



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 13, No. 3 2011

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## Executive Director's Column

Fall is blowing through New England, and the muggy dredges of summer are being replaced by a crisp clear night, and we have exciting news. For perhaps the first time in history, a Phd is awarded based on the traditional art of playing the bones! Through out the ages, bone playing goes semi-documented, passed by word of mouth and hand, slightly noticed by the institutions of higher learning, but no more! Our own Dr. Mercier has granted our instrument an air of respectability by shinning the light of Academia brightly on the bones, and those who play them, and for that we are grateful. I'm excited to read Sharon Mescher's article on her, and husband Jerry's trip to Ireland, and the ceremony acknowledging Mel's great achievement. I will be even more excited to read his dissertation, and

the fruits of his labor which taken a number of years. I know that Russ Myers is smiling up there, and telling his many stories of his friendship with Mel. A hearty congratulations, Mel, and a big thank you from the bone playing community.

My apologies to those of you planning on attending the New England Regional Bones Fest, cancelled due to a pesky hurricane which blew through here a few weeks ago. I have sponsored a number of these small fests, and I was looking forward to the opportunity of seeing a several of you, and playing the bones together. This was to be a remembrance of our dear friend Shorty Boulet who passed away last winter. After discussing the rescheduling with

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Congratulations, Dr. Mel Mercier

On August 26, 2011, Mel Mercier's title changed, for on that date he was awarded his PhD from the University of Limerick. Along with his wife, Maura, their daughter, Nora Kate, his mother, Nuala, three sisters, aunts, uncles, and friends, Jerry and I had the privilege of attending his graduation. Congratulations, **Dr. Mel Mercier!**

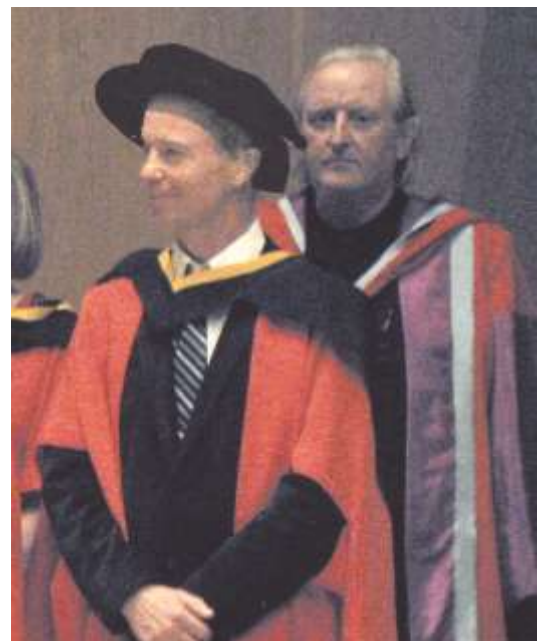
There was a story about Mel in the Vol 4, No 2, newsletter, now on-line on the RBS website. In that article, he shared the legacy of his father, Peadar, who taught and encouraged him to play the bones and the bodhran. From those humble beginnings, it is apparent that Mel's successful musical career has skyrocketed to new heights, and continues to reach new heights.

During the last ten years, Mel has been extremely busy, and there have been many changes in his life.

Mel's musical life revolves around three strands: "the theater, performing traditional Irish music, and teaching non-Western music. They're all connected in some ways, but really different worlds...As part of the academic world...and the one of being a traditional musician and a bones player, that's where the PhD dissertation is; at that intersection between those two...So, right up to 2005-2006, I decided I needed to start writing the dissertation."

Mel began teaching at the University College Cork in 1991. By 1994 he was teaching full-time. His vision at that time was "to develop the study of world music," and, "we needed a gamelan. So they gave me the money to go to Java

*(Continued on page 6)*



Dr. Mel Mercier in cap and gown with Academic Supervisor, Professor Micheál Ó'Súilleabháin, looking on

# Editorial

Bones players are aging and they are dying. On Page 3, San Slomovitz tells us of the death of rhythm bones maker Ray Schairer.

