased, centrifugal force will replace gravity, and a rhythmical roll will ensue.

It is essential to persevere with this action until the first double beat is achieved. Analyse the exact flick of the arm you used to produce this, and try to repeat it. It is easier to attempt a very fast roll, than to do slow ones, as these require greater control, which will come with practice.

iv) **HOW TO PRODUCE A WHIPCRACK EFFECT**

This is the effect where a single, sharp crack is produced. It is used where a roll will not fit certain sections of the tune, say in jigs. It can also be used to punctuate a roll at the end of a phrase, or as a point on which to finish; i.e. the classic dah di di dah di, dah dah.

Played:- dah di di dah di dah dah

single beats roll 2 whip cracks

The whip crack is made by flicking the wrist away from the body, so that the thick ends of the bones are turned to point towards the body. In this position, the arm stops abruptly and reverses the motion, causing the bones to strike each other with a hard, sharp crack.

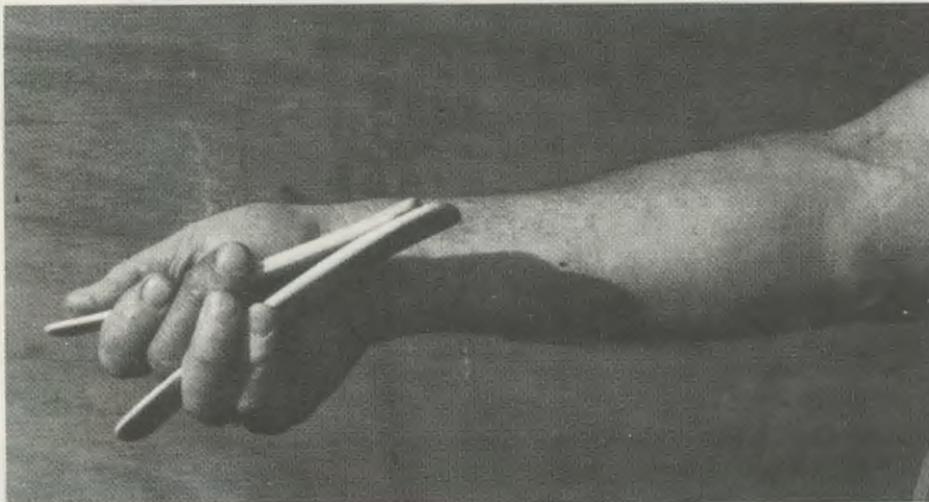


fig.m

v) **PLAYING BETWEEN THE FINGERS**

Once the principle of playing is mastered, try to play bones between a variety of finger combinations. Playing between the middle fingers increases volume as a greater area of contact is made between the bones. Remember, though it may be more visually effective to play up to four bones in each hand, the decoration, and versatility of the player, is reduced; combinations of three or four bones are most suited to slow, steady rhythms, and definitely not to the demands of slip jigs, hornpipes, and some set dances.

(Please see figs m & j).

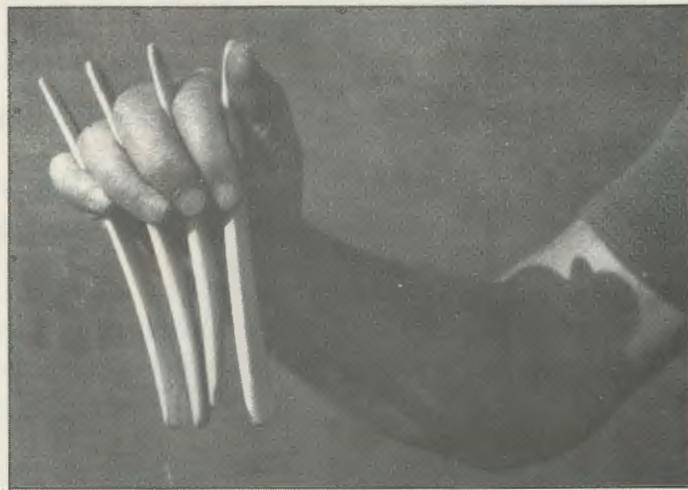
One of the most startling and effective tricks that can be done with bones is to toss them into the air while playing and, of course, catch them without losing the rhythm. My father is a master of this party trick, but the would be performer should practise over a carpet, or else damage may result to a bone, should one land on hard floor.

(Please see fig o).

fig.n



fig.o



*Aubrey Driver*



## vi) THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOTH HANDS AND DECORATION

The normally dominant hand will always do the most playing; it is the hand which will lead. The other hand is no less important, as it can play either simultaneously, and match the rhythms of the dominant hand, or play its own rhythms. (Please see fig p).

The latter is very difficult, but extraordinary rhythmic combinations can be made. The simplest of these is to play one hand half a beat out with the other; if this is done with sensitivity, the apparent speed of vibration is doubled. Other decorations that can be used are to describe a decorative roll with one hand, while maintaining a regular beat with the other, coming in and out with the natural emphasis of the tune.

It is also possible to simulate the rhythmic quality of the bodhrán with bones, breaking away from the rigid pattern every now and then, to introduce a roll. It will be found that the variations in playing are associated with changes in the body's position, and the actual distance the arm is allowed to move.

