



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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## Executive Director's Column

I'm just back from Abbeyfeale and competing in the All Ireland Bone Playing Competition, and though the result weren't quite what I hoped for, it was a spectacular trip. I promise a full report in the next issue of the Rhythm Bone Player, but for now a couple of observations.

Rhythm Bone playing is alive and well in Abbeyfeale, and if it can be contributed to anything—one name comes to mind, David Murphy. David not only exhibits the finest bone playing, but he works tirelessly with the local children to ensure the tradition of bone playing in Abbeyfeale continues in fine style.

Look no further than the results of the chil-

dren's competition. Adrian O'Leary in first place (one of Davids students and his nephew), Jackie Murphy in second place (David's daughter) and John Ford in third place (David's nephew).

Beyond the weekly classes of his students, and extremely fine bone playing himself, is one exceptional person—fair play to you David!

The other is the fact that Junior Davey is another reason rhythm bone playing will continue in Ireland. He also teaches children in his own locality (one actually drove the five hours down to the competition), and adults during his

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## Who Dat Knockin: Bones Playing During the American Civil War

The "bones" can be referred to as one of the earliest instruments. The idea of striking two bones together to produce a clicking sound, pretty much dates to early man. However, the ability to effectively produce complex rhythms came a little bit later.

Bones playing, in the United States, has existed for quite a while. Bones were present in Irish and English folk music for some time and naturally made their way across the seas with our colonial ancestors. However, it wouldn't be until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that the bones finally found their way into the popular music of the day. Initially played in old folk tunes brought by various immigrant groups, the bones quickly became the staple of the American minstrel movement. The introduction of this instrument can be attributed to one of the earliest American bones players, Frank Brower.

Frank Brower was born in Baltimore, Maryland on November 20, 1823. Interested in performance, Brower made his first musical appearance at Dick Myers' Museum in Philadelphia,

doing a song and dance, about 1838; subsequently he joined John Robinson's Circus, and later Raymond & Waring's Circus. In turn, this circus background prepared him for the showmanship and style of minstrel music. Brower's interest in performance also applied to musical instruments. It is said that in 1841, Brower sawed into 12-inch lengths the rib bones of a horse and proceeded to play them. His showmanship was even demonstrated while playing

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Sailors on the USS Wabash taken in 1863. The sailor on left is playing the bones.

# Editorial

I was in dire need of a Page 1 story, and Rick Musselman bailed me out with a story beyond expectation. This is a story long overdue, and a big thank you to Rick for writing it.

The big news is, of course, Bones Fest XVI in Orlando, FL hosted by Mary Lee Sweet. This is the first Fest in a vacation city, and many of you, like myself, will come early or stay late to take in the attractions. It's been years since my wife and I were there. I hear it's grown since then.

You can learn more about our host, Mary Lee, in a story she tells about herself.

You may have seen the email announcing that Sky Bartlett was to be on ABC's Wipeout program and was also going to play his rhythm bones. Well he tell us what it's like to be on primetime television.

Deborah Brower is a Charter Member of the Rhythm Bones Society. I ran across her name, and wondered what she was up to, and she told me in a short article. By the way, she thinks her husband is a distant relative of Frank Brower, the first Minstrel Bones Player.

I was serious about my dire need for a story for this issue (Sky Bartlett also really helped me out.) I am amazed, when I look back over 13 volumes of the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, at the quality of its articles. Most of them are contributed by members like yourselves, and I make this plea that you send me articles or ideas for article so we can continue the high watermark for what is, at times, almost a journal. While it is just a little newsletter, it is housed and cataloged in the Library of Congress where future researchers will see these words.

