



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 15, No. 1 2013

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## Executive Director's Column

Well Bones Fest XVII is starting to take shape right smack in the center of New England. The City of Leominster is embracing us and we have commitments to use City Hall for our Saturday night concert, and the possibility of a live feed over their Cable Access Television, perhaps a first for a bones fest. I'm hoping that the site of our Friday and Saturday activities will be the Leominster Environmental Center, a lovely building on 20 or so acres of land, about 5 min drive from the hotel I'm negotiating with. Possible performances are being worked on including television spots on Thursday night, visit to the city run camp programs to teach children, and a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to view the Bone Player, William Sidney Mount's mid 19th century painting. The dates are August

9th through the 11th, and while we have availability through the city and the hotel, it's not written in stone yet. Stay tuned!

This is the perfect time to travel to Ireland to compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship in Abbeyfeale. First it is the year of the Gathering and many activities and incentives are planned for getting people there. Secondly this is the best and most comprehensive bone playing competition we have. They hire well known and extremely qualified judges (our own Mel Mercier is one), and there is not a spoons player in sight! Thirdly and perhaps most important, if this contest is not supported it just might die out, and that would truly be a shame. So if you have always wanted to test the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Joe Birl - Rhythm Bones Inventor & Promoter

1999. I saw an old music store and went in to see if they had rhythm bones for sale. Bought two pair of Joe Birl rhythm bones (should have bought their entire inventory), saw 'Rhythm Bones' embossed on the black plastic bones, entered it into my browser only to discover Ev Cowett was about to host Bones Fest II in Greensboro, NC, attended that Fest, and have attended every Bones Fest since. Has Joe Birl been an influence in my life—you bet!

Joe has influenced an untold number of people having sold over 200,000 sets, and Scott Miller of Dry Bones Music Company says Joe's wooden rhythm bones (announced as new product in 2002) are his biggest seller. You will read personal stories from people below, and I bet you have a Joe Birl story of your own.

Joe Birl was born in Philadelphia on August 20, 1916, and died there on Christmas Eve, 2012. His story is told in online newsletter, Vol 6, No 3, Page 1. While you are looking at our online newsletters, do a Adobe Find search using 'Birl' and you will find lots of references to him. For example, check out the story about when he taught a ballet company to play rhythm bones for a performance. Joe Birl was an inventor, promoter, teacher, rhythm bones player and friend. The photograph to the right was taken at Bones Fest X, and shows a big version of him

with some of his friends in the background. RBS presented Joe the Meritorious Service Award at BFVIII for his many contributions to rhythm bones. See another photograph of Joe playing with friends on Page 8.

Joe has the only patent issued for rhythm bones. He told us about it at Bones Fest III, and this talk and the documents he showed us have been preserved in the History section of our website. You can view the talk at

*(Continued on page 7)*



Joe Birl with 100 of his Rhythm Bones Society friends

## Editorial

The January website update announced the death of 96 year old Joe Birl, and in this issue several members reflect on Joe and the impact he had and continues to have on rhythm bones players. The story begins on Page 1, and there are side stories from Aaron Plunkett, Hank Tenenbaum and Walt Watkins on Pages 4, 6 and 8. Bob Goulet sent the Popular Mechanics Ad on Page 7.

Bones Fest XVII, yes that is seventeen, hosted for the second time (first was BFV) by Executive Director, Steve Brown, will be in Leominster, MA. Preliminary information in Steve's column on Page 1. Our largest Fest, BFX, hosted by the Danforths, was in Massachusetts. This looks to be another great Fest. Mark your calendars.

An unusual thing happened to me a few weeks ago—I was asked to play rhythm bones at a funeral. Rhythm bones have long been associated with ritual and the church, so it is historically appropriate. Member Tim Reily in a BFIX video interview noted that there is a spiritual connection when playing real animal bones as we sort of give them a new life by playing them. I played real bones.

I taught a rhythm bones workshop at the Chattanooga Folk School, and one of those attending came up and show me a picture of his bones playing grandfather. I asked him to write up a story which he did and it is on Page 4.

English member Nail Roche volunteer an article about bones in literature. I hope it inspires others to submit material that helps document the history of rhythm bones. Thanks, Nail

There are five more rhythm bones maker stories, Rob Boer, John Huron, Robi Kessler, and Randy Seppala with a short story by Walter Messick.