Each bone in a set will have a different note; by playing different ones together, a variety of sounds can be created. Also, the relative position and length below the hand of each bone alters both sound and volume.

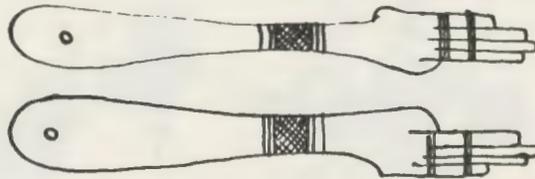
Changes can be made while playing by actually turning the thumb bone on edge during playing, causing a variety of sound changes.

fig.p



iv) ORIGINS OF THE BONES

The Egyptians, with their well-preserved records, give us the earliest dated indications of playing, and from the Ur seal of a small animal playing bones, circa 200 B.C., pictures of bones being played, and actual sets of bones, cover the whole period of this civilisation. (Please see fig q).



*Clappers – CIRCA 1600 B.C. Egypt.*

They appeared in more recent cultures, as a street instrument in the Middle Ages, and particularly in Elizabethan England. It was, however, the minstrel bands of the nineteenth century that brought about the massive popularity of bones. First in America, and then in this country, the art was developed, until the skilled two-handed playing, with its subtle combinations of rhythms, was honed to perfection.

Big minstrel bands had up to 12 bones players, people gave solo performances on the music-hall stage, and the instrument returned to the streets, played by schoolchildren and buskers alike.



*The Christy Minstrels were amongst the best known, and the cult spread to England, where similar bands were set up.*



*Acknowledgements to Hulton Picture Library*

The name “Mr Bones” passed into the language, and in places as far apart as New Orleans, Dublin, and the East end of London, bones were played with a wide variety of musical cultures.

The north of England, with its ancient tradition of clog dancing, found the clog-like sound of bones appealing, and playing on mainly slate bones sets can still be heard in taprooms in this part of the world.

Bones-playing with the steady rhythm of the English tunes was popular, especially in East Anglia, with its tradition of stepping on a tin tray in time to button accordion or hammered dulcimer.

Bones were played with traditional jazz, Cajun music, with mountain music of Virginia and North Carolina, U.S.A., and, of course, to tunes like “Lambeth Walk” thumped out on a piano in the East End.

Ireland is still one of the oldest homes of bones playing, and the Irish developed some very different styles to cope with some of the more complex rhythms that are found in their music.

It is undoubtedly the simplicity and low cost of bones that made them so universally adopted. They can also be played with the traditional music of a variety of countries.

Playing with both hands is, as I have mentioned, the ultimate skill. One hand, makes cross rhythms with the other, and also produces a contrasting sound, all adding to the richness of the performance.

In America, the great two-handed player Percy Danforth, now in his seventies, has done much to revive the interest in playing. He learnt from Negro street players in the South.

I found out from Percy Danforth that the reason the bones were taken up by Negro bands was that they were in fact the only percussion instrument permitted by the slave owners. It was thought that drums would be used to communicate between the plantations and cause possible uprisings. Though no hard facts have come to light as yet, the negro must have brought the bones to the American plantations from North Africa, perhaps a direct line of playing from the Egyptians.

An English player of fifty years' experience is Len Davies. He has recently moved to East Anglia to make violin bows. At sixty he still plays with a determined and aggressive style that is worth both seeing and listening to. He enjoyed an impromptu session with the Chieftains, who, as the leading evangelists of Irish music, have done much to encourage bones playing by featuring the instrument as part of their sound.

Bones, or clappers, are made from two materials; the first, as the name suggests, being animal rib bones, which is the usual primitive form, and suggests that development of this instrument went hand in hand with that of man, from the earliest times. Wood is the other material, 'black bones' being clappers shaped from African blackwood, or ebony. Probably these are the most successful woods for the purpose, although rosewood and boxwood have traditionally been used.

The ultimate material for bones must be whalebone, combining the hardness of bone with the easily worked qualities of wood. For serious playing, wood or whalebone are the best materials, cowsrib proving too uncomfortable between the fingers for sustained playing.

Spoons and castanets are diversifications of the bones and, while both have a valid contribution to make, they do lack the amazing versatility of sound and rhythm it is possible to achieve with the bones.

Bones should correctly be played by using a combination of two, three, or even four in each hand. It is not clear when this method developed, as opposed to banging two bones together, one in each hand, but it must have been a natural progression, through experiment. They are not rattled together by a twitching movement of the hand, but rather swung together, like a bell and clapper. One bone is held firmly, the other left loose, while the hand, wrist and arm describe an ellipse through the air, enabling the loose bone to strike against the firm one. The technique is rather like riding a bicycle; you can either do it, or you cannot, but once the first roll is achieved, the would-be player never looks back.

The sound bones produce cannot be duplicated by any other method, and, regrettably, people still fail to appreciate their scope and versatility, as they are surely the most effective pocket percussion instrument ever conceived by man.

Bones-playing is at last returning to the traditional music scene. My father, Aubrey Driver, and myself were concerned that, with the death of the last old players, the art would die. I am pleased to say that the playing of this ancient instrument is on the increase, and will, I think, survive.

The number of players, young and not-so-young, whom we have encouraged to take up the instrument has revealed much new talent, and those that have stuck with it have proved that it can be done, and done well. Bones truly are an instrument of the people.