



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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Executive Director's Column

With the memories of Shepherdstown floating around my head and the prospect of an exciting Bones Fest in New York starting to germinate, I'm just starting to take an account of where I'm at in this whole process.

Another big thank you to Skeffington Flynn and Alyssa Clem for all their hard work in making the Shepherdstown Bones Fest a success. From the Sheddoppers at the Hotel on Thursday night to the Opera House performance on Saturday evening, it was a true delight.

How great to see Wilma Myers again, and to keep Russ Myers memory alive. The tribute to Walt

Watkins, and Jerry Mescher produced tears, and happy memories of our good friends. And seeing the Mescher tradition continue was inspiring!

Having just spent the week end at the Hillsborough, New Hampshire Living History Event, one thing is clear. Although rhythm bones have been forgotten by the general public, they still excite and fascinate when the public sees them. I distributed 25 of our brochures on Saturday, and another 10-15 on Sunday. It will be interesting to see how many people actually contact us through this outreach, (Continued on Page 2)

Highlights From Bones Fest XIX

Hello RBS members! I need to start out by saying that it was an absolute blessing to be able to host Bones Fest XIX. Throughout the weekend I was reminded of what an incredible community this is. I believe it was Mitch Boss who said to me "this is the only place you'll go where everyone you meet just wants to figure out what you're doing well." I couldn't agree more. We all seem to look for and to bring out the best in each other.

I should also note that there are far too many memories to fit into a single article. I will do my best to cover as much as I can but I know that I can't get to everything. Perhaps I'll do a follow up article but for now, bear with me and prepare to jump around a bit as I try to organize some of my favorite recollections of Bones Fest XIX.

Bones Fest XIX officially kicked off

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Editorial

An amazing thing happened to me at Bones Fest XIX. At the end of the General Membership meeting, Steve Brown addressed the members listing some of my contributions to the Rhythm Bones Society. He followed that by presenting me with a wrapped box that I quickly unwrapped only to discover a set of Jerry Mescher Ebony rhythm bones. I had been after Jerry for years to make me a set, but he could not find the high grade of Ebony that he wanted. And this set is perfect as every combination or position in my hands sound great - the most acoustically matched rhythm bones I have ever seen. A big thanks to the RBS Board and in particular to Sharon Mescher for this wonderful surprise. I played them at the Saturday evening public performance.

As you will see in the highlights article by host, Skeff Flynn, beginning on Page 1, and in videos on our website over the next several months, Bones Fest XIX was another outstanding success. The facilities at Shepherd University and the Clarion Hotel more than met our needs, and the public performance in the Shepherdstown Opera House was to a full house (some people were turned away).

Thanks to Mary Lee Sweet for videoing the Fest and also to Art Sands for taking and photoshopping most of the photographs on Pages 4, 5 and 8. Our website and newsletter are the better for it.

There was not room for the minutes of the Board and the General Membership meeting, and these will be printed in the next issue of the newsletter. Of significance, Sky Bartlett was elected as a Board Member at Large taking Tim Reilly's place. Tim, thanks for serving.

Bones Calendar

Bones Fest XX. August 4-7, 2016, Homer, NY hosed by Gerry Hines. Check our website; Tab: Current; Next Fest for details as they become available. Just imagine the T-shirt!

NTCMA Bones Contest. August 31 - September 6, 2015, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday.

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and if we get new members. If you think you will be at an event where you could distribute brochures, please let me know.

At the Board Meeting and General Membership Meeting, discussion on how to interest kids in our instrument and organization produced several good ideas about distributing starter kits to kids, and expanding membership to include families. Judging from the interest at the Living History Event, it doesn't take much to attract them to our ancient instrument, but keeping them interested is the tough part. A good number of children were at my booth over the weekend, each one wanting to get their turn to try them. Several teachers also took my card with the interest of having the bones to their schools. For those of you who have tried to teach groups of kids, it's not easy to give the necessary amount of attention to them, but it does yield some exciting results. The Board continues to address and define our role in working with kids, as the future of rhythm bones playing depends on it.