Membership in RBS is up this year with 7 more than last year at this early time of the year. That number includes eleven former members whom we welcome back. We pick up a few members throughout the year and several at our Bones Fest. If you know of someone who should be a member, encourage them to join.

## Letter to the Editor

Member Mel Harvey, age 78, died April 23 of this year after a courageous fight with cancer. His wife said he was playing bones in his last days.

He held his bones in a bit unusual style with his index finger holding the stationery bones against his palm. His favorite bones were rosewood. He taught hundreds of people how to play rhythm bones. He learned of RBS from a music store in Coshocton, OH.

## Klepperle Video

Several months ago the Video of the Month was about the Klepperle, the German version of rhythm bones. When it was taken off, it was not linked back in. It is back now and to find it go to our Homepage, click Resources, then Audio/Video, then Audio & Video on our website. Scowl down to the bottom of the page and click Travel Channel Klepperle.

## Rob Boer and Dem Dry Bones

I found you when I got rolling as a bone craftsman. I use real bone. The different densities along a stretch of cow ribs makes for a huge variety of tones, depending on where you hold them, on which end and where on the length. I have pictures of the process at <http://demdrybones.biz/crafting-bones.html>.

Last week I sold my 101<sup>st</sup> pair, and had to take my wife and daughter out to dinner. At least my 8-year-old got excited and claimed "Denny's" so it didn't break the bank.

About half of my sales have been on eBay, and others at sales or consignment at Acoustic Corner (Black Mountain, NC), Song of the Wood (Black Mountain, NC), and Skinny Beats (Asheville, NC). By the way, up here would be a great place to have an annual conference!

Along with the sales, I've given away about 40. The most recent was to David Holt at a concert he did here in Black Mountain a few weeks ago. Dem Dry Bones, *Robert G. Boer*  
[www.demdrybones.biz](http://www.demdrybones.biz)

## *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)

## Website Updates

The January homepage update announced the death of Joe Birl, and presented highlights of his career.

The February update was the last of four videos with highlight from Bones Fest XVI in Orlando, and announced the death of Jim Steakley, a new 99 year old rhythm bones player, with a short video of Jim talking and playing.

The March update had a fun video of Walt Watkins and Mitch Boss playing together at Bones Fest XIII with the Rascals of Ragtime Band. The Photograph of the Month show Swiss Chlefeldi (see Page 5) maker, Robi Kessler and when you click on the photograph it takes you to a video that shows how he makes them plus a lot more. It also announced that a previous Video of the Month on the German Klepperle is back on our website (see Page 5).

# Randy Seppala and Dem Bones

"Dem Bones" was born in 2004, in Covington, Michigan, when I, a rhythm bones player, asked my friend Jim Lohmann, a world class architectural wood carver, if he could make rhythm bones on his CNC machine (computerized router).

Over the past nine years Jim has experimented with various methods and jigs and has brought the making of wooden rhythm bones to a state of near perfection. Bones now come off the machine requiring very little sanding and with minimal waste, of often high dollar woods

The resurgence of bones playing in the 1950's may have been deterred by the fact that bones makers were not able to develop a process capable of putting out large quantities of bones quickly. 'Dem Bones now has a set-up and production process that could yield up to 500 pairs of quality bones (sanded, finished, polished and packaged) in a day; if that should ever become an issue. We are now capable and ready to handle large orders.

Thus far 'Dem Bones has been mainly a retail outlet, selling bones at festivals and workshops through out the region. Bones and various accessories are also sold via the internet, [www.playdembones.com](http://www.playdembones.com), and are shipped out across the United States and the world. 'Dem Bones has sent products to almost every state in the union and to France, England, Ireland, Australia, Canada, Spain, Italy, Finland and Czechoslovakia.

Our new website will be out in the spring. *Randy Seppala* "Da Bones Man." [randyplaydembones@ jamadots.com](mailto:randyplaydembones@jamadots.com)

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVII**, August 9-11, 2013. Leominster, MA. Host is Steve Brown. If you have questions, suggestions or want to volunteer contact him at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com)

**NTCMA and Bones Contest**. August 26-September 1, 2013. Bones contest on Saturday or Sunday.

*(Executive Director Continued from page 1)*  
European waters with your playing, make this the year. *Steve Brown*



