

**History of Bone Playing**  
**By**  
**Russ Myers**  
**Presented at Bones Fest II, Greensboro, NC**  
**September 26, 1998**

The only other person that I have known that played the bones was my father. Then I got a copy of a 'History of Bones' by Sue Barber. I got interested in that and went to the Library of Congress. This is a short dissertation on what I have learned about Bone Playing and Bones. First off, what are they. My favorite bones are made from the ribs of an Ox – shortened and sanded down. They are played with one stationary and one that moves making a sound as one bounces against the other.

How old are they and how do we know about them. Well, strange enough this instrument is over 4000 years old. They were recorded in the kingdom of Ur, and about the only person you probably know who came from Ur is the biblical Abraham. He moved out of Ur – maybe there were too many bone players there - they were prevalent at the time. How do we know it – because the only they recorded back then were things that dealt with the kings and rulers or with religion, and bones were associated with religion. Bones were considered something of the dead, and they were used in religious rites honoring the dead or committing someone after burial – things of that nature. They were used in Zoroastrianism that is one of the Persian religions. We also hear about it and have pictures in Egyptian mythology – they were used by Priestess of Isis who was a mother goddess and also in the worship of the God Osiris who was the god of the dead. We see pictures of hieroglyphic drawings on temple walls and on vases of musicians playing lutes, wind instruments and holding a pair of bones in their hands much like we would hold them today. We have no idea if they were used for tapping sounds or what music they play them with.

They were carried over into Greek mythology. They used them for rites of the dead or in springtime for rites of living – at birth. Rome used them because they copied everything the Greeks did. After the Christian era began we find they are recorded by people like Tertullian and Cyprian of Jerusalem being used in early Christian rites of exorcism driving out evil spirits and Satan. Once again a slight connotation with things of the dead.

There are drawings and pictures showing traveling minstrels in Europe. Bones are very portable and can be carried in a hip pocket. They were played by ladies because they were considered delicate instruments. In England and the British Isles today, we find they are still prevalent in English, Scottish and Irish music, especially Irish music in Pub bands. The only physical recording we have in the Library of Congress is the first time there were used in the United States when a German came over and played in a theater in Bronx, New York in 1740 for an evening performance. The Library of Congress shut the book with this story and I could not see anymore, but that was good enough for me.