Lastly, we may be making our earliest announcement of a Bones Fest in our history over the next month. Gerry Hines is working hard to make the arrangements, and his results are impressive. So be prepared to make Bones Fest XX plans almost a year in advance! Thanks again to all Bones Fest attendee's, especially first timers, it was a blast! *Steve Brown*

Letters to the Editor

The Bones Fest sounds good, as always, and wish I was a little nearer. But I do support the the bones in England playing in lots of venues. It was sad news to hear of the passing of our members some of them I met in 2006. Please give my regards to all who might remember me. Kind regards to all. *Charles 'Tony' Humphreys*

Although I've been a member for most of the last decade, this was my first Bones Fest, and I'm glad I got to put faces to names mentioned in the informative and friendly newsletters. Nice job with the writing and editing of it!

Rhythm Bones Player

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.org

So many folks went out of their way to be welcoming. I didn't meet everyone, but it was easy to meet members, many of whom are happy to share tips and suggestions. Several stand outs in especially Skeff, our genial host, Steve, Hank, Spike, Jerry, Kenny and others, really made the weekend for me.

Everyone was invited to join in during breakouts, whether beginners or old rattlers. The deep affections possible were very apparent during the memorial service, from the touching eulogies expressed. If you, like me, have not been to a Bones Fest yet, this first timer hopes you will give it a try, and see how many new friends await you.

Thanks very much again to all. Educational, inspirational, fun! *Jason Ryan*

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on Thursday August 6th in the Tuscany Grille at the Clarion Hotel in Shepherdstown West Virginia. My good friends The Shedhoppers did what they do best. They brought their enthusiasm and their openness and played honest renditions of a wide range of material. Their support was the foundation for a great opening night and the bones players in attendance were more than happy to jump right in, playing and even singing along.

At one point I heard the normally diminutive Mary Gunderson King belting out a tune and thought to myself, "It's a Bones Fest Miracle!" I don't think I've ever heard her sing so loud. Mary's husband Mike King was as solid as ever on the guitar. Bruce Reich happily mentored Jessye Bartlett on the fiddle. Tim Quigley on guitar was, as always, our fearless leader (whether he'll admit or not). Kurt and Pat Cam provided emotional and rhythmic support with Kurt on the Cajon. Jonathon Albright and Hannah Geffert upheld other Appalachian traditions by rocking the washtub bass and washboard, respectively. And of course, Bill Newland's constant looks of surprise and amazement while rocking out on rhythm guitar were thoroughly entertaining.

Friday morning we moved in to the Shepherd University Student Center and got things going in the Storer Ballroom. The facilities were top notch, located a block and a half off of the epicenter of Historic Downtown Shepherdstown. We had a simple stage, ample seating and tables for vendors and registration. Jon Kalbaugh supplied the sound system and Alyssa Clem and I supplied soft drinks, snacks and coffee. The room got lots of natural light and we heard the sound of the town's bells on the hour.

A good bones player has rhythm, but even the best bones players seem to move on a time of their own. The phrase "herding cats" comes to mind. This is my first time hosting any kind of event like this and frankly there are a lot of things you can only learn by doing. Friday morning was challenging. And then Stan Von Hagen gave me a gift sometime after lunch. He asked about the program for the afternoon and I could see the sincere desire to learn in his eyes. He spurred me

to action. I said over and over throughout the weekend that I learned a lot about hosting a Bones Fest on Friday and that Saturday was better as a result. Stan was a big part of that. I see a real difference in Stan's playing this year over last and it's that desire to learn that will keep him moving forward. I'm awarding him the unofficial "most improved player" award this year (I 'unofficially' received this award myself in 2011 from Steve Brown.)

So let's talk about the workshops. In the weeks leading up to Bones Fest XIX Eric Fredenburgh and I discussed our approach. Eric offered to be my "close and play record player" and he came through big time! During the Friday morning session we were still finding our way but managed to rattle off some great tunes featuring acoustic guitar and vocals. The Friday afternoon session took it up a notch. We made things more intimate by moving down to the Blue and Gray room in the Student Center, where all of the workshops would be held from there out. Bill Vits and I talked through our thought processes in how we approached each of the grooves that Eric laid down.