## Letters to the Editor

Just want to let you know that I will be appearing on the TV show Wipeout -ABC on Thursday night January 12th. I will be playing the bones on the show. I look forward to seeing you at the next fest. *Sky Bartlett*

Enjoyed seeing Sky on Wipeout. Too bad it was so brief. *Dick*

*Jacobs*

We watched the program last night. It was fun to see Sky playing them bones. *Sharon Mescher*

How about bones in literature? In *Blue Highways*, by William Least Heat Moon, the author dips down to the Mississippi Delta during a cross country journey and meets a Cajun bones player in a tavern. *Rob Rudin*

I have attached a picture of "Johnny Bones" a street performer in the old west section of Tombstone, AZ. I got to play a couple of songs with him yesterday. He is an amazing performer and has been doing this in Tombstone for about 5 years. He is the one who told me about the Rhythm Bones Society a couple of years ago. The photographer is Dave Day of Bisbee, AZ. I thought this amazing picture would look great on your web site and got Dave's permission to use it if you are interested. Pretty nervy of me to suggest it I know but it is such a great picture, I had to try. *Gerry Hines*



## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XV.** August 9-11, 2012, Orlando, FL.

**NTCMA and Bones Contest.** August 29-September 4, 2011. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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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 Fest XVI Brings the Magic Bones to the Magic City of Orlando, Florida

Come on down to the land of Magic! If you are a sports fan, we are the home of the Orlando Magic. If you are a horticulturist, we have orange blossoms, orchids and air plants (Spanish Moss). If you like critters you can swim with Manatees, try to see the mockingbird's wings fluttering or watch the alligators - from a safe distance.

Come to the Land of Sunshine and create some Bone Rattling magic! Orlando is a city where people sing, play, dance and are waiting to discover how to play the rhythm bones. Amid palm trees swaying in the warm

summer breezes the Rhythm Bones Society will bring a new experience to Orlando's city of entertainment. *Mary Lee*

### **Preliminary Program**

Food and Beverage will be served either Friday or Saturday. When we have a better headcount we will decide what will be served and when. Changes will be added to the website as they occur.

#### **Thursday August 9, 2012**

- 3:00pm check-in at Rosen Plaza Hotel
- 4:30 - 5:00 Ish gather in the Bones Fest XVI Sweet suite ;-) Ask at registration desk for location.
- 5:30pm - ? Dinner and/or drinks at Raglan Road Irish Pub in Downtown Disney. Selected Bones Players perform between Irish dancer and house band Creel performances.

#### **Friday August 10, 2012**

- **9:00am - 10:00pm** conference room available with registration open except during meal breaks
- 9:00 - 12pm Workshops, individual performances, jamming
- 12pm - 2pm - Lunch on your own
- 2pm - 5pm Demonstrations, performances, presentations, jamming
- 5pm - 7pm Dinner on your own/or at evening pub/restaurant
- 7pm - ? Pub/restaurant "crawls" with stage performances by selected bones players

#### **Saturday August 11, 2012**

- **9:00am - 10:00pm** conference room available with registration open except during meal breaks
- 9:00 - 12pm Workshops, individual performances, jamming
- 12pm - 2pm - Lunch on your own
- 2pm - 3pm "Skin & Bones, Hair & Guts" presented by Spike Bones
- 3pm - 5pm Demonstrations, performances, jamming
- 5pm - 7pm Dinner on your own/or at evening pub/restaurant
- 7pm - ? Pub/restaurant "crawls" with stage performances by selected bones players

**Sunday August 12, 2012** - for those still around

- Brunch at 11:00am - details TBA

## Sky Bartlett Plays Rhythm Bones on Primetime Television

There I sat, in Bradenton, Florida, for the second time that winter. It was some time in January of 2011, and I had just got back from skiing in Colorado. I was sitting on my aunt's couch watching TV with my cousin Colby when Wipeout came on. We began to laugh at the contestants as they were relentlessly beaten and made fun of.

After a while my aunt, sitting at the computer behind us, began to tell me how I should go on the show. Why she felt this way I am not sure, perhaps for the \$50000 grand prize, or maybe posterity. She looked the casting details and requirements; good looking, high IQ, good taste in art, and such. It seemed I was a perfect fit.

I got into my truck and drove back to NH. I realized I had made a wrong turn. I reset my GPS to Hollywood CA. Once there (for the second time in the young year), I simply went to a specific address and waited with the other 300+ people who were hoping to make the cut.

I should mention the day before they screened over 1000 hopefuls at a different location, not to mention online auditions. When my "turn" came, I was lined up against a brick wall with three other people and was told by a friendly woman to say something impressive/interesting within 10 seconds. I had my bones in my hand ready to seize my opportunity, knowing that they would be the key to my success. But now was not the time for that, instead I simply said "I drove here from NH in my 1988 Toyota pickup truck, for the second time."

