



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 10, No. 4 2008

In this Issue

Bones Fest XII Highlights

The Bones Fest XII Proclamation

Blackface Minstrel Marionette

Clif Ervin Obituary

Minutes of the Board Meeting

Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Columns:

Executive Director

Editorial

Letters to the Editor

Website of the Quarter

Bones Calendar

Future Issues

Send Your Suggestions for Future Newsletters Articles

Executive Director's Column

Let me be the first to sing the praises of Bones Fest XII. Despite a low turnout due to the economy and the change to the Fall, that old Bones Fest magic came through loud and clear. Although we had around 20 registrants (unofficial number) there were 12 states represented including California, Texas, New Mexico, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Missouri.

With last minute cancelations due to illness, and several of our events cancelled due to the security requirements of the Obama rally, lesser folks might have packed it in, but led by Scott Miller, and the inimitable Spike Bones, we forged on. We started the week end with a Mayor's Proclamation declaring Bones Fest Week end, and after looking

down at the magnificent St. Louis Arch from Spikes hotel room, most of us went off to pub crawl to the local Irish pub. On Saturday afternoon we were Performing in front of the Soldiers Memorial when the Union Station cancelled out, conducting the workshops spontaneously, and performing in the museum room when we were mistakenly locked out of the theater. We had several new participants, and a whole lot of veteran bone fest players. Once we got into the theater, the Saturday night performance shined, Spikes black light day glow bones really took the cake! I had a great time, and a great big thank you to Scott Miller and Spike who worked tirelessly to ensure the week end a success.

(Continued on page 3)

Bones Fest XII Highlights

We raised and lowered the flag on BFXII and carried the RBS banner forward, through the Arch and back again. And now, onward to BFXIII!

It was an honor to serve with co-host Scott Miller in bringing our great Bones Fest to St. Louis, Missouri. It was a mighty big city for a wee group, but we were welcomed, honored and graciously served by the folks at the Mayor's office (see the Proclamation on Page 2), the Crowne Plaza Hotel as well as the faculty and staff at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

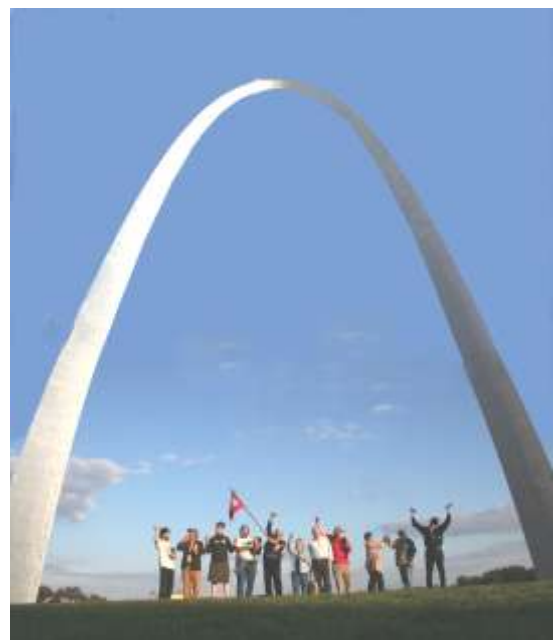
Our group was small, but we carried our bones high and left a large historical footprint in the gateway; along side footprints of Lewis and Clark, Mark Twain and now President-Elect Obama, who stepped right on top of our riverboat cruise and arch-riverfront celebration. I am referring to the last minute cancellation of our riverboat cruise because of security concerns for the Obama-Biden political rally. "What happens when you plan a party for 50 and 100,000 show up and they are not there to hear bones?"

I guess someone thought a boat load of bones players could be a dangerous thing. We are reminded that rhythm bone playing is a part of our history and continues on in spite of history.

In the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter, we promised that BFXII would have these four elements, 1) Lots of bones playing, 2) Reunion of old

and new friends, 3) the teaching and learning of all things bones, and 4) lots of bones playing. That we did thanks to all the support, creative input, hard work and hard play by the RBS Board, its members and all the BFXII participants

(Continued on page 6)



A few hearty Bones Fest XII attendees showed up after the 100,000 Barack Obama rally at the St. Louis Arch

Editorial

The adopted motion to make our fiscal year run from January to December (see minutes of the General Membership meeting) means that you get this fifth issue of the newsletter as part of your 2007-8 membership. From now on our year starts in January and the dues renewal form for 2009 is included in this issue. Membership was lower this year and if you know of any reasons for this, the Board would appreciate knowing about them.

