

How to Play the **Bones**

by
Sue Ellen Barber

In collaboration with
Percy Danforth

Audio

**Listen to Percy
Play to "Miss
Monahan's Reel"**

**Audio will stop
when you leave
the Page or
right click audio
box and select
"Disable Content"
or select "Full
Screen Multimedia"
for audio controls**

**Front Hall Records
FHR DP-1000
Book and Cassette**



1. INTRODUCTION TO PERCY DANFORTH AND THE BONES

This is your formal introduction to bones virtuoso Percy Danforth and to his lusty American minstrel show style artistry with the bones. Percy's brand of bones playing is descended in a direct line from that of Mr. Bones, one of the stock characters in the enormously popular blackface minstrel show of Nineteenth Century America. Authors of the day describe intricate bones routines which imitated running horses, reveille, drums, and a variety of other phenomena. Besides being a comic, Mr. Bones was a singer-dancer-musician whose bones playing added rhythmic solidity and variety to the musical numbers.

Bones playing was not limited to the stage, however. In its heyday in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, bones were found as part of plantation, street corner, and dance hall bands, in schoolyards, marketplaces, social gatherings, and just about everywhere else that people gathered to have a good time. And that's how Percy Danforth learned to play, from black youths who played the bones and danced, in the best tradition of Nineteenth Century popular musical entertainment.

Although primarily associated with black slaves and blackface minstrel shows, the bones probably came to the New World with immigrants from Northwestern Europe. They have been played there in pub bands and at dances and festivals for centuries. (They still are.) Throughout the Middle Ages there are scattered references to bones playing in odd corners of extant literature; there are even a few illuminations and paintings that depict bones players. Bones were also used throughout Europe in the early Middle Ages by lepers who were obliged to sound them to warn the frightened populace of their approach. Bones are shown on Greek urns and Egyptian bas reliefs. They have even been excavated from prehistoric Mesopotamian graves.

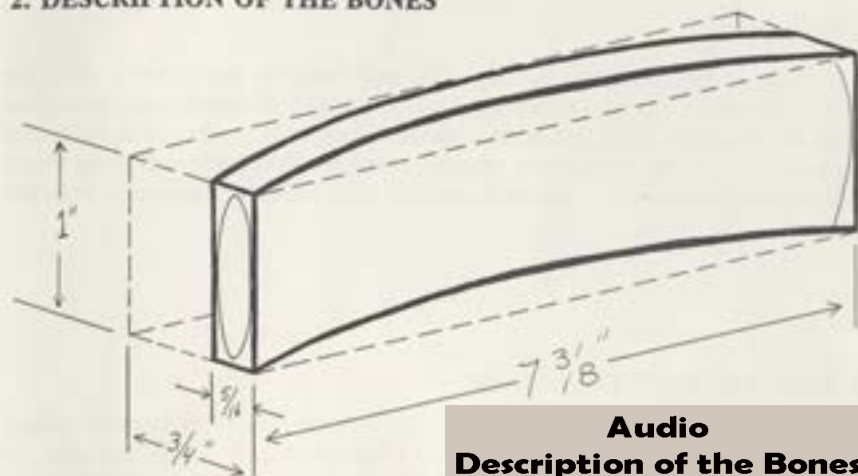
So you see, by learning to play the bones, you are joining an ancient and proud fraternity that stretches all the way back to mankind's prehistoric beginnings.



Audio Percy's Personal Rhythm Bones Story

"The Bone Player" painted by William Sidney Mount in the 1850's, from *Black Magic* by Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, 1967.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE BONES



Bones are available commercially from some music stores and by mail. Danforth Bones designed by Percy himself and built to his specifications are for sale at selected music stores, at some folk festivals or through the mail from Andy's Front Hall, RD 1 Wormer Rd., Voorheesville, NY 12186 or direct from Percy himself at 1411 Granger, Ann Arbor, MI 48104.

If you feel adventuresome, you might want to try making your own bones. You may select any one of a variety of woods. Shape them to the specifications shown above. Remember that different woods will give you quite different sound qualities. (Listen to Section 3 of this tape where Percy demonstrates the various woods to get a better idea how they sound.) If you want to make bone bones, cut rib or shin bones of cattle or sheep to proper length, scrape them clean, and then bleach and dry them in the sun. Finally, sand and polish your bones with emery cloth until they are smooth.