I was promptly sent upstairs to schedule further auditioning. I went back 10 days later after a quick trip up to Washington state. This was to be my on camera audition. I simply stood in front of a camera for 15 minutes while the same friendly woman asked me question after question.

At some point I had had enough questions and said "watch this." I played the bones, and there were no more questions. I was sent to fill out a

mountain of paperwork, then told I would be contacted in 90 days if they needed me.

Back to NH, 90 days came and went, no contact. I soon forgot about the whole thing, and life went on. Then in early October, the call came, "Our producer loves your bones, be here in 10 days if you want to be on TV." I got back in my truck. I did stop along the way in Colorado to see fellow bones festers, Jessye and Courtney, before continuing on to my destination.

I got to CA, got my paperwork and was told where to go and what to do, I had to wait a week. In my free time, I got a job and a place to live, seemed like a nice place to try living for a time. So eventually the day came, lots of waiting around, I won't go into much detail, the people running the show were good to me, so I'll respect their desire for secrecy.

I was ushered to the front of the obstacle course, were I had been told to play the bones and give a shout out to one of the shows characters. I was obedient. Then I ran like a chicken being chased by Col. Sanders as I was relentlessly beaten and made fun of. I made it through the course with the second fastest time out of 24 contestants. I was told to come back in two days for the next round. No bones playing, just bones breaking. I did not proceed to the next round. Oh well, no regrets about that.

This all took place in October, the show aired in January 2012, I was rather surprised at the response I got for my 20ish seconds on TV, dozens of people found me through face book wanting to know what those 'thingys' were I was playing. Considering they only showed me playing for 1 second, like a crazy person, to no music, it is a wonder anyone responded at all.

I stayed in CA into late January, then I drove to the deep south of Texas to play bones with Jay and Tammie Roy, always a good time. After returning to NH for a month I decided I missed CA. I got back in my truck. And here I sit, in Ventura County, wondering if the waves are big enough to go surfing. *Sky Bartlett*

(Continued from page 1)

bodhran playing workshops, and yearly school in Gurteen, his home town. Junior, whose personal history is steeped in the traditional music, took the time to review each competitor both in the Junior and Senior competition, and was very encouraging in each instance. Thanks especially to Junior and David for encouraging this tradition to continue!

I have been so fortunate in my life to have traveled around the country and the world, which has been almost entirely because of bone playing. That includes trips to Ireland, and to the US, including Texas, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri, to name a few.

Now I can include Florida in that itinerary, thanks to Mary Lee, and Frank Sweet and Bones Fest (what number is this) to be held August 9th-11th in Orlando Florida.

What an amazing opportunity we have not only to bring rhythm bone playing to another state, but to see what that state has to offer. I urge all of you to come to Orlando and avail yourselves of this chance. Mary Lee and Frank have out done themselves with the fabulous hotel rate, and many opportunities to play the bones. My son Jeremy is truly excited about the prospect of playing the bones in Disney World! See you there! *Stephen Brown*

## Rick Musselman Short Bio

Rick Musselman is the Education Supervisor at Carriage Hill Farm, an 1880s living history site. He has also worked for the Ohio Historical Society and the National Park Service. In addition, he has also been involved in Civil War reenacting for twenty years and has been a student of rhythm bones. He has over 10 different sets, including an original set of ebony bones that are dated to the civil war.

## Update From Charter Member Deborah Brower

I'm still playing. The group I perform with released a CD last year. It was quite a project took most of the summer but I'm happy with the results. No bones but I do play 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 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 at <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/taskerschance>. Nice to hear from you. Hope all is going well. *Deborah Brower*