We owe a big round of thanks to Spike Bones and Scott Miller for hosting Bones Fest XII. It was a smaller Fest due to the tight economy and the October date. Smaller, however, gave it a more intimate feel as we had more individual time with other attendees. Read Spike's highlight's article starting on Page 1.

Spike organized one of the most complete historical displays of any Bones Fest. During his planning, he found a minstrel marionette that he tried to bring to the Fest. That was not possible, but you can read about it in a Page 6 article by Sonie Joi Ruffin. She outlines the racial implications in a objective and positive manner.

I am amazed at the quality of the articles published in this newsletter. Steve Brown's article on the Chieftains in the last issue is just the latest example. That said, I am laying out the newsletters for the 2009 year, and would like to know what subjects you would like presented. Please email me your ideas. Better yet, write the article and send it to me. You can say what you will about our little newsletter, but a copy goes to the Library of Congress where you will be immortalized.

A note on preserving the history of rhythm bones. I talked to Bob Goon, son of deceased rhythm bones player Ted Goon (see RBP, Vol 2, No 2 for a story about Ted), and he is sending us some items from his dad's collection. We need to preserve and make available as much of the history of rhythm bones as we can. Do you have anything or know where any is? We don't necessarily need the item, just a good copy (photograph, recording, etc.) that we can share with others.

The BFXII Proclamation



The Text of The BFXII Proclamation

Office of the Mayor, City of Saint Louis: Proclamation:

Whereas, it is my pleasure to welcome everyone attending Bones Fest XII. We are extremely pleased that the Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) has chosen St. Louis as the host city for this annual gathering of rhythm bones players from around the world; and

Whereas, rhythm bones in some form date back almost as far as recorded civilization. Early English and Irish settlers introduced the bones into North America, and over the years, bones have enjoyed popular revivals in the United States; and

Whereas, it has been estimated that there are tens of thousands of bones players in the world, and that many of them can trace their bones playing to the end of the minstrel era or from a relative who learned from a minstrel show; and

Whereas, the Rhythm Bones Society was formed for the purpose of the continuation, promotion, and improvement of rhythm bones and other related musical instruments; and

Whereas, the City of St. Louis recognizes the RBS in its efforts to pass

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 10, No. 4
Fourth 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

on bones playing to the next generation and encourage today's students, musicians and teachers to discover the ancient art of bones playing and to take advantage of all the workshop, exhibitions and performances that Bones Fest has to offer.

Now therefore, I, Francis G. Slay, Mayor of the City of St. Louis, do hereby proclaim October 17 through October 19, as:

"Bones Fest XII Weekend" in the City of St. Louis.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and cause to be affixed the seal of the City of St Louis, this 17th day of October, A. D. 2008.

Website of the Quarter

There has been an explosion of videos posted of my favorite bones players! Here is one and you can find many more with the related videos links: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-17dBuOpUo>. You go Don!

Mike Passerotti

(Continued from page 1)

Next year is not finalized, but returning to the summer should help attendance. *Steve Brown*

Minutes of the Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown at 7:30pm on Friday, October 17, 2008, in the lobby of the Provincial House of the University of MO at St. Louis. Members present were Steve Brown, Jonathan Danforth, Gill Hibben and Steve Wixson.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the BFXI meeting and these were approved as read.

Steve Wixson presented a preliminary Treasurer's report. We have \$7,200 currently in the bank with \$440 committed to the Russ Myers Memorial and about \$1,000 in reimbursements to Steve Wixson mainly for the newsletter costs.

The Board met as the Nominating Committee and recommended continuation of the current officers and Board Members.

Jonathan noted that his new job has given him little time to keep our website current. He gave a brief summary of a presentation that Scott Miller would like to make. We will ask him to do that at the General Membership meeting.

There was a brief discussion on how to increase our membership that has declined to about 75 members this year. Ideas included having a membership table at Bones Fests, and giving a pair of Birl bones and a DVD with Bones Fest highlights to each new member. There was not time to fully discuss this issue.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:00. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Steve Brown on October 18, 2008 at 7:45pm in what host Spike Bones

called the BFXII Museum Room.

Steve Wixson read the minutes of the BFXI General Membership meeting and these were approved as read.

Steve Wixson presented the report of the Nomination Committee; Executive Director, Steve Brown, Assistant Director, Gil Hibben, Steve Wixson, Sec/Treasurer and Board members, Everett Cowett, Jonathan Danforth, Mel Mercier, Jerry Mescher. With no additional nominations from the floor, the motion was made and approved to elect these people by acclamation.