Jerry and Board Member Sharon Mescher attended Mel Mercier's graduation ceremony in Ireland, and Sharon has an interesting update on him that starts on Page 1. Mel tells us a bit about his thesis on Page 3.

On Pages 4 and 5 are stories about two unique rhythm bones players who were both described as 'Characters' (though ain't we all.)

1. The promotion for Bones Fest XV included sending everyone in our database who lived within driving distance of San Antonio either an email or written notice of the event. As I looked at that list of bones players, Bones Fiedler popped out at me. I learned of him from a member of my church who saw a newspaper article about him. Seems Bones helped the police catch a bad guy, and became a regional hero. At that time in 2003, I called him and recorded a nice conversation which I then forgot about.

I tried to call him to invite him to the Fest only to learn that he died back in 2006. I thought he should be re-member in print, and when you read my story about him, I think you will agree. It starts on Page 5.

2. There have been a couple of Australians who have joined RBS for a year or so, and I periodically search for 'down under' stories on the internet. Recently I found Sally Tompkinson, and her story is on Page 4.

Hans Weehuizen, a long time member, lives in the Netherlands, and we got to meet him at Bones Fest X. He occasionally contributes to the newsletter, and this quarter tells us about his maritime rhythm bones workshops.

Michael Satterwhite is a new member who we met at Bones Fest XV. He has expressed interest in hosting a Fest in Flagstaff. On Page 5, he tells us about his bones workshops.

On Labor Day weekend, I attended the National Folklife Festival in Nashville, TN. This festival is sponsored by the National Council for the Traditional Arts, and moves around the country for a three year run in each

selected city. I found out about it too late for RBS to participate formally this year, but I talked to the Festival Director who suggested we submit a proposal for next year. I'm thinking we could schedule a Regional Bones Fest and get some stage time like Dennis Riedesel arranged for BFXV as well as teach kids in the Children and Family area of the Festival. Any thoughts?

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Bones Fest Family! What a wonderful time I had in San Antonio with the group. You are all very warm and welcoming. All the music, the activities planned for the weekend were so well coordinated and so much fun; the hotel was excellent. I was practicing my bones this afternoon by watching Fred Edmunds' video. Maybe by next year, I'll get it. Thank you all for your kindness and generosity. *Becky Shannon*

Like each Bones Fest, Frank and I enjoyed visiting a new place and being treated to the special features of the city as presented by a resident bones member. Dennis did an outstanding job of finding and sharing the treasures of San Antonio. Jamming with our rhythm bones players on the grounds of the Alamo was a treat that should have been on my bucket list - I just didn't think of it.. Our guided tour by the Historian Director of the Alamo was wonderful and performing at the Texas Folklife Festival was another notch on our "where we've performed" list!

While performing and jamming at the Alamo, it was wonderful to watch Bones Fest members teaching willing tourists to play the bones. Old folks, young folks and in-between folks all wanted to see what this was and how to do it. The musicians that Dennis brought to play for us were outstanding and added that professional touch to our shows. Just listening to them was a pleasure!

But the highlight of the fest has to be the River Walk Dinner Cruise. This unique experience had us floating down the San Antonio River while sharing a superb Mexican dinner from the Casa Rio Restaurant with fellow

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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](http://rhythmbones.com)

bones players. As we wined and dined, other cruise boats wondered how we got the diner boat and they got the sardine boat. Their boats were packed with people. Ours had a long table laden with food and smiling bones players breaking bread together. Those walking along the River Walk enjoyed the sight and waved to us. Bones players enthusiastically returned their greetings. *Mary Lee Sweet*

I recently sold a set of rosewood bones, and wondered how the customer managed to find me. All thanks to you, I think. Many thanks and best wishes, *Mike Blair*, Bedroom Acoustic Music, email: [bedroomacoustic-info@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bedroomacoustic-info@yahoo.co.uk)

[We seldom hear from people we list on the 'Where to Buy Bones' page on our website. Thanks, Mike for the feedback.]