On Saturday it all came together. Eric would start a tune and we would send it around the room pass off style. After each tune we would highlight accent points, recognize approaches that worked and field any questions on what we had covered. Eric's timing is impeccable and he made sure we had a solid foundation to build on. It's amazing how much we can learn from each other in these situations and the Saturday workshops, starting with Eric's, really reinforced what a valuable vehicle the pass off is. We are indebted to Walt Watkins for this and would do well to incorporate this into every facet we can in future fests.

There are definitely two separate and distinct notions about bones playing. One is that the bones are something of a novelty. The bones should be played fast and loud with flare and showmanship for a tune or two, taking a lead role in the music or in the performance. The other is that the bones should be understated and supportive of the music and as such could be present throughout. This latter position is one I have mostly found myself taking. No one ever told Eric that it was silly to have a bones player in the

band. No one ever told the Shedhoppers the bones were only supposed to be used on a tune or two . . . thank goodness! Identifying the context in which you are playing became a theme for the workshops. Knowing which role you are playing is crucial to determining what you should be playing!

The Shedhoppers returned on Saturday afternoon to put on a workshop I really wanted to deliver: How to Play with Acoustic Musicians. The workshop focused on being the foundational percussionist in an acoustic ensemble; getting under the music and supporting it. I was genuinely amazed at how responsive each participant was; whether they were a seasoned player or just beginning everyone involved accepted the challenge I put before them. Adjusting volume to match the ensemble, when to embellish, and when to play simple patterns were just a few of the topics discussed. The Shedhoppers graciously and expertly played a range of styles, tempos and grooves. The defining moment was when Mary Gunderson King led the group in a down tempo, very soft, rendition of "Oh My Mama" by Alela Diane. Haunting and a great showing by all who participated!

I'd be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to recognize Tim Sealy. A resident of nearby Hagerstown, Tim was only able to join us on Saturday. We were fortunate to have him in both workshops that day and it's my sincere hope that we see more of him in the future.

Bones Fest XIX was dedicated to the memory of Walt Watkins and Jerry Mescher. In my welcome message for the program I said that "the connections we make and the impact we have on one another's lives are at least as important as the music we play" and so on Friday afternoon we took time to reflect on the impact that these men had on our community and to celebrate their legacy. Steve Wixson put together some excellent video presentations that served as introductions for those that didn't know them and as reminiscence for those that did. Participants had the opportunity to share their favorite stories and we closed with a massive pass off. These two great Bones Ambassadors are surely missed but they live on in the vibrant traditions

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Randy Seppala



Tim Reilly with Peter and Nathaniel Johnston



Tom Worrell leading Remember Jerry Session



Ernie Duffy (Also led Remember Walt Session)



Adam Klein



Bernie Worrell



Wilma Myers - Bones Fest III on her back porch



Spike Bones



Rowan Corbett



Ivan Browning



Mitch Boss



Scott Morrison



Ben Denny & Adam Klein backing up Steve Wixson



Blue Hammond



Jason Ryan (See his Letter to the Editor)



Sharon Mescher



Gerry Hines - Next year's host for BFXX



Hank Tenenbaum



Dennis Riedesel



Sharon Mescher and Bernie Worrell



John Cohen and Mariah Mullins



Sky Bartlett



Steve Brown and Mitch Boss



Stan Von Hagen



Jeremy Brown



Kenny Wolin



Bill Vits



Mary Lee and Frank Sweet

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they helped instill in us.

After a break for dinner we reconvened in the Storer Ballroom. The plan was to jam, to share and to get ready for the Saturday night concert. This was also the first chance we had to introduce the Tin Roof Pickers to the Rhythm Bones Society. This leads me to a pair of stories, starting with the story of Ben Denny.

I first met Ben sometime about smack dab in the middle of the summer. We immediately hit it off and frankly I knew that there was something special about this young man. The reality at that point was that I was hurting for musicians. I knew the Shedhoppers would do everything they could to help out, but I also knew it was unreasonable to ask them to be there every night of the festival. So I asked Ben if he had a group of guys he normally played with and if they might be willing to help us out.

