



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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Executive Director's Column

With 25 out of 30 days of June rainy ones, the prospect of dry summer weather in the months ahead seems like the only thing prompting me forward. And as I dream about what's to come, thoughts focus on the return to Louisville in August for Bones Fest XIII.

The first Louisville Fest was a true delight as witnessed by one of the best Bones Fest videos. The old Kentucky Theater was the perfect location which saw several new Bones Fest attendee's like the Fraser Family from three Western states, and Sandor Slomovits, a protégé of Percy Danforth, delighting us with his bone playing and songs.

This time in Louisville is sure to be a real treat. Although the old theater has now been

turned into condo's, Linda and Gill Hibben, our hosts, have found the perfect location, the Clifton Center for the Performing Arts, which includes a 500 seat auditorium, and a number of rooms perfect for workshops or jamming. Located in the heart of Louisville's restaurant district, with many shops for browsing, it boasts a picture perfect thorough fare which plays host to street musicians just begging for bones accompaniment. Check it out yourself at www.cliftoncenter.org.

And while our location is truly supreme, this Fest will feature an opportunity for participants truly unrivaled in Bones Fest history: the opportunity to play on the first professionally recorded compact disc and DVD produced by the Rhythm

(Continued on page 2)

Russ Myers Memorial Dedication Ceremony

It was a beautiful day in Madison County, Virginia. The Possum Ridge String Band was playing Russ Myers' favorite song, St. Anne's Reel, under the covered bandstand. The sun was bright, so people gathered under a large shade tree a bit off to the side of the bandstand. More than 50 people were remembering Russ.

In the background was the Kemper Residence, a stately old home now owned by the

Madison County Historical Society. In a basement room was a brand new television with built in DVD player with a narrow plaque along the bottom of the screen with the words; *In Memory of Russell Bordley Myers, 1934-2006 by the Rhythm Bones Society, June 28, 2009.*

Tables in the room were full of Russ memorabilia on loan from Wilma Myers and arranged by

(Continued on page 7)



Front row is the Possum Ridge String Band. Back row from the left, Scott Miller, Sharon Mescher, granddaughter Katie, grandson, Colman, Wilma Myers, daughter Jennifer, son David, Mary Lee Sweet, Kenny Wolin, Steve Wixson and John Davis.

Photograph by Helen Miller.

Editorial

The Russ Myers Memorial ceremony was a grand event, and it was heartwarming to see so many RBS members help celebrate Russ' life. It is the feature story that begins on Page 1. For more information about Russ, see RBP, Vol 5, No 2. For his obituary and related articles, see Vol 8, No 3.

I share Steve Brown's excitement about Bones Fest XIII as I have such vivid memories of Gil and Linda Hibben's Bones Fest VII. I'm back to practicing regularly, and trying to select a song to perform for the *Bones Fest XIII Live* CD/DVD. Wouldn't it be something if it would catch the public's eye like, say, the Hula Hoop.

I write about my trip to the Greek Islands and Turkey and my rhythm bones research. Am I the only one who researches rhythm bones on vacations? I challenge you to do the same and report your findings in our newsletter. We still have a lot to learn about our instrument, and who knows when or where one of us might find an important piece of its history.

There is a nice article reprinted from a local newspaper on rhythm bones maker and player, Clif Ervin. I wish that I could have met him.

Letter to the Editor

Hi all, Hope you've all been well! Steve Brown and I had our usual great time at the New England Folk Festival teaching and selling bones. I just finished hosting a small local musicians' tent at the New Bedford Summerfest Folk Festival with my band, the Jethros (with whom I play fiddle and bones). The Jethros released a new album in May, which features two tracks with bones -- one of these can be heard online at <http://www.myspace.com/thejethros> (click on the track "Why Not" for bones).

You should also check out Tim Reilly's band at <http://www.myspace.com/ribarnacle> -- they also have a new album out, and you can hear Tim's great bones on that web page if you click on the Polkas track.

See you in August! *Boney Jethro* (a.k.a. Jonathan Danforth)

(Executive Director—Continued from page 1)

Bones Society. You can be a part of history documented at this fest and preserved for posterity! So book your flight and hotel, August is truly just around the corner.