I am so bummed that I missed Bones Fest this year. Both Alice and I

were hoping to come this year. Filming is going well, and while I feel very blessed for all of God's inspirations which should be seeing the light of day soon, I am sad that I was not able to partake with my Rhythm Bones family. I have to get you a video at some point, and I think I'm going have to be there next year, or take you guys and gals out with me! Hmm... Sounds like a good potential weekend next year! Let's see what happens! Please give my love and hellos to the gang!  
*Dan Griffin* [We met Dan at BFVI.]

I've been in contact with John Beck and, through him, his friend Wiley Sykes. John is the percussion faculty head for the UNC School of the Arts School of Music and Wiley is the percussionist for the NC Greensboro Symphony. John and I hope Wiley should be sending in applications I gave them to join the RBS. John and I are planning some ways to present bones as an important percussion instrument. Nothing is going to happen for a few months ; I will let you know when things get farther along.  
*Mitch Boss*



This book's title page says "Copyright, MDCCCLXXIX, by Clinton T. De Witt. The Roman numeral date is 1879. Scott Miller has a few of these for sale, probably at more than fifteen cents a copy. See [bonedrymusic.com](http://bonedrymusic.com).

## Bones Maker Ray Schairer Died

I am very sad to let you know that Ray Schairer died on Saturday, September 17th, after a year-long struggle with lung cancer. He was 89 years old.

Ray was the originator of the Danforth bones, and began crafting them for Percy Danforth (the man who taught me how to play the bones) in 1976. He retired last year after making more than 35,000 bones.

I started apprenticing with Ray, learning to make the bones, in 2002. Last year, he gave me his custom bones-making tools, and I have, and will continue, to make the bones.

Ray and I also collaborated on a wonderful project. In his eighties, he began writing down stories of his childhood, and in the summer of 2008 I, along with my nephew Daniel, was able to help him publish a book of those memoirs. I will miss Ray's warm friendship and skilled mentoring very much.

There was a long article and photograph of Ray in newsletter, Vol 5, No 1, Pages 3 and 4, which is now on-line on the RBS website.

For a biography of Ray, and excerpts from his book about growing up in a farming family in Michigan in the 1920s, please visit his website, [BarefootBoyBook.com](http://BarefootBoyBook.com).

At Ray's funeral, I played the bones on *When the Saints Go Marching In*, with my friend, Brian Brill on piano. Be well, *Sandor Slomovits*, [Gemini-ChildrensMusic.com](http://Gemini-ChildrensMusic.com).

## Website of the Quarter

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIRG0ANd2yQ>. The title of Mel Mercier's PhD thesis is *The Mescher Bones Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape*, and it is a study of the development, transmission and performance of the Mescher style of rhythm bones playing. This link presents long time member Jerry Mescher and his father as they demonstrate *The Mescher Tradition* on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour on Father's Day in 1961.

(Continued from page 1)

Ernie Duffy, we have agreed to re-schedule it sometime in early May. I will get the date out to all of you.

Calling all Bones Fest hosts! With the fest not being held in Ireland next year, it does give us a void as to where it will be held this year. We have long wanted to go to Florida at the urging of the Sweets, and Mike Satterwhite has expressed an interest in holding it in Arizona. Any and all proposals would be most welcomed!  
*Steve Brown*



The Boston Museum of Fine Arts is the happy home of one of best examples of bone playing through the ages, *The Bone Player*, a painting by William Sydney Mount. I have visited it many times, so I was understandably delighted to be invited to record a video standing in front of the painting (see Vol 11, No 3, now on-line on the RBS website for a story about this painting and a photograph of it.)