# Bones Fest XVII

**Heart of New England  
Leominster, MA**

**August 9-11, 2013**

**Host  
Steve Brown**

**John Huron of Noteworthy Instruments**

When I started making bones, a little over twenty years ago, I was a Civil War re-enactor. I became very interested in the music of the period, in particular the music that would have been going on in the soldier camps. This led me to build my first instrument, a homemade pattern fretless mountain banjo. It also led to information on minstrel shows and to bones. Research is sometimes an avalanche waiting to happen. About that same time, I came across some recordings of banjo and bones music that perked my interest in bones. Not long after that at a craft show I ran across a guy selling bones, watched him for a bit, bought a set and spent the next several months trying to get the "lick" down. Again, this was twenty years ago. No internet. No YouTube. No websites. The libraries had big oak cabinets full of long narrow drawers filled with 3x5 note cards that directed you to where you could find a particular book. I'm not

even sure we even had indoor plumbing. I digress. Anyway, all I had was a few images of minstrel musicians and a "sound" off of a cassette tape. Then one morning it happened! A real roll. I stopped and looked at my hand to mentally record the exact position of my fingers and when I restarted, it was gone. Don't know where it went, but it took about a week to find its way back

So about this time I was making a few more banjos and some less expensive three string instruments and going out to some local craft shows to try and sell them. I generated a good bit of left over hardwood scraps so instead of using it to heat the house, I spun the scraps into bones (figuratively of course) and would sell them at the craft shows. Sometimes that was all that would sell but I would make enough to buy enough gas to get back to the house.

All the woods I use are indigenous Southern Appalachian hardwoods, including some American Chestnut that I reclaimed from an old timber frame barn that was built before the blight that killed all the Chestnut trees. I've always sawn out the basic shape, length, curve, thickness. I do a pair, side by side, in one slab, rough sand them to get out the saw marks then cut the slab in half. I round the edges, different radius inside and out, on a router using a little jig I've made to keep my fingers out of the machine. Then they get finish sanded and I use urethane oil to bring out the natural color and grain of the wood. *John Huron*

[I asked John for more about music in soldier camps and here is his reply.]

First, the music did not differ much between Union and Confederate camps. "Dixie's Land" was a minstrel show tune and pro ported to be one of President Lincoln's favorite. Likewise, I believe the instrumentation in the camps was driven by the cultural entertainment phenom of the day, the minstrel show; fiddle, banjo (fretted banjos were not common until the 1880s), bones and tambourine. The guitar, although it was around was used for "parlor" music and was not a component, i.e. no 1860's string bands.

## Old-timer Bones Player

Here is a picture of my Grandpa Kenneth Frazier, my Mothers' Dad. He was from Laurelville, Ohio, but lived most of his life 40 miles away in Logan, Ohio. He worked at Sears & Roebuck Stores in the hardware Dept and small-time farming while raising 4 children.

He played most rhythm instruments including the bones and Drum trap set. He played in the Panhandle-Fiddlers Band as drummer (rhythm instrumentalist) and sang also. The band played every Sunday morning for several years on WHKC in Columbus, Ohio (65 miles North of Logan). The WHKC Studio was on the top floor of the AIU Building (American Insurance Underwriters Co), later called the Leveck-Lincoln Tower. It was the tallest building in Columbus, Ohio from the early 1900's until the mid-1980's when the Ohio State Office Tower was built.

I was only 6 years old when he passed away in 1956, but was very close to my Grandmother who lived to be 94 yrs. I probably get most of my musical abilities from Kenny, as I play many instruments including drums.

When Grandma gave me his set of bones, I recall my her saying that he played RB on various songs when it was more appropriate than the drums. He would practice out by the barn to get a rhythm he wanted for a particular song, hence the picture of him by the barn. I'm guessing some Latin beat songs etc. we're played with the bones. The band would also play special gigs and I'm sure there were times that did not accommodate the drum set, so the bones were used instead. Appalachian music with Irish jigs for dancing were popular. He must have been pretty good to be in a band on a regular Radio slot. I remember he had a great singing voice and Grandma said he was always dancing around even when he was guiding the old walk -behind tractor plow. Lucky for me I inherited some of his musical abilities. Remember, the 1940's still played a lot of folk and country tunes



(carter family's , the McCoys, the Browns and others) on the radio , as R&B was just getting started and Rock wasn't around yet. The big band sound was still in and Bill Monroe cut his first record that year, In what was to become known as Bluegrass music

Hope to get more involved with the RBS in the future. Thanks for the rhythm bones instruction and the interest in my Grandfathers' musical heritage. *Tom Bumgardner*, Signal Mtn. TN

## Just a Bit of Ipe from Joe Birl

At Bones Fest XIV in Alexandria, I had a conversation with Joe about making bones in a wood I was having a hard time finding, ipe. Joe was telling me that ipe would be some pretty tough wood to work with and suggested 3 or 4 alternatives. I had to nix them all because of my concerns for the environment, sustainable resources, trying to stick with domestically available woods and so forth. We both agreed that ipe is not endangered, yet.