Gil Hibben invites members to submit idea's for workshops that they would like to lead for this year's Fest. Workshops will be held during the course of the Fest. Some of the workshops from previous events include beginner workshops, advanced workshops, Scrimshaw and bone making. Submit your idea's in writing to gil_hibben@bellsouth.net before July 31st. Workshops will be chosen as space allows, and based on appeal to the majority of the attendees.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Steve Wixson for all of his hard work, not only in the newsletter production, but for the Russ Myers Memorial Project and Memorial Celebration recently held in Virginia. Russ was a corner stone in our organization, and most deserving of this tribute.

In closing I would again like to invite all of the members to participate in what promises to be a ground breaking Bones Fest in Louisville this August. It surely will be a Kentucky Derby of a different kind! *Steve Brown*

Website of the Quarter

earth.google.com. This is an amazing website that shows satellite photographs of the world. Some images are higher resolution than others. Put your own address in and see what your house looks like from above.

As for why this website is included in this newsletter, enter 2117 Payne Street, Louisville, KY and view the Clifton Center, the location of Bones Fest XIII. If you zoom out a little, you will see some restaurant symbols. Click on any of them to see the tremendous variety of restaurants.

Goon-Bones DVD Update

Bob Goon searched without success for bones playing video of his dad, Mr. Goon-Bones to add to the DVD. The project is now complete and DVD is being professionally duplicated. See Vol 11, No 1 for details.

Rhythm Bones Player

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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 XIII. August 28-30, 2009, Louisville, KY. More information and Registration form is in this issue.

NTCMA and Bones Contest. August 31-September 6, 2009. The festival begins right after BFXIII. The bones contest is on the following weekend.



Turkish Kashik or spoons played like castanets

Abbeyfeale 2009 Bones Competition

The bones competition in Abbeyfeale is amazing. The women of the committee are some of the hardest working, most welcoming people I have ever met. There were plenty of sessions to play in to get warmed up for the competition and the level of musicianship was very high.

Despite the turn in the weather, people filled the square for the competition. They were enthusiastic and cheered loudly for the players. Rob Coppard and I were the only 2 handed players. The committee arranged for a banjo and box player to accompany the players, and 1 competitor brought his own band. We each played 2 sets.

It was marvelous to hear all of the different styles and interpretations of the music. The adjudicator, Tommy Hayes, gave feedback to each of the bones players before he announced the winners.

Consider the trip - it is well worth the experience. I have video of my playing. If you are curious, contact me. *A. Lakin* <a_lakin@yahoo.com>

Wixson Plays Bones in Ephesus Theatre

My wife, Janet, and I took advantage of recent discounts and booked a cruise in the Greek Islands and Turkey. Since rhythm bones passed through this area many years ago, my secondary purpose, other than having fun, is to research rhythm bones which translates to visiting museums and historical sites, finding someone who speaks even a small amount of English, demonstrating rhythm bones, and asking if they know the instrument or someone who might know it. Most of the time this results in failure, but occasionally there is a connection.

In Istanbul, I discovered they play *Kashik* which are spoons played in a castanet style shown in the photograph on Page 2. I found a CD titled *Turkish Folklore Music* that has many great examples of this style. I'll bring it to Bones Fest XIII.

Ephesus, also in Turkey, was one of my highlights. Restoration of this ancient city has been underway for many years and there is much to see, and the library and theatre were the most impressive. I had to take the theatre stage and play rhythm bones to a large collection of appreciative tourists. See the photograph below.

I assume rhythm bones were played here a few thousands of years ago, and I wondered if I was the first to play them in modern times—or has someone beat me to it.

While I found no other bones being played or anyone who had ever heard of such an instrument, I did return with the names of three academics who I will correspond with and will report if I learn anything. *Steve Wixson*.

Bones Fest XIII Update

The Bones Fest XIII Registration Form is included in this newsletter, and it has preliminary program and hotel information.

Due to the difficulty of securing permission to use CDs as backup for the BFXIII Live CD and DVD recordings, we have obtained permission to use CDs from the following bands; Possum Ridge String Band (Russ Myers), Liza >>>>> and Razamatazz (BFXII) and Dave Reiner (BFV). If you have a friend or contact that would give us permission

Bones Fest XIII

Louisville, KY

Gil & Linda Hibben, Hosts

August 28-30, 2009

Clifton Center
www.cliftoncenter.org/about/

**Registration Form
and Hotel Information in
this Newsletter**

Special Event

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

to use their CD, please let Steve Wixson know so he can share this information with other attendees.