The Museum had recently gone through construction of a new wing in which the bone player would reside. The video is used on the "video tour program" and when the visitor enters the painting's code number, a video of me playing a set of bones in the Museum's collection is shown. I can't thank the museum enough for the opportunity. The museum is no longer carrying the painting as a post card in their gift shop. So if you received the post card in your fest packet at Bones Fest V, hold on to it.  
*Steve Brown*

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVI.** Date and location unknown. If you are interested in hosting a Fest, contact Steve Brown at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com).

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Contact Jerry Mescher for details.

# Sally Tompkinson Australian Bush Bones Player

If you do a Google search on 'Sally Tompkinson,' you will see links to a couple of photographs of her and a link to an interview by folklorist John Meredith. The photographs and interview are housed in the National Library of Australia, and I wanted to learn more about a rhythm bones player who could catch the attention of such an institution. Searching more with Google and following up with e-mail, I contacted the Library, her son Glen, and friends, Bob Campbell and Barry Norris.

RBS purchased a copy of the recorded interview by John Meredith which resulted in the interview being placed on the Library's website (see 'Recording of the Quarter.') In addition to Sally talking, you can hear her rhythm bones playing style. Meredith made many field recordings, and the Library maintains them in the John Meredith Folklore Collection.

Bones Player Sally Tompkinson was born premature at 2 pounds, two ounces, on June 6, 1919 at Coolah, Australia. She was wrapped in cotton, placed near the fireplace and lived. Her parents moved to Beryl, near Gulgong, when she was three. Her son said she joined the circus when she was 14.

One day, when she was about 16 years old, she heard an Aboriginal lad playing the bones. Intrigued, she hung around him until he showed her how to hold and rattle them. She was so adept that he taught her some of the finer points, such as playing a roll, then presented her with his set of bones.

Sally's dad was a drover, as well as being a blacksmith and a wheelwright. He taught her to waltz when she was a little girl by letting her stand on his feet as he waltzed around the room. When she had learnt the movements, she would step down and dance by herself.

Sally played bones taken from the sun-bleached skeleton of a beast found in a paddock. With the marrow

eaten out by insects, these bones had a softer and richer tone than the 'green' bones obtained from a butcher, which were then boiled and scraped. Sally would tune her bones by shortening them until she got the sound she wanted. She was very particular about which bones she play, and had bones with high, medium and low pitch. Her son said Sally had some wood bones, but she said real bones were superior to those imitations made from plastic or hardwood.

Barry Norris said there was a thriving community called 'No Name' and later 'The Tribe' about fifty kilometers from Gulgong on the Goulburn River. Sally was part of 'The Tribe,' a loose association of bush (rural) people who gathered together and partied. Music and dance were a big part their activities, and Sally, who always carried several bones in a basket, was dancing and playing bones at their gatherings. Their bush music was a combination of Irish, Scottish, folk and country traditions.

Barry said, "When I was young, rhythm bones were very popular, and I played them a bit. Today they are a rarity." So when he said Sally was a good bones player, I believe him.

Barry's dad christened her, 'Sally Honky Tonk.' Barry's band, *Home Rule*, played at numerous functions around the district and Sally would get up and play. He said, "She always was a great hit."

Her son said she also played with Frank Bourke and the White Rose Orchestra when he toured their area, and thinks she recorded an album with them. I could not find the album.

Sally died March 20, 1988.

Some of the information in this article is from Real Folk by John Meredith, National Library of Australia, 1995, ISBN 0 642 10639 X. *Steve Wixson*

## Recording of the Quarter

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-man6044185>. Listen to John Meredith interview Australian bones player, Sally Tompkinson. He also accompanies her while she plays her rhythm bones. To listen, go to the link above, scowl down and click on 'View

Online Content,' and accept their Conditions Page. If you click on: Tompkinson, Sally, 1919- (Performer) you can see photographs of her.