Before the party ended in the 'hospitality' room he was still telling me how tough the wood was to work

with and I told him the closest domestic I thought had the characteristics I was looking for was black locust and he countered with tulip wood. After the fest was over we all went our separate ways I didn't give the conversation any more thought.

Some time after that I got home & there was a priority mail package, from Devereaux Ave in Philadelphia, PA, dated 7/28/10, postage on it was \$6.65. Just enough ipe to make one set.

Many times those that do the most good do their best work in the background and under the radar. I believe that Joe did not actively seek the lime-light as much as he appreciated the respect and admiration he received from those in the Rhythm Bones Society that knew him.

Try to imagine the look of surprise on my face when I went to the LOC (Library of Congress) to see the Carolina Chocolate Drops and on their table of sale items was about a half dozen packs of Joe Birl Bones! They sold out. Dom Flemons told me they always do. Dom was so busy with the CD's and fans they were not able to do as much teaching on the bones as they would have liked. I was able to take a few minutes with one kid, parents in tow, and one adult, kids in tow, and get them started with the basics. Think of the sounds of Joe's bones resonating thru the halls of the LOC and in front of the Capitol as they made their way to their cars...

The impact that Joe had on bones players around WORLD the will resonate long after you and I are one.

The significance of Jimmy Durante's reference to Mrs. Calabash seems especially relevant to Joe at this time. Over the years he has done so much for so many people that the effects are incalculable. "Thank you and GOOD NIGHT, Joe Birl-- wherever you are!!!" *Hank Tenenbaum*

## Walter Messick

I make the Cabin Creek Music bones - every one of them. I made a jig for my band saw to cut them out so I cut out hundreds at a time and then sand them as needed. *Walter Messick*

## Bones in Literature

Further to Steve Brown's previous interesting article on a bones related literary theme, I came across another passing literary reference to the bones, this time in a novel. It is contained in *The Real Charlotte* by Somerville and Ross, which was published in 1894.

Edith Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, were distant cousins and they were members of the Anglo Irish gentry. Somerville's family had property and lands in West Cork and Ross' family had lands in County Galway. They wrote their stories and novels about Irish life together and these were published in both their names. The income from their works was needed as their family fortunes declined. Somerville and Ross were also concerned with the place of women in society and the restrictions they faced, even if they were from privileged backgrounds.

There has been some criticism of their works for including Irish stereotypes in the portrayal of peasants and servants, although it has also been pointed out that they also lampoon the Anglo Irish gentry, as well as British people. Much of their work is comic and episodic, with the Irish RM stories perhaps being the best known; these were adapted for television.

*The Real Charlotte* is generally regarded by literary critics as being their best work and some consider it the first great Irish novel. One of the themes in the novel is the decline of the Anglo Irish gentry, or the ascendancy, which was evident in the late nineteenth century as a result of the impact of the famine and the land wars. Another theme is the aspirations of the Irish middle classes and their desire for social advancement.

The reference to the bones is somewhat curious in nature. An account is given of a character entering a room and playing the spoons "like bones." This seems to be illustrative of one of the motifs in the novel that the men can be sociable, good fun and friendly but also frivolous, unreliable and not to be trusted with a woman's affections. There may be men like that amongst bones and spoons players!

I have tried to play the spoons using a bones technique and it does work, although a lot of rosin would be needed to do this at length. Playing the spoons this way does, mean that unsurprisingly, some traditional

spoons techniques can't be used. Give it a go and see what you think, if you haven't done it already.

Whether the reference in *The Real Charlotte* is meant to be taken literally in terms of the technique used is debatable. It could, of course, simply be a reference to a similarity in the rhythmic playing of the bones and the spoons. It does indicate though some knowledge of traditional Irish music on the part of the authors.

In conclusion, *The Real Charlotte* is in print in the USA. If you would like a long novel about nineteenth century Ireland to pass the winter evenings then it might be one for you.

I'll keep an eye out for any other references to the bones, or related matters, in works of Irish or English literature. *Niall Roche*, Yorkshire, UK

## Joe Birl Remembered by his Son

My dad was always passionate about his bones. He would always have them with him, and would demonstrate to people.