## Al Lemieux Obit

It is with great sadness that I have to inform you that our dear friend, fellow musician and bones player Al Lemieux, left us at 9:40pm last night after having been in the hospital for only 2 days. For those who would like to say good bye, there will be a wake [now long past] on Monday from 4-7 at the Grise Funeral Home, 280 Springfield St, Chicopee. The funeral home phone number is 413-594-4189 if you need to contact them for any reason. If you would like, you are welcome to send flowers or donate to a charity of your choice. On Tues, the funeral will be at the Assumption Church in Chicopee. The time is not finalized but will be near 9:30am, followed by another service at the Mass. Veterans Cemetery in Agawam at 11am. The obituary will be in the newspaper tomorrow with all the final details. The Family will also have a gathering of Al's family and friends after the Agawam service. More information about this get together will be announced at the service. Would you please pass this information along to all those who knew him from the Rhythm Bones Society? Thanks, *Robin Unger*

[Al Lemieux played the bones, and washboard. I know he attended several regional fests, but don't think he made it to a national fest. He was a friend of Richard Clifford, rhythm bone player from Connecticut. *Steve Brown*]

## Mary Lee Sweet Rattling Bones Made of Sticks and Stones

### **Mary Lee Sweet Rattling Bones Made of Sticks and Stones**

Performing as Backintyme <http://backintyme.com/performances.php>

I was standing in a grassy field in front of a Civil War sutler's tent the first time I saw bones. To the sounds of cannon and rifle fire and the thunder of horses hooves as the cavalry

*(Continued from page 4)*

raced into battle, I surveyed boxes and more boxes filled with multi-colored sticks. The vendor told me what they were and demonstrated how to play them. Unable to master a stringed instrument, I was sure my musical fortunes would improve as I learned this new instrument. Since Frank and I do nineteenth century music and storytelling, the bones would be a perfect fit. Two years later, I managed to keep them from flying across the room as I practiced, but my performances were not riveting.

Then I discovered the Rhythm Bones Society and entered a new world of adventure. Frank and I began to travel to cities that we had not visited before as we attended the annual Rhythm Bones Fests. Greensboro, North Carolina was our introduction to the world of Boners with all its variety and cast of characters. As we practiced our performance songs in the hotel room, there was a knock on the door. A man I did not know stood at the door smiling and said, "I hear a bones player in this room." It was Don DeCamp, one of the best bones players around, and he had called ME a bones player!

At Guilford College, where the Bones Fest was held, we discovered that "It's a Small World After All," when Hank Tenenbaum from Virginia said to us, "I hear you're from Florida. Do you happen to know VGO?" We do! Hank and VGO, a Florida Folk Festival favorite, had performed together in the D.C. area 30 years ago. Russ Myers, also from Virginia sat down and showed us his whalebones and how he could change the pitch by moving his fingers. I loved the sound of the whalebones and Russ loved the sound of my cow bones that I had bought in Ireland. He wanted to make a trade, but to my suggestion, he said, "No! You can't have the whale bones!"

We have not missed a Bones Fest since that first one in 2002. We've been to nine now, and with each new one we meet more friends to add to the ones we already have. Our travel log includes Louisville, KY, Reston, VA, Signal Mountain/Chattanooga, TN, New Bedford, MA, Newburg/Milwaukee, IL, St. Louis, MO, and

Old Town Alexandria, VA.

With each Bones Fest, I learn new tricks and improve my playing. I went from one handed playing to two handed playing and from a few on-the-beat clicks to a rhythmic style all my own that makes people stop and look and ask how it's done.

In Milwaukee we performed with Bones Fest on stage at the Irish Festival and marveled at Dave "Black Bart" Boyles' combination washboard and bones playing. In St Louis we did NOT get to take a riverboat cruise because presidential candidate Barak Obama made an unannounced appearance down by the riverside. But I met Ida May Schmich who, at 94, rattles the bones, plays in the St. Louis Banjo Club, and drove us back to the hotel! In Old Town Alexandria we were treated to the first Bones Fest wedding, where the bride walked under an arch of Bones players' raised arms holding their bones aloft.

My bones playing and my performance skills have been greatly influenced by the magic of Bones Fests. There is inspiration in the air and a family reunion atmosphere. Like all families, there are young and old, and shy and bold. If there were a royal family, it would be the Cowett Clan of North Carolina. Everett Cowett is the "Founding Father" of the organization. There's also Al, Dan, John, Martha and Tom Cowett. Here a Cowett, there a Cowett, everywhere a Cowett! Playing bones, manning the registration tables, running sound, mc'ing, and welcoming everyone with miles of smiles.