## Hans Weehuizen's Maritime Rhythm Bones Workshops

It is with a lot of pleasure that I give workshops on "How To Play The Bones" during Maritime Festivals, mostly Shanty Festivals (see the photograph on Page 8.)

My workshops last from 45 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour, but it is an active hour.

Every time I am surprised that with every workshop there are always 2 or 3 persons who have the technique under control in a few minutes, while others need more time (or never learn.) Most of the time I have 10 persons with a maximum of 15.

For all the participants, I have practice bones available. At the end of the workshop they can buy them (but this is not necessary.)

For the participants who can not learn directly from me, I have a book with text and photos. I have also made a CD with spoken text in English and Dutch and there are also 8 songs/tunes on which a bones player is active and these are good to play with for a beginner.

Scott Miller sells my packets in the USA.

On the average, I give 5 to 6 workshops a year and hope to do this for many coming years.

The most of the work is to produce the bones. I make them together with a friend and bones player, Rik Homan.

Rik has a small shipyard and because of that, has regular leftover wood that is excellent to use for making the bones. We use only wenge (panga-panga, Dutch name.) We steam the Bones round and after that we finished them beautifully.

For both of us, it is our hobby because if you look at the time it takes to make the bones, the bones would be very expensive. Therefore it is always just a hobby. Met vriendelijke groet [With kind regards.] *Hans Weehuizen*

## Michael Satterwhite's Bones Workshops

New member Michael Satterwhite taught two "Musical Bones" workshops again at the Arizona Highland Celtic Festival (<http://nachs.info/festival.shtml>) in Flagstaff, Arizona in July 2011. The festival is produced by the Northern Arizona Celtic Heritage Society (NACHS). Michael has taught this workshop on prior years and loves introducing curious folks to the fun of playing bones. He uses 'penny bones' so everyone can begin to learn the basic mechanics of playing, and they are affordable enough for the festival to send everyone home with instruments. Workshops are full of giggling and banter as players realize they too can deliver a basic rhythm and bones can be flying every which way.

Michael's final request of his new bones players is to observe them playing their new bones as they take in the various musical offerings of the weekend. Wooden bones from various suppliers are offered close to cost. Any profits go into the NACHS scholarship fund - which has dispersed over \$50,000 to deserving students of Celtic culture through the years. Recipients can study, music, culture, language with Celtic orientation. Indeed Michael received a small scholarship to offset travel expenses to attend Bonesfest XV this year based on the anticipation it would strengthen his workshop leadership. Michael was amazed by his fellow players at Bones Fest XV, learned a huge amount and was able to carry back more knowledge to share with his students.

Michael also taught a bodhran workshop and assisted with a spoons workshop taught by another local, Nicole Bauge. The festival makes the bodhran workshop affordable by dispensing small cardboard pizza boxes and dowel 'tipplers' for the students to use during the workshop.

This family-friendly festival is a lively offering of music, children's activities, bagpiping competition, traditional athletic games, visiting clans, vendors and Celtic-oriented food vendors. But near and dear to NACHS is the festival's strong educational component which is exemplified by the

bones, bodhran and spoons workshops. They are joined by whisky-tasting, language, storytelling, genealogy, Celtic attire, Celtic plants, the history of salt and much more. Thank you, *Michael Satterwhite*

## Bones Fiedler—Wish I Could Have Met Him

Bones Fiedler was Harper, Texas' unofficial Ambassador, and usually had over a dozen visitors a day; some were local friends, but many were out-of-towners stopping at the Chamber of Commerce office to get information. Inside his house were two walls full of pictures of visitors who had taken his picture and sent it back to him. In a telephone interview, I asked him for his home address. He said, "Bones, Harper, Texas. Somehow it gets to me even without a zip code."