Please note that performances selected for the CD and DVD will be based on musicality and not raw rhythm bones skill. If you want to practice before the Fest, order one of the CDs. This is one way to say thanks to the people who are letting us use their recordings. Ordering information is on the Registration Form.

For those performing to live music, there will be some practice time.



Steve Wixson playing rhythm bones in the theatre of the ancient city of Ephesus in Turkey

Photographs from the Russ Myers Memorial Ceremony



We were in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains.



The Kemper Residence, attendees gathered under a shade tree and the bandstand with the Possum Ridge String Band and rhythm bones players



Wilma Myers, standing by the red car and many friends and neighbors who attended the Memorial celebration. She is looking at her son, David.



Sharon Mescher on the left shooting photographs of the ceremony. Other photographs on Pages 4 & 5 were taken by Helen Miller and Frank Sweet.



Steve Wixson presenting the Russ Myers Memorial Video to Penn Bowers, Vice-President of the Madison Country Historical Society.



John Davis (left) and Kenny Wolin jam with the Possum Ridge String Band after the ceremony.



Peter Bramley from the band. Peter works for Crutchfield Electronics and helped us buy the memorial television/DVD player.



Playing with the band as a musical tribute to Russ from left Kenny Wolin, Mary Lee Sweet, Scott Miller, Steve Wixson, Russ and Wilma's daughter Jennifer, Sharon Mescher and John Davis



Mary Lee Sweet during her tribute to Russ



Russ and Wilma's son, David, playing bones



Scott Millers during his tribute to Russ



Some of Russ' memorabilia on display

Clif Ervin Ambassador of the Bones

[In the Vol 10, No 4 issue of the newsletter, Scott Miller reported on the death of rhythm bones player and bone maker, Clif Ervin. I wanted to know more about him and contacted his widow who sent this article from Seattle Times, Snohomish County Edition, November 27, 2002, along with some of Clif's memorabilia.]

The 71-year-old Ervin, of Everett, sometimes plays wooden African drums to attract customers to his Knots and Things booth. But his treasured instruments are the bones — flat sticks made from golden wood that sound like castanets when struck together.

"Every country in the world has a clapping instrument, and bones are probably the oldest," Ervin said.

When Ervin was a young boy in the East Texas town of Tyler, local blues musicians noticed he kept a good rhythm with just a pair of sticks. So they taught him how to play with ordinary objects such as spoons and animal bones.

Ervin found his first pair of cow bones in a neighbor's pasture. Later he made pairs by boiling the meat off rib bones, then cleaning out the marrow with a clothes hanger. The oil from his hand would polish the bones to a fine sheen.

Most pairs of musical bones — originally actual bones but now often made of wood — are 5 to 7 inches long and vary in width. Thin bones have a snappy sound, Ervin said, and thicker pairs sound more "mellow."

Ervin explained how playing the bones works: The player holds one bone tightly between the index and middle finger. That piece is held in place and struck rapidly with the second bone, which is held loosely between the little and ring fingers.

"It's all in the wrist," Ervin said as he raked his hand back and forth. "Your hand is the resonator. By moving the bones up and down, you get a different sound."

Ervin likes to move around as he

plays, tapping out a rhythm with his feet for his hands to follow.

"Whatever your hands are doing, your feet have to keep the beat," he said.

Nowadays, Ervin said he prefers carving bones out of teak or rosewood. He used to own a craft shop on Broadway called Knots and Things, but since 1997 he has made the instruments at his house. He sells them for \$22.50 a pair.

One of his customers is Artis the Spoonman, a Seattle street musician made famous by the grunge band Soundgarden's Grammy-winning song "Spoonman."

The two met at an informal jam session at the Northwest Folklife Festival in Seattle, and soon after, Artis bought a pair of Ervin's bones carved from a tropical monkey-puzzle tree.

"His quality is top of the line," Artis said. "I tell people about him almost every show."

Ervin has always seen himself as more artist than performer. He was a graphic artist for the Air Force during the Korean War and studied fine art at Clark College in Vancouver, Wash. But over the years his interest has changed from painting to woodworking.

"We're blessed with so much wood in this part of the country, it's easy for an artist to become a carver," Ervin said.

It helped that he had access to lots of free wood while working at a Weyerhaeuser sawmill. As he finished wooden boards in a planer, he fell in love with the different colors and textures of the planks. When his co-workers went outside for smoke breaks, Ervin carved on leftover knots and wood clippings that he'd picked off the mill floor.