Jonathan Danforth, whose grandfather Percy Danforth helped preserve the art of playing bones, is known for whistling or singing accapello while playing bones. Spike Bones Muhrer juggles tambourines and plays bones in the dark while wearing a skeleton outfit. Sky Bartlett started playing when he was 16 with Shorty Boulet, a master player, and Ernie Duffy, and is leaving the rest of us in the dust! The Mescher Trio dresses in matching clothes and performs in perfectly choreographed unison. Bill Vits, a professional percussionist plays so fast that his bones look like mockingbird wings floating vertically upwards. Kenny Wolin of the President's Own

Marine Band keeps trying to teach us polyrhythms. Tim Reilly, from New Bedford, can make the bones talk and taught us the art of scrimshaw. Who can forget the year Gil Hibben, known for martial arts and knife design, played the bones while dancing the hula! John Cahill wowed us all with his Uncle Sam outfit as he strutted around playing his bones. Walt Watkins rattles his bones and leads others in his famous "pass off" which lets players share the spotlight and then "pass" the play to the next person.

Johnny Perona, who played bones and silver spoons, will live on in our memories, as will Vivian Cox and Mary B. Seel. I had the privilege of meeting and watching these fine folks perform at Bones Fests. While in her eighties, Vivian was playing for tourists in Indiana with a band at the Boggstown Inn. Mary traveled the world to provide health care and shared her bones playing wherever she went.

Dedication and expertise are rampant in the Rhythm Bones Society. Steve Brown has won the bones competition in Ireland. Steve Wixon is an outstanding bones player and has also contributed by researching the history as well as publishing newsletters and producing videos of the shows. Scott Miller makes and sells bones and related products and is a champion bones player.

There are so many wonderful, unique players that I cannot list them all. At Bones Fests each year they share their talents and provide a very professional show for the public. Among the many things I have learned is that bones (or spoons) players are not always welcome in a session. You must be tactful and respectful, as illustrated by this poetry, which is part of a song titled The Spoons Murder by Con O'Drisceoil.

"Without waiting to ask our permission

He took out a large pair of soup-spoons.

Our teeth in short time we were gritting

As he shook and he rattled his toys,

And the company's eardrums were splitting

With his ugly mechanical noise."

*Mary Lee Sweet*

# A Rhythm Bones Story From Dennis Zech

I guess we share a mutual interest in playing the "bones". Here's some history:

My dad, Clarence Zech, showed me how to play when I was about 10. That's about the same age he was when he decided to learn (about 1922). His dad was a carpenter and they built a lot of barns in the area and then they would have barn dances to celebrate and that's when he saw Alfred Wagoner playing the bones to a Polka beat. He said he got such a kick out of the sound he went to the butcher shop the next day and asked for some cow rib bones and practiced and practiced and that's how he got his start. We still have those thick old bones around, but he likes his ebony bones as they are much easier on the hands. He says that after he learned how to play with both hands at same time the audiences got really excited about his playing.

He became quite well known in our area of Wisconsin as the "BonesMan" and would occasionally put on "one-man shows" back then with a little record player and loud two-fisted clacking at conventions and meetings that wanted some entertainment.

After he retired from 25 years at the Badger Army Ammunition Plant in 1975 and Mom died a few years later, he says and I know, that "Bones Playing" saved his life, as the music pulled him from a dark hole of depression when Marsha, the accordion player of the Senior Seranaders Band, asked him to join them. They toured all over Wisconsin and I think they must have played at just about every Nursing Home - and when Clarence wasn't there they would always ask "Where's the BonesMan?" He gets such a kick out of that. He's 90 years old now, still lives at home, and is slowing down just a little.

Well now, about me - the beat goes on: When I was a kid and I had to do something for a required Talent Show in our Fifth Grade at Baraboo

East School I played Camptown Races on my harmonica with the left hand and rattled those old cow rib bones with my right. This shy guy (still am) was so nervous it was hard to stop rattling. Anyway, I guess, as they say, I awed the audience that glorious day and they dragged me all over the school to show off.