Steve Wixson presented the Board motion to change our Bylaws such that our fiscal year coincides with the calendar year. The specific wording which will replace Article VI, line 6.10 is, "The fiscal and tax years of the Association shall be from January to December." The motion passed unanimously.

Scott Miller made a presentation on Club Express that we could use to handle many of our administrative functions as well as keep our website up-to-date. Gil Hibben noted that his business website is maintained by Mike Carter who shot the video for BFXVII. The Board will follow-up on this item.

There being no old or new business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:06pm. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

Clif Ervin Obituary

Known to fellow musicians and adoring fans as the "Ambassador of the Bones," Clif Ervin died Tuesday, September 23, at the age of 77. News of his passing was reported by his son, Eric on the Black Banjo forum.

Clif was not a computer person or contributor to the Black Banjo forum. But numerous friends, musicians and well-wishers on the forum expressed their admiration for Clif. "Clifton's gentle, graceful style harkened back to a bygone era," said Laura Love of the black bluegrass group, Harper's Ferry.

Born on April 11, 1931, Clif was raised in the East Texas town of Tyler. He later made Everett, Washington his home.

An earlier story in the Seattle

Times reports that Clif was a graphic artist for the Air Force during the Korean War and studied fine art at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. Over the years his interest changed from painting to woodworking, the article explains, which eventually led to his carving bones for sale in 1980.

Clif and I talked on the phone just two times. I called him last Fall about selling his products at my online store. And in January he called me back to talk some more. And talk is what we did. Clif was an absolutely delightful person and on each occasion we talked "bones" for nearly an hour. This probably comes as no surprise to most of you, because as you know, bone players do go on and on and on about bones.

Clif specialized in making teak, yellow cedar and cow rib bones. His personal favorite were the thick (9/16") bones made from yellow cedar.

As a historical note, Clif explained to me that the six v-slots he characteristically carved into his instruments were inspired by William Sidney Mount's 1856 painting, "The Bone Player."

<http://rhythm-bones.com/assets/bonesplayer-mount.jpg>

No, we never did get his instruments into my online bones store. I guess it wasn't meant to be. But we did share quite a few stories and for that I will always be grateful.

Below is a YouTube video of Clif Ervin accompanied by Chris Coole at the Midwest Banjo Camp in 2008.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnUjERsFLlo>

You might be able to get Clif Ervin bones here at Elderly Instruments:

http://www.elderly.com/new_instruments/items/CEB.htm

Scott Miller

Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the rhythmbones.com website.

Bones Fest XI. August 28-30, 2009, Louisville, KY. More details in the next issue.

NTCMA and Bones Contest. August 31-September 6, 2009. This is one week after Bones Fest XIII.

Photographs from Bones Fest XII



We received a Proclamation from Ann Chance (right) and Cathy Smentkowski representing the Mayor of St. Louis. Spike Bones is teaching Cathy how to play the rhythm bones while Steve Brown holds the Proclamation.



Jamming at Tigin Irish Pub on Thursday night for those who came early to the Fest. From the left are Mitch Boss, Spike Bones, Walt Watkins, Michael Ballard, Gil Hibben and Spike's son Truman.



Jonathan Danforth on fiddle and Michael Ballard leading a workshop. On the right are three students from the university's percussion department plus Ida May Schmich. Instruction by percussionist Bill Vits is on the television.



The Saturday afternoon show at the Soldiers' Memorial. Seated in front are representatives of the Mayor's Office. The Fest videographer, Charlie Lee in the dark shirt, videoed this and all major Fest events.



92 year old Ida May Schmich, not seen since BFIV, is performing with Jonathan Danforth. She is about to drive herself 1200 miles to her winter home in Texas



Jonathan Danforth leading a group session in what Spike Bones called the Museum Room. This is where people registered and gathered. There were many historical exhibits and t-shirts from each previous Fest.



Bones Fest XII had the most complete historical exhibits of any Fest. In addition were historical books on tables and bones videos and vinyl records.



Saturday night finale starring Spike Bones and his family. There were live performances and Bones Fest XII highlights and memorial videos shown.



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet performing at the Soldiers' Memorial. On Saturday night they performed in costume.