He sold his first polished knot for \$1 at the Evergreen State Fair in Monroe in 1975. As his skill with carving knives increased, he began to whittle faces, then key chains, canes and finally wooden apples complete with polished seeds.

But many customers asked Ervin where they could find bones after hearing him play, so in 1980, he began carving bones for sale. He remains among the few vendors selling

the instruments at local craft shows and music festivals.

Ervin marks his wooden bones with a "V" pattern that he copied from a design he saw in a pre-Civil War painting of a bones player.

Ervin remembers when bone players were a regular part of Southern folk music, performing alongside banjo pickers and guitarists. Because his son, Eric Ervin, loves to play the banjo, the two are making a recording for family and friends.

Eric Ervin said his father is glad to share his experiences with younger people, though he doesn't want to be known as a folk musician.

For the past seven years, Ervin has performed for students at Lakewood Elementary School during its cultural fair in January.

Dave Duzan, a teacher at Lakewood, said that what's most impressive about Ervin is the patience with which he works with young musicians.

During last summer's Blues and Heritage Festival in Port Townsend, Ervin originally had planned to attend only a country-blues workshop.

In the end, he played the bones with the Ethel Caffie-Austin singers, a gospel group from West Virginia.

The Centrum Arts and Education program, which hosts the festival every August, may invite Ervin to be a blues instructor after a number of festival goers commented on his performance.

"There's a lot of interest in old country blues because people want to be personally connected to the music," Centrum spokesman Keven Elliff said.

Bone playing is part of what Elliff classified as old Southern blues, which fell out of favor in the 1950s as the Chicago blues emphasized electric guitars. The bones can be heard in the background of the Harlem Globetrotters' theme song, "Sweet Georgia Brown."

"Clif is taking the relics of past life and using them in a new way," he said. *John DeWeese* Used with permission.

(*Russ Myers Memorial Continued from page 1*)

the Madison County Historical Society. In an adjoining room, ladies from Wilma's church, the Madison Presbyterian Church, were setting out finger food for after the ceremony.

At the appointed hour of 2:00 PM, Penn Bowers, Vice-President of the Madison County Historical Society, welcomed everyone. In the audience were Wilma, her son, David, daughter, Jennifer, grandson, Colman, and granddaughter, Katie. RBS members included Sharon Mescher from Iowa, Scott and Helen Miller from St. Louis, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet from Florida and me, Steve Wixson, from Tennessee. Virginians attending were Kenny Wolin from the DC area and John and Sarah Davis from close-by New Canton.

Penn introduced me and I said the following (as best as I can remember.)

"Welcome also from the Rhythm Bones Society and our members present and thanks for helping us remember Russell Bordley Myers, a rhythm bones virtuoso.

"Rhythm bones are among the oldest of musical instruments, most likely prehistoric. Early artifacts have been found in China and Mesopotamia. They had a thousand year run in Egypt, then moved to Greece and Rome. We know they were in England as Shakespeare has Bottom to say in *A Mid Summer's Night Dream*, "I have a rather good ear in music. Let us have the tongs and bones." They came to the States and were one of four instruments that started the almost 100 year Minstrel Music era with Mr Bones playing the rhythm bones, Mr Tambo playing the tambourine and fiddle and banjo. The Irish get credit for keeping rhythm bones alive for the past several decades. They play one handed while others play two handed as did Russ.

"The concept for this memorial began soon after Russ' funeral. A few members attended the funeral and were given a copy of the Possum Ridge String Band's CD *On The Road Again* that features Russ playing rhythm bones and telling stories. This was such a great way to remember Russ that other members wanted a copy. We asked the Band if we could

have copies, and they said yes asking only that members make a donation of any size for a yet to be determined memorial of Wilma's choosing. Members responded and almost \$450 was donated.

"The RBS Board mulled over the donations, and the idea gelled that we make a video from all of the photographs and video from our annual Bones Fests (or Festivals). We contacted Wilma and she liked the idea. She introduced us to the Madison Country Historical Society, and while they liked the idea they did not have a way to play the video. Well, it turned out that there were enough donations for a TV with a built in DVD player. Peter Bramley from the band has electronics contacts and helped us get the best TV for the monies available.

"The *Russ Myers Memorial Video* will be on display in the Kemper Residence after this ceremony and at your leisure you can view it. Later it will be at the Madison County Historical Society building for public viewing.