Richard 'Bones' Fiedler was born on November 2, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, and died on January 20, 2006. He served in the Army during World War II. Upon his return, he began working in the zoo in Washington, DC, and had many interesting experiences there. He helped raise the original "Smokey the Bear" who had been rescued from a forest fire in New Mexico and had burnt paws. He met Hopalong Cassidy, and he rescued a 1918 Stearns Motorcycle from the trash, and after restoring and then riding it for a few years, donated it to the Smithsonian Motorcycle Exhibit.

He moved to Texas to raise his children. He had two children, seven grandchildren and eight great grandchildren.

He had a dairy farm. He later traded that for a mercantile store that sold hardware, feed and clothes, and where he learned to make cowhide chairs. For several years, he exhibited them in the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio, the location of Bones Fest XV.

When the local newspaper got started, Bones took off his wonderful hat, pulled out \$200.00 and said, "Here's your start-up money." He was the first donor, and became a member of its advisory board. He would often shelter a person or two down on their luck at his small home.

Bones lived in Beaumont, TX for a while, and there he met John Henry Noble (read a story about John in Vol 10, No 1.) Bones said, "I saw him play from a distance. We got to be real good friends, but he never taught me." Bones recalled, "He sold bones for \$10 a pair, you know. Somebody would ask him to show them how to play them. John would say, "I sell them--I don't give lessons. He wouldn't show nobody, me included." John would say, "Just rattle them together until you like what you hear." So Bones taught himself how to play them. Since John Noble was also a regular at the Texas Folklife Festival, they must have played together there over the years.

Bones was a part of the Friday night "Jam Session" at the Longhorn Cafe. Bones wore his signature hat and sat near the door and greeted visitors and fans as they enter the cafe. He played two polished cow ribs, but was said not to be a great bones player. Bones said, "Over here in the hill country you can always find a dead cow." And then quickly added, "There are a couple of young buffalos that I'm keeping my eye on." He said, "I skinned a Zebra one time. They've got an exotic auction here once a month. I got the bones and they had a real good sound." He would also make bones out of oak when he had trouble finding real bone.

As shown in the photograph on Page 8, Bones loved kids and taught many how to play rhythm bones. One of his adult students, Pam Fisk, who gave him a RBS membership, said "He could play one-handed or two-handed, but said one-handed was more relaxing." She said, "He would give bones away to friends and acquaintances who showed interest."

The editor of that previously mentioned newspaper said, "We will miss Bones, the tourists will miss him, the homeless and hitchhikers will miss him. His spirit continues to linger and offer guidance." Bones was named the "Charles Barrett Citizen of the Year." *Steve Wixson* Parts of this article were extracted from an article written by Martha Stevens in the September 3, 2005, issue of *The Harper News*.

## An Update from Founding Member Deborah Brower

I'm still playing. The group I perform with released a CD last year. It was quite a project taking most of the summer, but I'm happy with the results. No bones, but I do play them in performance. The rest of my time has been taken up with doing historic research for the local historical society and programs for the group. I'm also doing quite a bit of work on slavery in the local area and the Underground Railroad. The one thing I've learned is the Underground Railroad is such a small part of slavery, but gets all the attention. It side tracks the real story, that there are no code songs or otherwise, when a slave escaped it was done with no help from anyone else, and the Underground Railroad only came into play (if at all) when slaves reached the north. What gets lost are the stories of people who bought their freedom and stayed in place working tirelessly to free their families. It's very rewarding to bring these stories to light and challenge teachers to be more creative in how they tell the story. The resources are out there you just need to look. It is amazing what you can learn.

Songs like the Follow the Drinking Gourd are 20th century and have nothing to do with slavery, but are about the great migration during the 20s and 30s. The words people sing now weren't written until the 1940s. Don't even get me started on the Quilt Code, the first Bush presidency is older than that. Yet the codes permeate lesson plans on slavery, because they have a nice built in craft and everyone can feel good, instead of telling real stories about real people.

So in a nutshell I'm having a really but very rich musical and intellectual life these days.