Dennis Michel, Brian Allee and Scott Miller performing at the Soldiers' Memorial



Steve Brown and Michael Ballard with his bones at the top of the 630 feet Gateway Arch



The view of St. Louis downtown from the top of the Gateway Arch



Bones Fest XII Host Spike Bones



Bones Fest XII Co-Host Scott Miller

(Continued from page 1)

and Show-me Bones Family volunteers. The bad news for all of you who could not attend is that you missed a great festival. The double good news is that "Bones Fest XII: The Movie" will soon be coming to a DVD player near you. This DVD will not only document BFXII events but will also include greetings and boning by members who were unable to attend. If you have any video clips you would like included please forward them immediately to Steve Wixson, for our editing has begun. RBS members who pre-order this two DVD set will pay only \$25 plus shipping. (\$20 for production cost and \$5 for the RBS to off-set some Fest costs). As our clock strikes 12, BFXII will always be a celebration of twelve great Bones Festivals.

The other part of the double good news is that you are all invited back to St. Louis for Bones Fest 17, 2013, not an election year.

The photographs on Pages 4, 5 and 8 tell more of the story. *Spike Bones*

Bones Fest XIII

Louisville, KY

Gil & Linda Hibben, Hosts

August 28-30, 2009

Clifton Center

www.cliftoncenter.org/about/

Special Event

Professional recording of
The Fest with the
Intent of producing a commercial
Bones Fest Live CD/DVD

Live Music—No copyright
problem if in public domain

If you play to recorded
music, you must get
permission from the producer of the
recording who holds what is called
the Mechanical License.
Email Steve Wixson for details and
start working on this now.

Blackface Minstrel Marionette

As a theatrical art form, 'Blackface' was invented in the United States in the 19th century. Perhaps it's better to say adapted rather than invented. Referencing the institutional racism of the day, it draws on ancient theatrical genres ridiculing the lower classes and the disenfranchised. The blackface minstrel marionette in the Kansas City Museum collection emerges from a period when blackface was in full flower in American theaters. A well-made and provocative object, its origins are loathsome and bigoted, and deeply historical. Properly interpreted it has much to offer a contemporary museum-going audience.

'Blackface' minstrelsy was a merging of aspects of 'European Punch and Judy' puppet characters and itinerant musicians. Live actors began to emulate the traditionally dark faced Punch, blackening their faces to depict fools and other inept characters. As American slaving practices became widely publicized and critiqued in England, dark-colored characters became prevalent in the theater. When reintroduced to America in the 18th and 19th centuries, physical exaggerations common to clowning in some minstrel acts began to pick up references to unashamed racism in American views of the enslaved. It became habit for white actors to transform into black caricatures using shoe polish, burnt cork or greasepaint to darken their faces. They would exaggerate lips and eyes with light greasepaint. Their appeared in gestures and costumes elements that were loose, gangly or physically unconventional. Costumes included ragged clothing simulating cast-off finery of the higher class. Wigs and gloves concealed true racial identity while concentrating the effect of the misfit and the downtrodden.

'Blackface' proper in puppet theater technique has been documented to 1810. Because puppetry often mirrors live theater, blackface minstrels appeared regularly on puppet stages, and were unsurprising or standard by 1850. Presentations by puppeteers

were elaborate, and children and adults alike were mesmerized by the wooden company. Stages and props were elegantly designed; costumes depicted the period of the script. The timber and cloth performers were skillfully enlivened often by two puppeteers, and sometimes a third spoke and sang from the wings. Plays were staged wherever they had a ready audience: in churches, on riverboats, at carnivals and in open markets. These fabulous wooden performers were always draped in skillfully tailored fine fabrics: silks, organdy linens, and the best quality cottons and wools. Puppets and marionettes are often seen in closer proximity than live actors, and therefore their costumes must be better fitted and made to withstand intimate scrutiny. [Original Ed. note: in English usage "puppets" are generally operated from below or behind by rods or hands, while "marionettes" are operated from above by means of strings or wires.]

Minstrel puppets rarely appeared individually. Rather, they were portrayed in well-known pieces readily recognized by their contemporary audiences. These performance conventions were widely established by two popular troupes, the 'Royal Marionettes' of Liverpool, England and the 'Celebrated Christy Minstrels,' of America. In fact, the Christys were so popular and widely duplicated that most such acts came to be referred to generically as 'christy minstrels.' The puppet performers took their name from live counterparts, the 'Christy Blackface Players' who had performed in London during the 1850s and became beloved as Negro impersonators. Their puppet counterparts were publicized as the 'Automatic Christy Minstrels.'