If he had his car worked on and the mechanic was friendly, he might give him a pair of bones and a little demonstration. If he went to the casinos in Atlantic City, he would give the maître d' a pair of bones, and he got a real nice seat to a show.

When I was 12 at Christmas time, he would go to Woolworths and sell bones. They loved him.

My first memory of him playing bones was with a string band at Merrill's on weekend nights.

When he retired at age 80, my mom and dad went on quite a few cruises, and he would play the bones on their talent shows. That kept him young I think.

In fact right up to the end, I found a guy with some ironwood from the Atlantic City Board Walk, and he was going to manufacture new rhythm bones for my dad.

I have the history of how he patented his plastic rhythm bones.

Two weeks ago I saw the Carolina Chocolate Drops and showed it to Dom Flemons and Hubby Jenkin who are selling dad's wooden bones at their concerts. *Joe E. Birl*, his son.

## Malachy Kearns Bodhrans and Bones

I always saw bones played at home as a kid. Ann Ward our great family friend loved playing the poons .. That was regular Ireland then ... No I phones etc ! I make the ebony ones, grenadilla grade ...

My friend here, Franjo Reid, makes the Rib bones for me, as he has a great sense of balancing a set of bone - a magical player too ... We use cow rib. Gently treat the bone not damaging its density etc. it's all a love of music and life really. Soulful. Making them for 35 yrs now. Beir Buaidh *Malachy Kerns*  
[www.bodhran.com](http://www.bodhran.com)

## Robi Kessler Swiss Chlefeldi Maker

The Chlefeldi is the Swiss version of rhythm bones, and one maker is Robi Kessler from Schwyz, Switzerland. There is a video that shows exactly how he makes his Chlefeldi, and it can be found at <http://www.chlefeldi-schwyz.ch>. Click on the Chlefeldi? Tab, scowl to the bottom and play the video.

In addition to clips on how he makes his Chlefeldi, there are clips of bands and dances that reveal some nice Swiss culture.

At 2:00 minutes into the video there is a very good player and at 6:10 there are three girls who play together.

Robi does not speak English and I do not speak German. We communicate via email and use a language translator—for me, <http://microsofttranslator.com>. It actually works quite well. You can also use this translator to translate parts or all of the web pages into English. *Steve Wixson*

## My Friend, Joe Birl

I was saddened to learn of Joe's passing on Christmas Eve. But, if it is your time to be called home, it could not have been a better day to go.

Joe did not ever say much about his faith, but he celebrated life fully and that is what faith is all about. He carried his 96 years very well indeed. He looked much younger and seemed to be in good health. If I had just met him I would have guessed he was 68 to 75. His outlook was always upbeat and positive.

I always bought a 24 pair box of his bones for my inventory which I resold at Six Flags and other venues. Every now and then Joe would phone looking for another order.

He last called about two months ago, but this time he was wanting a copy of a CD he knew I had which included one of his favorite bones playing tunes. The CD is called "Dixieland Hymns", and his favorite tune was "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." The tune begins slow and softly as most hymns do, but soon gets ragged into a very nice rhythm bones beat.

When he first heard it at Bones Fest X I told him it was just a great match for his bones playing style. He loved it. So I burned him a copy and on the Avery cover I listed all the tunes on the CD and inscribed it "To Joe from Walt". It took about a week for the CD to arrive at his home in Philadelphia, and when it arrived Joe phoned

and thanked me profusely. He was very happy having that CD. His passing was only about six weeks later.

I had made Joe's acquaintance around 1985. I had a pair of his black Bakelite ones which I had acquired from a music store in Virginia about 1967. They had a polished click which I liked as an alternative to my noisy standing rib roast beef bones.

Fast forward to 1985, I carried the Bakelite bones in my hip pocket usually and foolishly sat on them, breaking one bone in half. We lived in Texas then and I went from music store to music store trying to find those bones.

My wife, Joy, took up my quest and through great research and a music store in Fort Worth she found Joe's name and address but no bones. She wrote him and he replied that he had sold his business but had some pairs laying around and he sent her two pair. Joy surprised me when she gave me them as a birthday gift!! I wrote Joe a thank you note and there began a running dialog between us.