You can hear some samples here <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/taskerschance>. *Deborah Brower*

[Deborah's husband thinks he is related to Frank Brower, rhythm bones player with the 1843 Virginia Mistrrels.]

## First Look at Mel Mercier's Thesis

The title of Mel's thesis is *The Mescher Bones Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape*, and it is a study of the development, transmission and performance of the Mescher style of rhythm bones playing. It is the first PhD thesis on the subject of rhythm bones.

Mel first heard Jerry Mescher at Bones Fest IV. Mel recalls, "Jerry stepped up on the stage and told us he was a corn farmer from Iowa. He played along to a tune called Maple Leaf Rag, and completely blew me away. I had never seen bones playing like that in my life, and I had never heard a story quite like his either. Jerry then went on to figure as the central character in my PhD research."

Below is the TABLE OF CONTENTS from Mel's thesis.

Abstract, Declaration and Acknowledgements. Chapter One: Introduction (starts on Page 1). Chapter Two: The Mescher Bones Tradition (41). Chapter Three: Coming to America: Mescher Homesteading (63). Chapter Four: Genesis and Transmission(98). Chapter Five: Aesthetics of Measure: Mescher Spatiality (156). Chapter Six: The Machine in the Parlour (262). Chapter Seven: Into the Groove (352) Bibliography (395). Appendices (414)



Mel Mercier and daughter, Nora Kate, with her 'diggities' bones made by Steve Brown

(Continued from page 1)

to have one made. I went for three summers to Java to study and then I was also interested in West African drumming, so I went to Ghana for three summers, as well, and studied there...I teach a range of courses; things like traditional Irish music, Indian, West African, or Indonesian gamelan. We have an Indonesian gamelan orchestra that I've been teaching since 1995, which is my favorite thing to do." What is the gamelan? "Gamelan is the equivalent of the Western orchestra. It's a set of bronze instruments...you sit on the floor to play it...some drums, but mostly tuned percussion, like xylophones...It is ensemble music." Mel also teaches performance courses and academic ones such as history and culture.

In 2009, Mel was appointed the head of the "newly formed school of music and theater" at UCC. "What this has meant for me is that I am busier than I've ever been in my life, because I've taken on a management role; I'm still doing the teaching; I'm still doing theater stuff, and for most of that time I was writing the dissertation. And, of course, there are now three of us in the family...So, life is rich... and challenging."

Mel had composed some theatrical scores in the 1990's. In 1999, he met Deborah Warner, an English theater director, who asked Mel if he would be interested in doing the music for a production of "Medea". He did compose the music, and the production "subsequently went to the *West End* in London, and then to *Broadway*, and toured the states." Since meeting Deborah, Mel has composed the scores for all of her stage productions. Earlier this year, he wrote the score for a production of "School for Scandal" that opened at the *Barbican* in London; and then it went to the Holland Festival in Amsterdam."

Mel does work with a Cork company called *Corcadorca*. "I've done a lot of shows with them doing music. Sometimes I record everything in the studio; sometimes I use live music. And, I'm just about to do another production with them of Shakespeare's "A Winter's Tale" that opens on Octo-



ber 10..."

Mel's brother, Paul Mercier, is a well-known Irish playwright ([www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com)). "... earlier this year I also did a play with him for the first time. He is an iconic figure in Irish theater; really developed and devised a form of "urban theater" for a new, young audience in the '80's with a company called "Passion Machine." I am a huge admirer of his work... I had never worked with him before, and I did this year for the first time. He wrote two new plays commissioned by the *Abbey* in Dublin, and I did the music for those... I'm about to do another play with him in November... Theater work is a different world. It is quite intense... because a theater production can be planned for maybe a year in advance." What is Mel's process in composing the score for a play? He never writes the music and then "just hands it over." He writes the score as the production is in progress. He responds to what is happening on the stage, and he is more inspired through conversations with the set designer, or the director, about what kind of production it is. "It's like painting. You've this drama unfolding and sometimes it feels as if you are highlighting the emotional content with sound."