Of course, later in my youth, I left the bones behind for drumsticks. But about a year ago now, I rediscovered the joy of making old-time music and I knew I wanted to carry on playing the bones so I picked them up again and started practicing. I haven't gone public again yet but now whenever I feel down or tired I'll just put on a CD to play along with and pretty soon my wife says I'm getting "all hepped-up". Seems like the bones can really punch up the rhythm for some Polka, Bluegrass, and Celtic music (we love the Natalie MacMaster Cape Breton Music).

I like the nice "tap-pet-ty" sound I'm getting from a Shooting Star rosewood paired with slightly smaller ebony wedge. Dad says it's not loud enough but I want to try to learn play nice with the rest of an acoustic group and not take-over. But I think I will have to try and make my own bones because I want them to fit my hands better.

Also my wife has taken up the fiddle (she played "violin" in her youth) and we really hope to get to one of your Bones Fests someday.

Thanks for your interest, See Ya,  
*Dennis Zech*

## Website of the Quarter

**<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL82F9FC5A01D448F8>**. Scott Miller has a collection of rhythm bones instructional videos that is different than those on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. Skeff Flynn says "check them out."

*(Continued from page 1)*

as he was skilled at tossing one of the bones in the air, catching it, and continuing on with the song.<sup>1</sup> This interest in showmanship would eventually lead to him making the acquaintance of Dan Emmett.

In 1843, Brower, along with Dan Emmett, Billy Whitlock, and Dick Pelham, formed what was known as the Virginia Minstrels. Their first performance was at Chatham's Theater in New York. The group decided on presenting to the listeners a performance of true southern negro music. A combination of dramatics, excitement and traditional banjo music presented the first minstrel show. Soon after, this performance was repeated at the Bowery Amphitheatre. Afterwards, the America minstrel movement had begun.

While other minstrel groups started to appear throughout the 1840s-50s, the formula for minstrel music had already been set. While the banjo and fiddle provided the melody, the bones and tambourine provided the rhythm. Whereas in traditional Irish or English music, the bones are played in one hand, Brower had popularized the idea of using two hands to promote intricate rhythms. Rather than just provided a steady rhythm, the American minstrel bones player kept the basic rhythm while adding in a certain flair. Not only were the bones for playing, they became an integral part of the showmanship. In addition, it became a standard part of the overall show that the two "end men", the bones player and tambo player, were the cut ups, while the banjo player, or interlocutor, kept the show moving along. The antics of the bones player were a large part of what made the minstrel show so popular for the American public to watch. Between his witticisms, antics and continual motions, the audience was both entertained and spellbound. This was evident in a manual written by Brower, in 1863, entitled "Frank Brower's Black Diamond Songster and Ebony Jester: New and Original Songs, Pathetic Ballads, Stump Speeches, Specimens of Ethiopian Oratory and Witticisms". Overall, this formula for minstrel shows would

remain in place during the civil war and into the turn of the century.

The creation of the minstrel show would mean that this type of performance and playing would be finely honed and at its peak during the 1860s. With the advent of the civil war, in 1861, the American public had come to love minstrel music. A combination of catchy tunes and exciting performances portrayed a romanticized version of southern life. Naturally, this popular form of music would accompany both armies as they marched off to war. The American civil war is typical of most wars, in that the bulk of both armies were composed of young men. These same young men also had interests in the latest or more popular forms of music of the time. For this reason, minstrel music would become a favorite of soldiers from both the north and the south.

A typical soldier during the civil war would be issued a wide variety of items that they were expected to carry on a daily basis. This included ones rifle, equipment and rations. Extra items were very quickly discarded as extra weight. However, musical instruments still managed to find their way into a soldier's knapsack or pockets. Out of all of the popular instruments, the bones were the easiest to make and to carry. The two traditional materials, bone and wood were both easily accessible to a typical soldier. Constantly having to procure wood for fires, a typical soldier would have easy access to a wide variety of hard woods. In turn, the handy pocket knife could easily produce a pair of hickory or maple bones in no time at all. Today, there are quite a few hand-carved artifacts produced by soldiers that show the remarkable skills that they had. Bones are found, documented to the war, in a wide variety of woods and styles. However, the 12" bones used by Frank Brower are seldom found, and a more reasonable 6-8" are more common. In addition to wood, the traditional style made from animal bones was equally common. Either through foraging, or issued meats, soldiers had easy access to a variety of bones. Beef, pig, goat, or even horse bones could all be obtained. In Remi-