Fast forward to 1999, Joe had learned of the effort to form a society of bones people, and he phoned to tell me all about it. I sent my name in and was all set to go to the charter Fest when Joy suffered a disk problem and had surgery on her neck to repair it. Joe did go and saved a copy of all the papers related to it which he mailed to me. My first Fest was IV.

I have treasured my friendship with Joe Birl. He was a class act. *Walt Watkins*

## Scott Miller's Joe Birl Reflections

My first set of bones were those small black plastic "Rhythm Bones" with Joe Birl's patented notch. I found them on a display rack at the local acoustic music shop. They cost \$3.75 a pair. "This is a musical instrument I can afford," I exclaimed at the time. That was well over 20 years ago.

The first time I met Joe personally was in 2003 at Bones Fest VII in Louisville, Kentucky. It was during a break in the scheduled activities. I was perusing the bones marketplace area in the lobby of the historic Kentucky Theater in downtown Louisville where Bones Fest was hosted that year by Gil and Linda Hibben. Joe was standing beside his table which had wooden "Rhythm Bones" on display. The wooden bones replaced Joe's ubiquitous black plastic bones which have been sold in music shops since 1949 (but went out of production because the mold broke). As I made my way around the marketplace tables I stopped and chatted with Joe...and being curious about these newfangled wooden style "Rhythm Bones," I gave them a rattle before moving on.

The next time I saw Joe was in July of 2006 at Bones Fest X which was hosted by Jonathan and Melissa Danforth in New Bedford, Massachusetts. It was there that I myself first offered items for sale at the Bones Fest Marketplace. Joe was also there selling his "Rhythm Bones". I stopped by Joe's table and inquired about selling his "Rhythm Bones" at my soon to be opening online bones shop.

A little while later Joe dropped by my table. He took out a slip of paper with his contact info and jotted down his wholesale rates on the back. Then he explained his quantity rates and advised me that the best deal was on orders totaling at least 72 pairs. Joe cautioned me that bones are not a big selling item. I still have that slip of paper.

A few months later I called Joe on the phone and placed my first order for 72 pairs of wooden Joe Birl "Rhythm Bones" (48 black; 24 natural). In addition to sending the bones,



Walt and Joy Watkins with Joe Birl at Bones Fest VI

Joe also mailed me a photograph showing him and Brother Bones in 1949 at the Paramount Record Shop in Philadelphia. It is a marvelous and historically significant photo. With Joe's blessing I produced a commemorative photo magnet of the event. The keepsake memento magnet appeared on March 31, 2007 in my online shop's first newsletter. It was also the shop's first product promotion - and it helped launch the online store. The photo magnet promoted Joe's "Rhythm Bones" of course, plus several Brother Bones items offered at the shop.

Since that time, the shop has sold more than 1,055 pairs of Joe's wooden "Rhythm Bones" (425 black; 630 natural). In fact, Joe's natural wooden maple version are the shop's top selling individual musical bones. The next top selling bones are Joe's black style which are no longer in production and have become a collectors item.

The last time I talked with Joe was in December, just weeks before he passed away. Joe had called on the phone to let me know a price increase would take effect the first of the year. Joe was his usual happy and radiant self. And the call became especially memorable when he mentioned that only two distributors sold his bones: Dom Flemons of the Grammy award-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops - and myself.

Over the past 64 years Joe's famous "Rhythm Bones" with the patented notch have helped at least 150,000 folks (including me) learn how to rattle the bones. And Joe's legacy will continue to live on. That's because Joe's "Rhythm Bones" are now produced under the direction of Joe's son, Joe Birl, Jr.

Yes, it's comforting to know that Joe Birl's "Rhythm Bones" will remain available indefinitely to help even more generations of players take up our favorite musical instrument.

Joe Birl was an iconic figure in the world community of bone players. He was always lively and upbeat and took delight in helping anyone get a grip on the bones. Joe was sharp as a tack and we will certainly miss him. *Scott Miller*

(Continued from page 1)

<http://rhythmbones.com/BirlPatentTalk.html>.

Here are some tidbits. Kenny Wolin bought a set of Joe's bones from Percy Danforth in 1979. Mel Harvey had several of Joe's bones. Ev Cowett's Birl bones were stolen. Old time bluesman, JC Burris, played what he called his 'black African bones,' but when you see JC on a video you can see they are Joe Birl's patented black plastic bones.