3. DEMONSTRATION OF VARIOUS KINDS OF BONES (Cassette only)

4. GETTING READY TO PLAY

Generally use two pairs of bones at a time. Consult the various photos in this brochure for a view of the proper playing position. Percy always stands up to play the bones because his style is an extremely active one. It is possible to play the bones sitting down; contemporary British and Irish players usually perform that way. They generally use only one pair of bones in one hand and their style is much less flamboyant than Percy's.

When you begin to learn the bones the movements will be more easily learned with the hand that you commonly use, but that can also produce problems later on. Playing the bones requires a high degree of ambidexterity. Do as Percy suggests and use both hands from the beginning. Your "slow" hand may require some extra practice, but get it working right away. You may want to alternate the movements as a means of checking up on the adequacy of both hands. Some of the exercises later in the tape and in this brochure will help you with that.

5. RELAXING

Look at Percy's face, hands, arms and body in the photos. He's the picture of concentration, relaxation, and enjoyment, all at the same time. You must develop your technical skills with the bones so that you are confident of your abilities. At the same time, always remember that you are making music and entertaining people—yourself and others. That's the real secret to bones virtuosity.

Audio **Body Position and General Philosophy**

6. HOW TO HOLD THE BONES

Study these photographs carefully. Note the details of the proper method of holding the bones and compare them with the description on the tape. As you teach yourself to hold the bones, verify your hand position by comparing it with these photos. For best playing results, your hand position should resemble Percy's as closely as possible.



Position of the moveable bone.

Hold this bone between the third and fourth fingers, with the tip extending $\frac{1}{4}$ inch above the knuckles. Pull the ring finger back, place it on the edge of the bone, and press the bone into the pad of the hand. (It should *never* touch the palm.)



Audio **How To Hold** **Rhythm Bones**

Position of the stationary bone.

Place this bone between the second and third fingers. It should extend about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch above the knuckles. Jam the bone against the heel of the hand and cup the hand around it.



Both bones in proper playing position.

Keep the tips one-eighth to one-sixteenth inch apart. Press the fingers together to help hold the bones in place. When you move the wrists, arms, and shoulders, the spring or moveable bone strikes the anvil or stationary bone.

Audio Tap Demonstration With Mudgy Waltz

7. THE TAP

Note: for clarity, Percy uses only one pair of bones for these instructions.

Before snap of hand.



After snap of hand.



The hand snaps outward, away from the body.

Remember to make the tap movement sharp, quick, and well-defined. It's not a big, fancy motion but it must be an accurate one in order for the tap to sound. Also, be sure to keep your arms away from your body, elbows down, wrists and bones up, with everything relaxed.

On the next page are two exercises that might help you as you learn the tap.

The Tap—Exercises:



Notice that when used with music, the tap is a simple, on-the-beat reinforcement of the basic rhythm of the piece.

Problems with the tap:

1. You are holding the bones too closely together. They can't produce sounds because you've already got them touching one another.
2. You are holding the bones too far apart. They can't strike together adequately because the distance between them is too great.
3. You are holding the stationary bone too loosely. Both bones are fluttering about in your hand rather than being under control. Recheck the photos in Section 6 if you are having problems.
4. You are holding the moveable bone too tightly. It should be like a spring—the tension on this bone must be "springy" enough to let it move in a controlled manner. (Percy left Problem 4 off the tape, but it is important nevertheless.)

Music: Mudgely Waltz

Audio Tap Demonstration With Mudgy Waltz

8. THE ROLL



Arm positions during the roll. Notice that the tips of the bones remain in the same place as the arm and wrist rotate from the elbow and the shoulder.

Position 1.



Position 2.

Audio Learning The Roll



Position 3.

Those of you with formal musical training may notice that the sound of the roll is really a continuous chain of triplets with an accent on the first note of each group of three.



As you learn this movement, don't try to *force* it into a triplet pattern. That will happen naturally since the motion used to produce the sound consists of three positions (see the photos). When the roll is speeded up to a publicly presentable level, you won't hear the triplet pattern so clearly, but it is still there. Listen to the demonstration with the music on the tape and you'll hear how it works. The most important thing to remember here is that for most people, mastering the roll takes time. Review your holding position (Section 6) and the instructions for the roll. Don't tighten up if it doesn't happen right away. That will only make the movement harder to find. Stop, relax, loosen up, and then try again after a while. As Percy says, all of a sudden—there it is!

Music: Mudgey Waltz

Audio Learning The Roll

SIDE TWO

9. PROBLEMS WITH THE ROLL

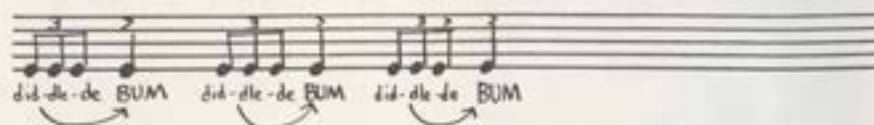
1. Be sure the bones aren't touching. They should be about one-eighth of an inch apart.
2. Remember, if they're too far apart they won't make a sound either.
3. The stationary bone is not anchored in your hand. It must become a "part of your hand," as Percy mentioned on the tape.
4. Be sure you're not flipping the ends of the bones toward you. Remember the circle of fingers talked about earlier. Don't let this illustration tighten you up. The ends should remain in *relatively* the same position while the hand rolls over and over.
5. It's possible you are not relaxed enough from the shoulder. Keep loose.

Audio Problems With The Roll

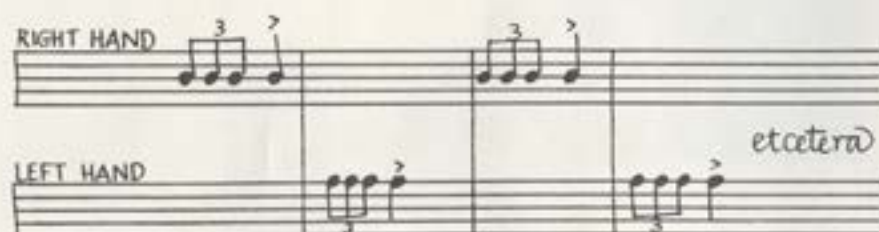


10. VARIATION I

This is what this rhythm looks like written down:



It's really a triplet pick-up note leading into a strong beat. The entire variation unit should head toward that accented beat. Be sure to practice this variation with both hands. Try alternating them, like this:



Remember, the "bum" is actually the down beat, or first beat of the measure. The triplet is the up or off beat.

Music: Temperance Reel

**Audio
Variation I**

**Audio
Variation I With Temperance Reel**

11. VARIATION II

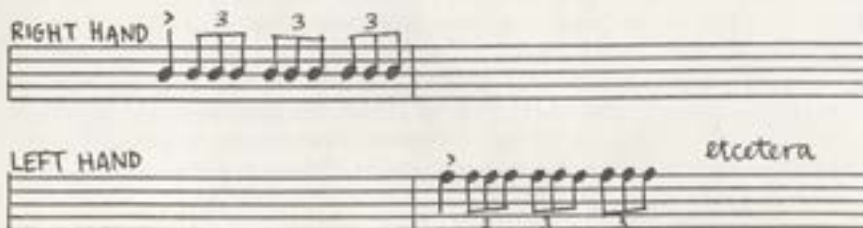
Here it is in rhythmic values:

Audio Variation II



Again, this variation is a combination of accented beats and triplets.

Try this:



It should be stressed that these two variations are only that—two possibilities. Many more exist. You can hear some of these as you listen to the various cuts on the tape. And as we've said before, use your own imagination. Find your own favorites.

Music: Temperance Reel

Audio Variation I And 2 Summary

12. ADVANCED DEMONSTRATION OF THE ROLL

Music: Temperance Reel

Audio **Temperance Reel With Variations**

13. USING TWO PAIRS OF BONES

Listen carefully to this tune and you can hear how the different rhythmic patterns fit together in the context of an entire tune. When you play the bones with music, which you will of course want to do, always listen carefully to the beat or tactus (to use the fancy word) of the music. It's very important that the rhythms you play on the bones fit appropriately with a particular piece. Even if you have no formal musical training (Percy doesn't, and it's not really necessary to have it to be a good bones player), you can tell with your ear when a bones rhythm doesn't sound right with the music. Musical bones playing is far more than just "rattling the bones." You need to be creative in your rhythmic constructions and sensitive in your applications of these possibilities to music.

Music: Parry Sound Reel

Audio **Playing With 2 Pair Of Rhythm Bones**

14. THE CRESCENDO



This is one of the few exceptions to the rule that the basic position of the two bones does not change and that you do not manipulate the bones with your fingers. Producing a crescendo does require some *slight* modifications of bones position. Consult the photos for the relative position of the two bones as your dynamic moves from pianissimo (very soft) to fortissimo (very loud).

Music: Golden Slippers

Pianissimo.



Audio The Crescendo



Fortissimo.

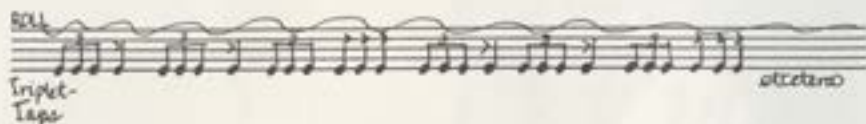
15. RAGTIME

This is the epitome of bones playing. It's not for the novice performer. On the other hand, don't be afraid to try it. You can use some of the simpler patterns as well as the complicated moves Percy demonstrates here. This is where ambidexterity is absolutely essential. It's the bones equivalent of being able to rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time, and at high speed. That's why Percy advocates practicing with both hands from the outset.

Musically, it's almost impossible to analyze these complicated syncopations and cross rhythms. You should notice, though, that the two-handed patterns are cumulative, which makes them sound more complicated than they really are. For example, one hand is rolling (Section 8) while the other hand executes a triplet upbeat to an accented tap.



Or a slow roll combines with a series of triplets and taps.



As always, there are numerous other possibilities which you can discover on your own. Listen to Percy's explanations and demonstrations and then try various movements. It might also help to practice slowly at first, and gradually increase the speed of the patterns.

Work up to ragtime. It's a lot of fun and rewarding both for you as a musician and for your audience as spectators.

Music: Stoptime Rag

**Audio
Ragtime Example**

**Audio
Stoptime Rag**

16. TUNES FOR LISTENING AND INSPIRATION

Mudgey Waltz, McCusker's Delight, Miss Monahan's Reel

Each of these tunes has a different underlying rhythmic structure and therefore requires different bones playing techniques. Rather than try to analyze the specific bones patterns, just listen to the cuts a number of times to get the feel of what's happening musically. The interpretations presented here are

Mudgy Waltz

McCusker's Delight

Miss Monahan's Reel

by no means the only ones possible. They are simply Percy's performances on one particular occasion. Most likely, his next performance of these same tunes would contain some differences.

With that idea in mind, this is a good time to stress again the importance of sensitivity, imagination, and creativity in superior bones playing. Without all these qualities, your bones playing will not reach the heights it can and should.

There are several other considerations to keep in mind at all times as you master the bones.

1. They are a musical instrument and are used to best effect with musical accompaniment. Start working with music as soon as you achieve some competence with basic bones movements. Work with many kinds of music and develop your skills with all of them. The types of music demonstrated on this tape are not exhaustive; they merely present a sample of some of the possibilities.

2. Bones playing does require technical skill, and that means practice. Keep working with your bones, perhaps a bit each day, and you will acquire the necessary technique. Also remember that these things take time. Be patient with yourself.

3. Bones playing also requires the expenditure of physical energy. Percy recommends standing up as he does to play and getting thoroughly involved with your work. The photographs below will give you an additional idea of some of the positions you will assume while playing—at least when you gain a level of proficiency that approaches that of Percy Danforth.

4. Finally, bones playing is, or should be, a lot of fun for both you and your audiences. You can see by the expression on Percy's face how much he enjoys himself. You can too. **RELAX, PRACTICE, AND ENJOY!**



Percy Danforth demonstrates the bones for Sue Barber.

Percy Danforth came into our lives at The Ark, a coffeehouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Our band, Fennig's All-Stars, was playing at the Ark and a mutual friend, Tony Barrand, had suggested to Percy that we would make good music for bones playing, and so Percy played a few tunes with us and knocked everyone's socks off with his energetic, flamboyant bones playing. Since then our paths have crossed at many festivals: Fox Hollow, Hartford, Connecticut, Mariposa, and the National Folk Festival where we have shared music. We are always amazed at Percy's enthusiasm and patience while teaching hundreds of young people, young and old, to play the bones. Out of his enthusiasm came his own design and production of wooden bones, both soft pine and hardwoods. As far as we know he is the only manufacturer and distributor of wooden bones in the U.S.

Percy has always wished that his pupils had something to take home with them to help keep alive the Danforth enthusiasm so that bones wouldn't get relegated to the back of the family junk drawer, for above all Percy really believes that playing the bones makes music, not just rhythm.

So here is the result of our efforts. Percy's personality shines through on the cassette tape, and the book and pictures will help the beginner understand the basics.

Our thanks to Sue Barber who took an interest in Percy and his bones playing while a graduate student in ethnomusicology at University of Michigan. Her script puts into words Percy's instructions for playing the bones.

Andy and Bill Spence

BOOK:

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CASSETTE (FHR BP-1000):

Produced by Bill Spence, Percy Danforth and Sue Barber.

Recorded by Bill Spence.

Music by Bill Spence, George Wilson and Toby Fink.

"Stoptime Rag" played by B.C. Moss.

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