niscences of A Banjo Player, written in 1893, Mr. A. Baur writes about his experiences in 1864. He said, "In addition to the banjo and accordion, a set of beef bones were obtained and a sheet iron mess pan answered for a tambourine".<sup>2</sup> With these simple items, a soldier could replicate the popular tunes of the time around the camp fire. This entertainment also helped the soldiers cope with both the monotony and horrors of war.

Evidence of bones playing around camp is evident through different first-hand accounts written during or after the war. This is evident in an account written by the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Colored Cavalry, "Many of them had fine voices, and the bones and banjo concerts they gave, attracted many people to the camp". Confederate private John O. Casler of the famed Stonewall Brigade describes the playing of the bones in a winter camp performance in 1864, "Noble T. Johnson, of the 5<sup>th</sup> Virginia, was one of the end men, handled the bones, and was one of the most comical characters I ever saw. He could keep the house in a roar of applause all the time."<sup>3</sup>

Not only did soldiers in the ranks enjoy the banjo and the bones, but the officers also expressed their pleasure at the sound of these instruments. Confederate general J.E.B. Stuart was so fond of music in camp that he purposefully surrounded himself with a variety of different talents. Minstrel player and banjoist Sam Sweeney, the younger brother of famous minstrel singer Joe Sweeney, served as his personal musician. He was joined by Stuart's servant Bob who accompanied him on the bones. Mulatto Bob was known for his bones playing during his performances. In addition, Samuel Moorman Gregory was Sweeney's infantry contemporary in the Army of Northern Virginia. "Flannery and Mayhew" played a banjo and bones duet in a Confederate soldier's show of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Alabama Volunteers in Norfolk, VA., in Sept. 1861, as recalled in the New York Clipper, Nov. 21, 1874.<sup>4</sup>

Through the influence of minstrel style music, the bones were introduced to the American public via popular music. However, they still

kept their place in traditional Irish music during the Civil War. During the war, both sides experienced a large number of Irish-Americans joining the ranks. The union army had over 150,000 Irish serving to fight for the cause. Numbers for Irish serving in the confederate army are somewhat sketchy, yet their representation was quite evident.<sup>5</sup> With this large number of Irish serving in the ranks, they not only brought their eagerness to serve, but they also brought with them customs and culture. Traditional Irish songs and music were also a part of our culture that showed through during the civil war. Popular tunes such as "Minstrel Boy" were popular amongst the troops whether they were Irish or not. With this influence on popular music, it is only natural that instruments in camp were played for a variety of different types of music. Thus, not only would the bones be played for banjo tunes, but just as much for traditional Irish songs.

Even though the bones have a long history, it can be said that the birth and influence of minstrel style music helped expose the American public to the instrument. This was especially evident during the American Civil War, when a large portion of the male population was involved. This infusion of various cultures, whether they be Irish or southern, came together to display different styles of popular music. Due to its simplicity, and at the same time its uniqueness, the bones had proven to be a valuable part of the fusion of styles. Simple, yet effective, the rattling of the bones kept a beat for any tune while displaying their uniqueness as an instrument. *Rick Musselman*

#### Footnotes:

1. Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Families Claim to the Confederate Anthem by Howard and Judith Sacks, 1993.
2. Reminiscences of a Banjo Player by A. Baur, 1893.
3. Music of the Civil War Era by Steven Cornelius, 2004.
4. New York Clipper, Nov. 21, 1874.
5. The Civil War Society's "Encyclopedia of the Civil War", [www.civilwarhome.com](http://www.civilwarhome.com)

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Claude Bonang makes a variety of things utilizing various marine organisms and driftwood which he refers to as Marine Motif Art. His latest creation is of creature which he refers to as Venus-mytilus (the scientific genera of the quahog and blue mussel) playing the bones. He fashioned the bones from an old piece of wooden lobster trap lathe.

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*Address Correction Requested*