Mel Mercier played a cow rib-bone and one of Joe's bones for years until they broke. Mel told that story at Bones Fest III not realizing that Joe was sitting on the front row only four feet away. Mel went back to Ireland with enough of Joe's bones to last a lifetime thanks to Joe's generosity. You can read that story online in Mel's well written words in newsletter, Volume 8, Special Issue 2006, Page 4.

Joe was the reason Walt Watkins joined RBS, and read Walt's story on the page to your left.

Michael Ballard said, "I don't have much in the way of specific memories of Joe except that he was a very friendly guy with a big voice and a passion for bones. At one of the first Bones Fests that I was able to attend, he gave me a pair of his patented plastic bones. At each subsequent Bones Fest, he found some occasion to chat with me and he really wanted to know what I had been up to since he saw me last. I will miss him."

Lee Formicola said, "I had the pleasure of meeting Joe when we were at the Bones Fest in Virginia. We were in the lobby of the hotel, he came over and introduced himself, and from that point on he had our un-

divided attention. He told us about the Birl bones and of course as he spoke we were very envious of those who owned them. I am very happy to have had the opportunity to spend some time with him. He was so willing to share his knowledge and stories with us. What a wonderful guy."

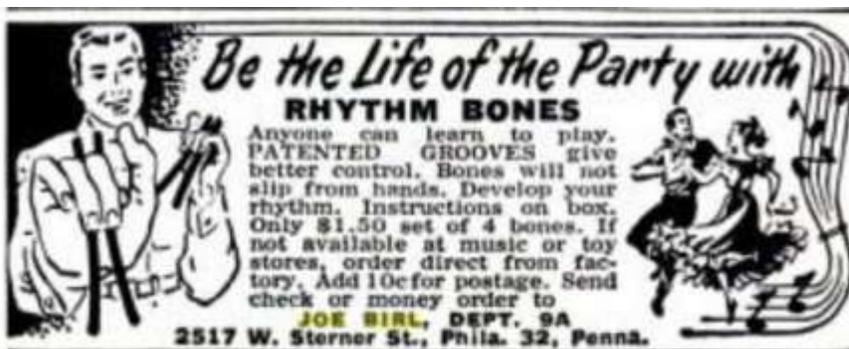
Sharon Mescher said, "I am sad about Joe passing away. At the same time, I am just thankful that we had the privilege to get to know him. They just don't make 'em like him anymore. I will think back on the times that we spent with him, and smile."

Bernie Worrell said, "This picture [see page 8] was taken at Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY in July 2003. I believe it shows Joe's vitality, warmth and interest in all those around him."

Former member Dan Griffin said, "What a great life he led! I have some of his rhythm bones. I've always wanted to add them to one of my children's books, and still intend to. He will be well remembered."

Bob Goulet bought first pair in 1957. How that happened is a story Bob wrote titled *Chance Meeting with Joe Birl* printed in online newsletter, Vol 9, No. 3, page 3. Bob had polio as a child and played bones, that is rulers, to strengthen his arms. Later his dad bought him his first real pair of bones, of course, Joe's bones. At Bones Fest X, Bob got to meet Joe and tell him that story. It's a touching story—go online and read it.

Percy Danforth, Ted Goon, and others made significant contributions to the history of rhythm bones in the last half of the 20th Century. The case could be made that Joe Birl is at the top of that list due to selling over 200,000 bones. I have three pair left. How many do you have? How many are left in the world? *Steve Wixson*



Advertisement for Joe Birl Rhythm Bones from 1954 Popular Mechanics magazine



Photograph of a video promotion to advertise Bones Fest VII in Louisville, KY, July 2003. From left are Steve Brown, the late John Cahill, Bernie Worrell, Michael Ballard, ??, Joe Birl, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet, Steve Wixson and Gil Hibbens

## Aaron Plunkett's Tribute to Joe Birl

Joe Birl has contributed much in the field of bone playing and pioneering his creation, plastic Rhythm Bones. Joe's Rhythm Bones, and his vast fountain of knowledge, in turn, have brought us closer together by

helping to preserve the ancient art form of bone playing. Art forms honor humanity, as well as history, and create a direct link to the past, present and future, a human collective consciousness, and sea of timeless knowledge. It is in that sense I honor Joe Birl, his knowledge, and his joyful spirit. Wishing you well. Your friend,  
*Aaron Plunkett*

[Aaron also sent a poem. There is not enough room to include it all.]  
TOGETHERNESS by a Reike Master. *Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. Whatever we were to each other, we still are. Call me by my old familiar name. Speak to me in the same easy way you always have. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes...*

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# *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*