"I am the video editor and let me tell you about our great Irish narrator. The Chieftains are one of Ireland's national treasures and have been performing together for over a quarter of a century. If you like Irish music, I'm sure you've heard of them. Their first rhythm bones and bodhrán (the Irish drum) player was Peadar Mercier who with his contemporaries get credit for reviving rhythm bones and bodhrán in Irish music.

"His son, Mel, is also a great rhythm bones and bodhrán and has performed all over the world. Mel came to the states to work on his doctorate, and eventually selected rhythm bones for this PhD thesis. His research led him to Russ and they met and became friends. Mel and later Mel and his wife visited Russ and Wilma in their home where Mel interviewed Russ for hours and hours. Mel without hesitation volunteered to narrate the video and you will love his wonderful Irish accent.

"The video opens with Russ playing at Bones Fest V. This is followed by early details of his life and marriage to Wilma. His rhythm bones accomplishments are followed by one of his best bones stories from the pre-

viously mentioned CD about people right here in Madison County.

"The Rhythm Bones Society was formed on the back porch of Russ and Wilma's home and the video highlights this and shows Russ' great knowledge the history of rhythm bones. Russ was one of the few people who could change the pitch of his rhythm bones without changing the position of the bones in his hands. The video shows him sharing this 'secret' with other bones players. There are more clips of Russ performing at Bones Fests.

"There is another track from the previously mentioned CD of Russ playing with the Band. There are photograph from Bones Fest X, his last Bones Fest. In one photograph, Russ is in the center of almost 100 of his rhythm bones family. The video ends with the memorial garden Wilma made in the backyard of her home.

"Mel Mercier's closing remarks from the video are a great tribute to Russ. "For those in the Rhythm Bones community and the many others blessed by the gift of his laughter and music, Russ Myers was a pure joy. His memory is cherished by many and his spirit and his music live on."

"We of the Rhythm Bones Society are happy we can contribute to this memory with the *Russ Myers Memorial Video*. We will add this video to our rhythmbones.com website, and it will be there for many years to come."

At that point I introduced several members who added their tribute to Russ. Kenny Wolin made some personal comments and finished with the story of how Russ became the first and maybe only rhythm bones player in an ROTC band. Sharon Mescher, who was raised in Virginia and just knew that Russ was a Baptist, told how she did not believe him when he said he was Catholic. They attended Mass together at future Bones Fests. Scott Miller at his first Bones Fest performed on stage with his two young children. Later when he met Russ, who had performed right after him, Russ told him seriously and jokingly, "Don't you know how hard it is to perform after children." They became friends. Mary Lee Sweet re-

(*Continued on page 8*)

(Continued from page 7)

membered how Russ liked the sound of her cow bones, but would not trade for his whale bones. He taught her his pitch change secret.

Whit Whitfield added a tribute from the Band. He noted that Russ made them better—not only his rhythm bones playing, but his wonderful storytelling. They would love to have a rhythm bones player in the band again.

There was a musical tribute with all rhythm bones players joining with the band. Russ and Wilma's daughter and later their son joined in.

I formally present Penn with two copies of the *Russ Myers Memorial Video*. Then I called on Wilma and presented her a copy. Penn made a few closing remarks and invited people to see the memorial and have some refreshments.

What followed was a mini-Bones Fest with the band playing for a least an hour and a half after the ceremony. There are several photographs of this and the other festivities on Pages 4 and 5. Many in the audience stayed for the entire mini-Fest.

In retrospect, I cannot imagine doing anything different than was done. Wilma and her family were most appreciative for the support by RBS and her community. There were lots of hugs and kisses.

Clouds rolled in during the ceremony, and as the min-Fest was winding down, I felt a few drops of rain. I looked up and wondered. "This couldn't be tears from heaven for Russ, could it?" *Steve Wixson*



The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (Songs to the Virgin Mary) are manuscripts written in Galician-Portuguese, with music notation, during the reign of Alfonso X *El Sabio* (1221-1284) and are one of the largest collections of monophonic (solo) songs from the Middle Ages. All of the songs at least mention the Virgin Mary, and every 10th is a religious hymn. Some of the manuscripts containing this music also contain colored miniatures showing pairs of musicians playing a wide variety of instruments, the one above being a medieval trumpet player with a female rhythm bones player. The reference to this is from a book found by member Scott Miller titled *The Bones Book* by Sue Hess, aka, The Bones Lady. Cantigas text from Wikipedia.

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested