



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 10, No. 1 2008

In this Issue

John Henry
'Bones' Nobles

Review of the
movie 'Bones'

Review of the
movie 'SNO-
LINE

Bones Fest XII
Preliminary
Plans

Dennis Riedesel
In His Own
Words

Dave Boyles
Make the Front
Page

Columns:

Executive Direc-
tor

Editorial

Letters to the
Editor

Tips & Tech-
niques—Playing
Eight Bones
Simultaneously

Website of the
Quarter

Recording of the
Quarter

Bones Calendar

Future Issues

How Much
Mondy Do
Rhythm Bones
Players Make?

Executive Director's Column

This issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player* brings the promising news that Bones Fest XII will be held in St. Louis on the banks of the Mississippi River. Great news, which will help us to reconnect with our roots, and the history of bone playing as it was undoubtedly done on the great river boats.

Each time the Fest moves to a new part of the country, it brings with it the character of the history in the area it is based, and the unique possibility of the people of that area.

How the bones have intertwined in the history of this country was one of the things which has always drawn me to them. Whether it is the minstrel shows associated with the south, or the Maritime traditions of New Bedford, the bones are nestled in there, creating a link between us and bone players of the past. Thanks to host Spike Bones

and co-host Scott Miller for getting it done!

As gratifying as this is, it was a difficult process and one that almost resulted in no Bones Fest this year. Since Ev Cowett invited a group of bone players over his house to create the tradition of Bones Fest, it has relied on the members' willingness to put the time, energy, and work into creating that magical experience we have all come to expect over the years.

But for Bones Fest to continue, it will take that special person or group of bone players to take on that responsibility. Of the eight Bones Fest hosts, two have done it multiple times and at least two others are seriously considering it for the future.

I do think, though, we need to take a hard

(Continued on page 2)

John Henry 'Bones' Nobles

Bones Nobles was a legend in Beaumont and around the state of Texas. He played with the likes of Gatemouth Brown and Clifton Chenier. He appeared in three films, and one titled *Bones* is a documentary about him. He was profiled on the Real People television program and by Charles Kuralt in one of his *On the Road* television segments. He was invited to appear on the Johnny Carson television show but did not because he did not like to fly. I suspect that because he would not fly, he never gained national recognition, so that people, including rhythm bones players, who should have heard about him never did.

John Henry Nobles, Jr., was born in Opp, Alabama on April 19, 1902. His father, John Henry Noble, was a preacher, and his mother, _____ Beaty, was a Cherokee/Choctaw Indian.

John, Jr. moved to Beaumont in 1922 and married his wife, Virgie, the same year. He was a truck driver and later owned a BBQ restaurant.

I could not find out how he learned to play the bones. His daughters say he taught himself how to play, but I suspect he first saw someone perform.

He could always be found at just about any festival or celebration. He especially loved playing for children, and put in frequent appearances at local schools.

The following is an excerpt from an interview by Alan Govanar, from his book, *Texas Blues: The*

Rise of a Contemporary Sound (Texas A&M University Press, 2008.)

"I don't care how much rhythm we had. We didn't have no way to let it out. My dad was making fifty cents a day. Three dollars for six days. There wasn't no money to buy musical instruments. The only way for us to let out our rhythm out was to find us some

(Continued on page 7)



'Bones' Nobles and Charles Kuralt during shooting of *On the Road* television program. Photo by Rick Campbell and courtesy of the Beaumont Enterprise

Editorial

I had never heard of John Henry 'Bones' Nobles. Member Dutch Koop sent me an article on 'Bones' from a book titled *Meeting the Blues: Interviews with Legends and Friends!* by Alan Governar.

I immediately contacted Alan for permission to reprint part of his interview and also the Tyrrell Historical Library in Beaumont, TX who sent me four newspaper article on him from the Beaumont Enterprise. I contacted his daughters, who also play the bones, and learned a lot about Bones. I later found Carol Munday Lawrence who made a film titled *Bones* featuring the story of Bones Nobles. I will try and bring a copy to play at Bones Fest XII. He has a unique sound to his bones playing and you may be able to hear it on the Website of the Quarter. I hope you enjoy his story.

There is a review of member Yirdy Machars's new CD on Page 4. Yirdy had some health problems this past year, but is doing better. He probably will not make it to the All-Ireland Bones Competition, but hopes to make it to the Danish Music Awards where his BoneZone band has been selected to play a short set.

Yirdy Machar taught a workshop on playing four bones in each hand at Bones Fest IX. I asked him to write a Tips & Technique column and as you will read, there is more to it than just banging four or eight bones together.

I tried Yirdy's technique and I'm impressed. I didn't have a lot of trouble learning the basics, but keeping four bones aligned will take some practice. Also the skin between my 3rd and 4th fingers is a bit tender as it has never had a bone pressed against it.

Dennis Riedesel is considering hosting Bones Fest XIII in Texas, so it seemed like a good time for us to get to know him. See his story on Page 6.

This issue is a bit late so we could include preliminary plans for Bones Fest XII in St. Louis in October. It was worth the wait as you'll see on Page 3. Spike Bones is the host and Scott Miller is co-hosting

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

look at the process of how the Fest is created each year. From its inception it was a "labor of love" by people who were so excited by the prospect of the event, that they couldn't wait to be involved in it.

From those sparse beginnings we have grown to a sizable organization which has members in all sections of the country and around the world.

The board can take a more formal approach, create a committee, delegate responsibility, but in the end it requires someone willing to take on the host role, and put in the hard work and dedication to make it work.

Anyone who has attended a Fest has experienced that special event that draws each of us back year after year.

But we will need you, the membership, to step up to ensure this fellowship continues. There is one serious possibility for next year, and talk of a future Fest in Ireland.

I would, though, ask each of you to take a look at how you might be able to make sure this special time continues long into the future. After all, it's your party. *Steve Brown*

Letter to the Editor

Please find enclosed the promised DVD of Cliff Wood playing the bones at his blind home [Pocklington House] when he was one hundred years old.

The lady who is interviewing is my amazing friend Alison Wood who lives at the same blind home and is in her nineties. She has paid for all the filming and DVD production as she passionately wants a record kept for posterity about this amazing man.

Jean Wheeler

[It is great to see a person playing bones as well as Cliff did at 100 years of age, and I will bring the DVD to Bones Fest XII for all to see. Read Cliff's interesting life story in Vol 3, No 3. Cliff died in September 2003 at age 103, and played bones until a few weeks before his death.]

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 10, No. 1
First Quarter Quarter 2008
ISSN: 1545-1380

Editor
Steve Wixson
wixson@chattanooga.net

Executive Director
Stephen Brown
Bones@crystal-mtn.com

Web Site Coordinator
Jonathan Danforth
webmaster@rhythmbones.com

Board of Directors
Steve Brown, Executive Director
Everett Cowell
Jonathan Danforth
Gil Hibben, Assistant Director
Mel Mercier
Jerry Mescher
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer

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

Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the rhythmbones.com website.

Bones Fest XII. October 17-19, 2008. Preliminary details in this newsletter.

NTCMA and Bones Contest. August 25-31, 2008, this year in LeMars, Iowa. For the last two years the bones contest was cancelled due to not enough competitors. If rhythm bones players do not support it, this unique contest might go away.

Website of the Quarter

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKqzVG2756U&feature=related

John Henry 'Bones' Nobles and Taj Mahal on Utube. There is a 6 minute excerpt from the movie *Bones* reviewed on Page 5. This is an illegal video that may be taken down at any time so look at it as soon as the newsletter arrives. Bones Nobles has a unique and interesting style.

An easy way to find it is to Google "John Henry Nobles."

Bones Fest XII Preliminary Plans

All aboard for Bones Fest XII, October 17-18-19, 2008 in St Louis Missouri! Just like all of our past Bones Fests, this Fest will be one to remember. Mark your calendars, we hope your bones will be there for the first Bones Fest west of the Mississippi.

Thanks to my co-host, Scott Miller, we have procured the conference center on the south campus of the University of Missouri at St. Louis. This facility includes:

A. THE MUSEUM ROOM: This large room will remain open to the public from Friday noon to Sunday noon and will contain, 1)Registration table for RBS, Bones Fest XII, Bones University workshops, tickets for The Saturday night public concert. 2) Bones Market Place. 3) Bones library. 4) Educational exhibits and Bones museum.

B. A BEAUTIFUL 350 SEAT THEATER, for our Friday and Saturday presentations.

C. CLASSROOMS, for our Saturday morning workshops. We will call these sessions our "Bones University" or for short, "Bone U."