Upon starting the dissertation in 2005-2006, Mel was juggling a lot of things. Nonetheless, one of the most "lovely, momentous occasions," and the first of the "two most significant events" in his life was marrying Maura O'Keeffe on April 21, 2007 (see newsletter Vol 9, No 2 for this story with photographs.)

By profession, Maura is a theatrical producer. Several of her credits include:

a. a play by the Brooklyn playwright, Will Eno, "Title and Deed," which played at the Kilkenny Arts Festival;

b. two international projects;

c. two plays since Nora Kate was born;

and, a new version of the documentary, "Man of Aran." Maura was the producer, and Mel wrote the new score.

In glowing terms, Mel explains how talented Maura is as a producer. "...she has a deep appreciation for



Maura and Mel Mercier and Jerry and Sharon Mescher with Mel's Diploma

creativity in art...and she has a great understanding of facilitation. She really knows how to take care of people who are making art, which means she's a god-send for those people. She understands the frailties and fragility of people who otherwise might have over-active egos...but still manage to make beautiful things...She is at her best when she is on the ground facilitating... That's a very difficult job. It's almost the hardest job, I think, to do if you're working in theater because... you've got to solve problems of all sorts of kinds; very few of them are glamorous. It's behind the scenes work... She's great with people... Maura remains active as a theater pro-

ducer; albeit in the last three years... she's not been able to give as much time to that." However, for the last year and a half, she has worked part-time as the marketing director for Lismore Castle, located in Lismore, Ireland ([www.lismorecastle.com](http://www.lismorecastle.com)).

On September 26, 2008, the second "most significant event" in the Mercier's life was the birth of their daughter, Nora Kate. As Mel relates, "Nora Kate has transformed my life, and Maura's as well... She moves quickly and I've got to move as

quickly. She's been a real joy, gift, and a revelation; a real wonder."

"The most remarkable thing about Nora Kate is how much of her own person she is... I had the fantasy that she would be an extension of me; but as it turns out, she ain't!!

From day one she was "this separate, complete entity... she's very articulate; headstrong; loves books; loves to role play; very precise; hard to keep up with her... She is an on-going revelation... There is this deep connection and the responsibility is

really profound; beyond words; and the care and the bond is indescribable. She has extreme power over you; we ain't the bosses! She has me wrapped around her little finger."

Mel has dreams and hopes that Nora Kate will play an instrument, or instruments. "Recently, we got a lovely package from Steve Brown and he had made Nora Kate a little pair of toddler bones... She calls them the "diggities," because when I would play them for her... I would say, "diggity, diggity, diggity... She has a sense of rhythm," and Mel hopes the musical genes have been imprinted.

Even though Mel has been quite

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busy with his teaching, theater, and performing over the last ten years, he shares that, “As I get older I am learning to prioritize...and the most important thing is family. I come from a big family. I’ve got nine other siblings, my mother...and my father died in 1991. We’ve always been very tight, very close.” Now that Maura and Mel have a “little one, things change and the future changes. So priorities shift...Somebody said a wonderful thing to me recently, “When you get to the pearly gates and you are met by St. Peter, or whoever it is, the two questions they are going to ask you are, ‘How did you treat your wife and how did you treat your kids?’”

It seems that the circle of life will continue: Nuala and Peadar Mercier passing on each of their legacies to their son, Mel; and, now, Maura and Mel passing on their legacies to Nora Kate.

With anticipation, we, the members of the Rhythm Bones Society, look forward to seeing how the future, with all its surprises, will unfold for Mel, Maura, and Nora Kate. *Sharon Mescher*



Member Hans Weehuizen teaching one of his rhythm bones workshops. See story on Page 4



The late Bones Fiedler—See Page 5



Member Michael Satterwhite Bones Workshop—See Page 5

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*