Echoing ancient Greek theatrical traditions and Italian and French operas, the main characters of the puppet minstrels shows, Mr. Tambo, Mr. Bones and Mr. Interlocutor, would appear in front of or at the ends of a line of supporting cast puppets. The 'Royal Marionettes' featured 16 puppets that performed side by side, strung in tandem rows of 8. Tambo and Bones would be on separate ends of the line allowing free movement



‘Blackface’ Minstrel Marionette from the Union Station/Kansas City Museum collection, Accession No. 1981.27.1. Photograph by Roy Inman

during performance. The ‘row of darkies’ sang and danced in the background while the lively, often racy script was performed by the featured players. They would cut jokes, dance a jig or two and act in pantomime. The ‘Royal Marionettes’ were particularly well-known for their pantomime performances of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Words of the Songs* and many other plays.

The Kansas City Museum's blackface minstrel marionette dates to about 1850. It features an egg-shaped head painted black with dyed sheepskin affixed to represent black fuzzy hair. It has typically distorted painted white eyebrows and red mouth, and black eyes with white grounds. The head is attached to a block serving as a torso. The loosely-jointed arms and

legs are carved wood and are attached with cords tied through holes drilled in the ends. The character, perhaps a Mr. Bones, is costumed in a black suit coat with blue, white and red striped and ruffled shirt and red vest (all one piece) with red and blue ruffled cuffs on the sleeves. Black and white buttons of painted metal are interspersed. Black pants cover long skinny legs. The shoes are represented by black-painted oversized slipper-shaped feet that are likely thus exaggerated to allow for comically embellished dance steps. Both hands hold white ‘bones,’ elongated shaped sticks representing the folk musical instrument of the same name. It is believed that this puppet was part of a troupe that traveled the Mississippi River on a steamboat performing onboard and in towns on shore. The marionette was loaned to the Kansas City museum in 1977 then made a gift in 1981, by Hazelle Rollins. Rollins was a popular Kansas City puppeteer from the 1940s through the 1970s. She provided no information about the origin of the piece. It is known however that she gave two others, likely from a group, to the Nelson Akin Museum of Art, one to the University of Kansas, Museum of Anthropology, and one to the Smithsonian Institution of American History.

Blackface entertainment may have seemingly benign philosophical origins, but we cannot help but view the art form, and this marionette, with 21st century eyes. Blackface actors as we know them, and later puppets, always portrayed roles of the happy-go-lucky ‘coloreds’ subservient to the desire of a dominant white culture. A mummified character of slurred speech and inhuman movement is filled with mischief and pain, all the while echoing a plaintive “Yaws,sa Massa.” Truly, satire and mockery are time-honored in the theater, but with a tacit peer acquiescence of the ridiculed. We can hardly consider a blackface actor or puppet a benign clown when those who were degraded in performance were not admitted to the auditorium, nor recognized as whole persons, nor given voting rights.

Blackface projected a highly racist

depiction of African Americans as ignorant, inhuman buffoons that justified, to dominant whites, institutionalized negativity towards blacks. The blackface minstrel can be viewed as a tool of social rationalization of slavery and oppression of those believed to be “primitive” or uncivilized. Thus, through their racism and enslavement, such whites—not all by any means — could be understood as embodying a typical 19th century mythos of man as steward of the natural world.

It would be comforting to imagine the 21st century legacy of 19th century blackface minstrelsy merely as historical text. But the dehumanizing exaggeration of physical form and mental attributes can be readily viewed in contemporary art and culture: see some contemporary African-American comics, and some aspects of urban black and hip hop culture. Blackface here could be viewed as having become a kind of internalized oppression or socially promulgated self loathing that has parallel presentation in the stereotypical presentations of women in ‘Sex in the City’ and gays in ‘Will and Grace.’ It is important that an institution like Kansas City Museum keep this artifact on exhibit, in front of the public, as a reminder to our society of how far we've come and how far we have to go.

References: Benjamin Fisler, PhD, 2005, *The Phenomenology of Racism: Blackface Puppetry in American Theater, 1872-1939*.

Mike Joly, 1994, *Hazelle and her Marionettes*.

Christine Klepper, 2008, *Prominence of the Smithsonian's Mr Tambo*.

This article was written by *Sonie Joi Ruffin* and used with permission. She is a renowned fabric artist with lectures and exhibits in many major institutions around the country. Her quilts are bold, intuitive and contemporary, and they are accompanied by masterly written prayers, sharing her life experiences, the African American culture, life's hardships and the courage to triumph.

The article was published in a Kansas City Museum *Community Curator* pamphlet from which the photograph was taken with permission.



Executive Director, Steve Brown (left) and Bones Fest XII Host, Spike Bones, at the window of Spike's room on the 27th floor of the Crown Plaza Hotel. The scene on the right is the 100,000 person Barach Obama rally that canceled a couple of Saturday afternoon Bones Fest events.

Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

Address Correction Requested