D. A 24 ROOM RESIDENTIAL FACILITY with two lounges and a courtyard for boning. Each room has 2 beds so choose your roommate. The rate is only \$18 per night per person, Friday and Saturday nights only...no alcohol.

E. A LARGE ROOM AND CATERING SERVICE for Sunday morning brunch.

F. A LIGHT RAIL TRAIN STATION; This service is fast, clean, safe and secure commuter service has you at the airport in 10 minutes, Union Station and AMTRAK in 20 minutes and to the riverfront hotel in 30 minutes.

G. LOTS OF FREE PARKING, on the University as well as downtown. The University of Missouri at St. Louis campus, The Crown Plaza Hotel, and the river front are all quickly and easily accessible by auto from Interstate 70.

On the other end of the rail line (overlooking the mighty Mississippi

river front and the majestic Gateway Arch) the Crown Plaza Hotel has offered to be the Bones Fest official hotel and has blocked 10 suites for our members. These \$350/night suites are being offered to us for only \$110/per night. Some suites have balconies and several rooms and kitchenettes. All have great views!

PREFEST EVENT, THURSDAY, October 16, we will have a pre-fest party beginning in the grand lobby and bar of the Crown Plaza, 5:30 PM, opening with a press conference for the local media. After meeting the press and media we will cross the street to an Irish bar for boning, jamming, and celebrating. Then down the hill to Laclede's Landing for more boning fun.

SATURDAY AT HIGH NOON we will gather in mass with a banner and bones at the south campus train station, hop onboard, and train to the famous Union Station. There we will present a public performance and eat. (12:00 to 2:00pm)

Next we take a short march through the park to the Soldier's Memorial for our second public performance. The Memorial will provide us with restrooms and other facilities as needed. (2:00 to 4:00pm)

From the Soldier's Memorial we parade east down the mall, through the famous courthouse (Dred Scott decision), through the Gateway Arch for our riverfront public performance. Then out on the riverboat "Tom Sawyer" for a little excursion. (4:00- 6:00pm)

Everyone will have two hours to eat and return to our campus theater for our Saturday night, open to the public, grand show at 8:00pm. Later there will be lots of jamming. Well that is an overview of Bones Fest XII. Be there or be square. Bring your friends and family, there is something for everyone to do in St. Louis. Contact me with questions or to volunteer at 773-787-7778 or spikebones2002@yahoo.com.

Meet me in St Louis, Bless your bones. *Spike Bones*

Bones Fest XII

October 17-19, 2008

St. Louis, MO

Host: Spike Bones

Co-Host: Scott Miller

Preliminary details
in this newsletter

**Contact Spike at
773-787-7778 or
spikebones2002@yahoo.com
for more information**

Shorty Boulet A Legend



Country Cookin', a brand new summer 2007 musical review, was at Whitefield's Weathervane Theatre, and featured a rocking band with local and company musicians including Dan and Ben Salomon, Ben Natti, Nate Pearson, James Sullivan, David McDonough, Jamie Feinberg and Elaina Cope. They were joined by North Country legend [and Rhythm Bones Society member] Shorty Boulet. Photo copyright 2007 by Mark Winter and used with permission

Recording of the Quarter

The CD that Yirdy Machar mentioned in his Letter to the Editor in last quarter's newsletter arrived today, and it is one of the best rhythm bones CD that I have heard (and I've heard some good ones.) There are rhythm bones on all but two tracks and those have spoons. One track has one of the best rhythm bones solos I've heard. There is variety in textures and rhythms that are most entertaining.

The CD is titled *BoneZone in Session*, and BoneZone is the name of his new group. The www.folkshop.dk website, where you can order the CD, describes them as four young Danish musicians who have joined forces with Scottish singer and bones-player Yirdy Machar. The liner notes describe BoneZone as a musical playground where tradition meets new ideas without changing its original form. I say it's a CD that most rhythm bones players will enjoy.

The other band members are Jonas Fromseier on banjo and mandolin, Christopher Davis Maack on fiddle, Rasmus Zeeberg on guitars and mandolin and Steffan Sorensen on double-bass and piano. They are Danish, but they play Irish and Scottish music.

Yirdy attended Bones Fest IX and taught a workshop on how to play with four bones in each hand (See the Tip & Technique column to the right) He also opened the Saturday night public performance and set a great tone for the evening. He attended the National Traditional Country Music Festival and won the World Bones & Spoons Contest. He is an outstanding rhythm bones player, and plays a variety of instruments. Hi is an entertainer.

There is a bonus track not described on the liner notes. It begins with rain and thunder followed by a music box and Yirdy on rhythm bones. Again a quite nice track.

Go to www.folkshop.dk to order the CD. For English text click on the British flag in the upper left corner. Scroll down until you see the Bone-Zone CD. Click on Add to Basket and follow instructions. *Steve Wixson*

Tips & Techniques Playing Eight Bones Simultaneously or *The Full House*

Firstly, I start by describing how the bones are held 1:) 2:(3:(4:(, i.e., the thumb-bone held with both ends pointing towards you, and the other three bones the opposite way with both ends pointing away from you)(((. This is especially important if your bones (like mine) are not identical.



I have also set small notches on the top of each bone i.e.: v, vv, vvv, vvvv which assures that the bones are always held in exactly the same position every time. You can also mark them, at least one set with a felt marker to distinguish left from right hand.

I have always kept my set that are marked in this way separate, and used only for playing the "Full House". They are Nick Driver Musical Bones which are perfectly suited for this style of playing. Unfortunately they are not available any more. Any other shin bones or wooden ones would suffice as they are generally thinner and normally of an even thickness.

One of the techniques I suggest in my workshops is that you make a small notch on the outside edge of each bone. This is made so you can feel that your fingers are in the correct position (one on each bone). The bones are then released individually by taking the relevant finger off the notch. Starting by holding the first three bones firmly (like the thumb bone in normal playing) i.e. index, middle and ring fingers placed on the notches and slightly pressing them into the palm of your hand so you are

actually playing one bone (under your little finger) against three (stationary) bones. This will give you quite a "light" sound.

The next finger is also removed



from the notch giving you a "rounder" sound with two playing on two bones. The removal of the small, middle and



index fingers gives you what I call "The Full House" effect with the three bones simultaneously playing on the thumb bone.



This is best practiced using rhythmic runs for example: tick/tick/tickity-tick/tickity-tickity-tick and repeating them while changing finger-pressure alternatively, 1-3, 2-2, and 3-1. Running this sequence gives you a nice run-up to a crescendo in the piece you are playing. The real *Full House* is when you achieve the same with both hands playing all eight bones at the same time.



Good Luck, Happy Practicing, and “MAY THE LIGHT SHINE THROUGH YOUR BONES”. As Aye, Yirdy ‘MacBones’ Machar

Review of the Film *Bones*

Bones is a documentary film about John Henry ‘Bones’ Nobles who is the subject of the feature article beginning on Page 1. It was produced and directed by Carol Munday Lawrence who as an African American artist and independent film maker creates works to empower and celebrate her people.

I spoke with Carol via telephone about her film. She was a producer and wanted to direct a film. A friend of hers in Beaumont, Texas suggested Bones, and she went there to meet him. She quickly discovered he was a real visual character and would be a good subject for a film..

She invited folk/blues musician Taj Mahal to join the project and they went to Beaumont and shot the film. Carol said, “It’s a real funky little film, you know, and it’s totally unpretentious. It’s full of music. I think you will like it.”

The film opens with Bones leaving his home and driving through his neighborhood playing bones. The scene changes to three guys and Bones playing dominos and talking about bones and things.

Bones’ daddy made 50 cents a day and could not afford a musical instrument. Bones says, “I had a beat in me” and bones was one way he let it out.

The next scene show Bones buying fruit at an outdoor market. He starts playing and gets one man to dance. He then teaches a couple of people how to play the bones.

At one time he was a sort of foot doctor and the next scene shows him working on the foot of a friend and

talking about life. He comments about himself, “Everything I do is unique.”

One of his daughters remembers that he played bones all of his life. All of his children and many grandkids play the bones.

He then goes fishing which he had done every Tuesday for thirty years noting that when he was a kid he used bent straight pins—a hook was a luxury.

He then drives to the airport again playing his bones. A plane lands and Taj Mahal exits the airplane. They introduce themselves to each other and then drive to Bones’ house where he is introduced to Bones’ family.

They play a song together and Bones plays a great combination of taps, duples and triplets. He also occasionally uses his other hand to slap the bones together (Bones play bones one-handed). They play a second song together and it is better than the first with Bones playing a nice break.

Taj Mahal tells Bones that one of the things that he’s been doing in his life is trying to preserve some of these traditions. He says, “I’ve heard about people like you, but this is my first time [seeing a bones player].”

The scene moves to the backyard where Bones is barbequing some of his homemade sausage. His family of children and grandchildren are gathered. There is eating, playing and talking going on. Taj Mahal brings out his guitar and they collaborate on third song, Stagger Leaf.

Originally a 16mm color film, it is now packaged as a video about 30 minutes in duration. It was illegally bundled with a film titled *Blues Like Sunshine in Rain*. I found the film *Bones* in a few libraries. A six minute except with the three songs is now illegally showing on Utube. Carol holds the copyright to the film, and it may be possible that she will re-release it. I hope we can show it at Bones Fest XII. *Steve Wixson*

Review of the Film *SNO-LINE*

This is a 1989 B-movie shot in Beaumont with John ‘Bones’ Nobles in a unique role.

It tells the story of small time New York racketeer trying to setup a drug operation in a Texas Gulf Coast town. About 20 minutes into the film, there is a brief cameo of Bones dressed in his colorful African clothes playing bones as the camera pans from a boat to the shore.

About one hour into the film the lead character, played by Vince Edwards, travels to the deep bayou to make a deal with the local drug lord. As the scene begins there is the faint sound of rhythm bones in the background. Bones is then seen playing his rhythm bones around the characters as if he is invisible to them He speaks a few words that are difficult to understand. A gun fight breaks out and the New York guys leave and Bones’ bones playing fades out. He plays solo bones to no music. This is a rather unique and interesting scene from a music point of view.

He gets on-screen credit as the character ‘Bones.’ This film in video format is available on the internet. *Steve Wixson*

Dave Boyles Makes the Front Page

Dave Boyles, member and Co-Host of Bones Fest XI, made the front cover of Milwaukee’s *Lifestyle Magazine: Northshore*, March 2008 edition. He is shown in a headshot wearing a grey derby hat. The article on Page 68 titled “The Bluegrass is always greener” shows him with rhythm bones and washboard. It profiles his career and civic jobs, and then his music. Bones was his father’s instrument of choice, and, he says, “I almost got obsessed by it.” He added the washboard and plays with Liza Edgar and Razzmatazz. “I played on the circus train for 10 years. We played so many different venues because we were unique,” he said. “Through all the things I’ve done, I’ve always stayed close to the music.”

Again a big thanks to Dave and Don Gilmore for hosting Bones Fest XI.

Dennis Riedesel In His Own Words

I have been involved with the mountain man and living history hobby since 1984. We participated in all the activities in the mountain man rendezvous camps and marched in all of the battles at the living history re-enactments but as we got older our bodies no longer allowed us to participate as we had in our younger days.

So we had to find a way to be involved in the reenactment camps but not march in the field. Since many of us played musical instruments during the evening hours' get together around the campfires, three or four re-enactor friends of mine researched whatever information they could find on the old medicine shows. They were able to keep the format of the old medicine show intact and we were familiar with the "Authentic Americana Folk Music" genre, however, the jokes were not funny! Something happened with the set up of the joke and the punch line that seemed to be funny for the 1800's audience but we did not see any humor at all. So we started with the problems the City Slicker had with the Country Bumpkin's homonyms and double enterers in the Arkansas Traveler skit and, during the years of performing the show, the homonymic gags have changed.

Our group is called the Dr. E. T. Bushrod and Tanner Family Medicine Show (see photograph on Page 8.) We perform throughout Texas at festivals and other civic events as well at many re-enactments. The Tanner Family is a motley collection of individuals: Rosco (AKA Dr. Bushrod) on mandolin; Unkle Jimmy on spoons and dancing jack; Tiny (that's me) on "one string bass banjo", bones and mouth-bow; NotNo on tambourine; Banjo Joe on banjo; Bisket on washboard; Little Lucky Tater on tambourine (and, yes, his son's Tanner name is Spud); Peach on penny whistle; Bingo on fiddle and his wife Sissy on fiddle or banjo; Pudge on fiddle; Toby on guitar; Lumpy on the "shovel-ally", Puddin as a heckler in the audience; and a host of others too numerous to mention.

One very curious thing about the

Tanners is that our family tree looks like a telegraph pole! All of us hail from Strawberry, Arkansas except for all of Peach's parts which comes from Burnt Mattress-which is right above Hot Springs!!! *Dennis Riedesel*

Real Animal Bones Where to Buy How to Make

I originally conceived this as a major front page article. As I researched it, it became clear that there are not many people making good animal rhythm bones for sale. And as you will see below, Scott Miller has a booklet with all of the information you need to make them yourself.

My father was a meat cutter and he made my first rhythm bones from what he considered the hardest bone—an old ox. I later bought four pair of cow shin bones made by Nick Driver. I found a buffalo carcass behind a slaughter house and gave most of it away to Ev Cowett. I bought a pair of Dave 'Black Bart' Boyles rib bones held together with a rawhide lace, and later cow shin bones from Steve Brown.

Over 240 people have completed the Questionnaire section of our Membership Application Form. Eighty people say they play animal bones from cow, buffalo, whale and goat. Several of these people contributed to this article.

WHERE TO BUY. From our Questionnaire we find; Lark in the Morning, House of Musical Traditions (made by Dave 'Black Bart' Boyles), Andy's Front Hall, Elderly, Tim Reilly, Steve Brown, David Landreth, Scott Miller, Malaghy Kearns, and Nick Driver. Several people said Ireland without naming a store. Nick Driver no longer makes rhythm bones

Walt Watkins has a set of goat bones sold by Aaron Plunkett. Aaron says they come from Ireland.

I've made three trips to Ireland and each time went into every music store I could find. To my surprise, I found no good bones—that is bones that I would buy. Custy's in Irealnd sells Steve Brown shin bones, but they were out the day I was there.

Member Guy Gillette makes and sells cow bones.

Steve Brown notes "Paddy Sport makes his own bones and one of his son's sells them, I think Jack. There was an article that I found on the internet where he talked about making them, getting the bones of a heffer 2-3 years old and setting them by the fire. Ronnie McShane has been making his own. There's a guy from the North, Eamon, Maguire, I think, who makes his own. The Bourque Family from Ruby South Carolina also.

There was a guy from Vermont who made them for a while, Robert something, If I remember the name I'll tell you. There was also a guy from New Orleans that made them, both of those guys used the shin. there's the Quebec people Benoit mentioned. Ray Sharier occasionally would get some ribs and clean them up."

Fionnuala Shaw from Essaness Music responded to an email. "We have a local man here in Kilkenny who makes bones. His name is Lorcan Bergin. "

Member Mary Seel had the most unusual suggestion. She found rib bones for sale at Petsmart stores. These are smoked beef ribs by Dentley, product #27099. They requires some cleaning before use, and not all are the right shape for playing. But at \$1.50 each, you can't go wrong.

HOW TO MAKE. From the Questionnaire, twenty-five people make their bone rhythm bones. One really good way is to find a carcass in a field. Those bones are already cleaned and dried and all that is needed is to cut them to length and maybe polish.

Cowboy and storyteller Bud Bartram's technique was described in Vol 4, No 3. "The only useable bones come from the upper back part of the rib cage next to the shoulder. After cutting to length, he would break a coke bottle and use the sharp bottom to scrap the bones until he got the sound or the pitch he wanted. This could take hours and hours."

Scott Miller has prepared a booklet on how make your own rib bones. Its sections include; Start With Good Bones, Which Ox Ribs Are Best, Step-by-Step Instructions with 1. Select a

(Continued on page 8)

bones, but the fact is we didn't use bones at first. We cut our rulers at school at the six inch mark and made us two little sticks to knock and that would give us our vent.

"Well, after a while, some of them boys got a little combo going and I wanted to play with them. One boy had a jew's-harp, a rub board, and I was the bones player.

"See, I found this old cow and the buzzard done cleaned him up and the weather had done cleaned him up and had done them bones white. I went and got me a saw and sawed me off some bones. That put me above them boys who only had sticks. They kept asking me, "Johnny, where'd you get them bones?" And I'd say, "A man done come through here from up the country and gave them to me.

"I went out there and cut me a bunch of bushes and covered up that old cow so that they couldn't find it, and I was kind of unique. So they had to use me in the band.

"I process these bones, I put a salve in them. It takes about two months to get a set of bones where they'll give you the right sound.

"I can play myself or with a band. You have to follow that beat."

His daughter, Ethel Franklin, tells a similar story. Her father didn't have toys as a child, so he frequently played outdoors in a field. One day, he stumbled across a dead cow, extracted a couple of ribs, and discovered he could make music with them. Thus began a career that attracted national attention.

Bones said, "I began playin' the bones at the age of 9." When he was older he began playing with other musicians at dances.

Bones could play every kind of rhythm you could imagine; African, Latin, country and western. He loved zydeco. He said "You know, I've played a lot of blues and I don't prefer to play a lot of blues: it's too slow." He always had a style of rhythm that was a little different from what others were puttin' down. He played bones one-handed.

Bones played piano, but his favorite instrument was the ever-present pair of bones, which he always kept in the nightstand beside his bed, Ethel



Bones Nobles and his bones. Photograph courtesy of Beaumont Enterprise.

said. "They sounded like magic."

Daughters Gloria Beasley and Ethel Franklin both play bones, but their playing is not as polished as their father. Gloria said, "We all could play them, me and my brothers. My brother that died [George], now he really could play them."

Bones died in 1997 at the age of 95.

In the early 1980s, Bones was profiles on two popular television programs; *Real People* and Charles Kuralt's *On the Road*.

In the *On the Road* segment, Kuralt asks Bones, "Do you ever go out without your bones?" Bones replies, "No, if I put my pants on without my bones they'd fall off. I'd have to go back and get my bones to make the pants fit."

Kuralt asks, "Are they just ordinary cow bones?" Bones replies, "They're cow bones, but they're not ordinary."

Bones appeared in two movies, *SNO-LINE* (see separate review) and *Vasectomy A Delicate Matter* where he was a butler with a few words of dialog. It is a bit interesting to note he is credited as 'John Henry Nobles' in *SNO-LINE* where he played the bones and credited as 'Bones Nobles' in *Vasectomy* where he did not play the rhythm bones.

In 1975, Carol Munday Lawrence produced a film titled *Bones*. One summary said this: "Introduces John Henry Nobles of Beaumont, Texas, who creates percussive rhythms for jazz with dried beef bones held between his fingers. Nobles devised this unique method because he could not afford a musical instrument. 29 min-

utes." This is an important film and it is reviewed separately on Page 5.

He played occasional shows with another Beaumont secret, bluesman, singer/guitar player Richard Earl. Richard said, "He played rhythms the way we play them on the guitar. Also the rhythms that you hear drummers do today, he could do on the bones. You could recognize what he was doing."

People used to hire him to come into different venues and play by himself. He would get up and make the music with his bones. These were bones solos. He was special, real special. People in Beaumont enjoyed him immensely. He and Richard Earl are two of Beaumont's best kept secrets.

Daughter Gloria added these comments.

"Some of the white people around here would call him when they were having a dinner to come and play for them, like at lunchtime.

"He would go to all of the schools and make talks on drugs and different things. He liked that—being around the kids

"He played with all of the bluegrass bands. They would come and pick daddy up because he did not ride planes.

"They called him their Daddy. They'd come up there looking for Daddy Bones.

"Daddy was number one at the Folk Festival in San Antonio for 4 years. "He played at Spindletop all the time.

"My daddy used to tap dance and play the bones. He could really tap dance.

"My daddy would get the cow bones, cook them up however he do them. He only had one pair left—somebody stole the rest—and I have them. He sold bones."

My thanks to Gloria for sending the two color photographs of Bones. The front page photo was from the newspaper, and they no longer had a copy.

Bones would go to many events where he was not on stage. He would take out his bones and play along, something we tell rhythm bones players not to do. But from everyone I talked to, he was so beloved that this was all right. I wish I could have known him. *Steve Wixson*



John Henry 'Bones' Nobles

(Animal Rhythm Bones—Continued from page 6)
90Rib Bone, 2. Mark where to cut bone segment with template, 3. Cut, 4. Sculpt, 5, Sand, 6. Buff and Polish, 7. Ends: To Seal or Not to Seal, That is the Question. There are side-bars with other information and lots of photographs. Contact him at www.rhythm-bones.com and ask for a copy. It's



Dr. E. T. Bushrod and Tanner Family Medicine Show with Dennis Riedesel on the right

really good.

Check the Letters to the Editor column in next quarter's issue for what I hope will be additional places to buy and techniques to make contributions. *Steve Wixson*



Top part of Page 1 of Scott Miller's Rib Bones Making Booklet

Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910