The Saturday night before Bones Fest I got to meet Andrew Montgomery and Paul Young and to play with the Tin Roof Pickers for the first time. I'm pretty sure all four of us were excited by the experience and any doubts I had were washed away. They came in on Friday and Saturday and absolutely saved the day. What a talented group of young men! And of course the fact that they got to jam with Rowan Corbett on Friday and play at the Opera House on Saturday was a feather in their cap as well. Good stuff all the way around!

I need to extend a special recognition to Ben. Ben was not just my entry point to booking the band. Ben made a point of coming early. Ben made a point of staying late. Ben talked to whoever he could. Ben sat in on any jam he could; and when the night was through we stood in front of the hotel and smoked cigars and talked about how lucky we were to be there. Many, many thanks are in order.

The other story I need to tell while we're on the subject of Friday night is the Story of Randy Jordan and Zack Serleth. Alyssa and I have a tradition of going to Delfest on Memorial Day weekend to celebrate friends and family and to enjoy some first class bluegrass performances and jams. In 2014 I was doing what I normally do around midnight on a Friday of Delfest . . . going to the gazebo to find

pickers to play with. The jam was good and went on to the wee hours. When it came time to pack it up the upright bass player (Zack) asked me if I'd be willing to show him the bones sometime. Tired but willing I told him where I was camped and suggested he come by the next day. My first task of the following morning was to lead an impromptu bones workshop for about a dozen people. Zack and Randy led that charge.

Randy and Zack were only able to attend the Friday night session. Randy texted me the next day to say it was the most welcome he had ever felt in a musical space. Randy and Zack are no strangers to musical spaces as they are both accomplished musicians that play regularly around Baltimore. In the short time they were able to participate in the festival they saw the richness, the diversity and the spirit of comradery that is a signature part of Bones Fest. We're currently working on putting together a Baltimore Bones Workshop for some time in October; stay tuned . . .

One of the things that I have treasured in my Bones Fest experiences has always been the late night jam sessions and Bones Fest XIX was no different. We were fortunate enough to have the Morgan Room at the Clarion hotel which was available to us both Friday and Saturday night. Tom Worrell seems to relish the role of late night DJ and I think we can all agree he deserves the job. Scott Morrison and Art Sands were first time Bones Fest attendees and both were regular and welcome fixtures at the late night sessions.

Perhaps my favorite story from late night this year (though admittedly I had stepped out of the room when it happened) came on Friday night. There was a wedding party at the Clarion that weekend and their 94 year old grandmother (complete with walker) happened by the Morgan room. She remembered hearing her Grandfather play the bones and asked if she could sit with us for a tune or two. Of course she was welcome! As she got situated Rowan jumped up and played the bones for her. As I understand it she was visibly jubilant, happily pantomiming the motions of playing the bones and tapping her foot in time with the music. Moments like this are truly a gift to everyone involved.

Speaking of Rowan, it was a real treat to have him at the festival, even if only for a day. Rowan Corbett is currently a member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops and is also part of the supporting band for Rhiannon Giddens' solo album. He has a beautiful daughter who is not quite a year old. He mentioned to me at one point that he wished he could be doing more for the Rhythm Bones Society (with a newborn, can you imagine?) but the fact is that he is doing more for bones playing than he realizes by being out in the world and playing the bones (among other instruments) in all of the venues that he does. I'm sure that anyone who had the chance to interact with Rowan on Friday will tell you that they were glad that they did. Eric Fredenburgh said to me at one point that he was enjoying watching some of the interactions and pointed to Rowan as an example. I said "yeah, I love Rowan", to which he replied "I love Rowan and I don't even know him!"

The public concert at the Shepherdstown Opera House on Saturday August 8th was absolutely the capstone of the event. Thanks to owner Larry Cumbo (who captured part of the performance on video for us), operations manager Nicola Larsen, Steve Cifala the sound guy, and Shane Harris the bartender for making it a night to remember. I believe we had a Bones Fest first as we had a capacity crowd and actually had to turn away about a dozen people due to lack of seating (fortunately about half of them came back and found seats after intermission). Nicola estimates that we had about 130 people in the room (seating plus general admission). It really was something. There is honestly no way that I can cover the concert in this article but I will share a few thoughts.

One of the primary concerns of the Rhythm Bones Society is to insure the continuation of bones playing traditions. The only way that happens is by getting young people involved. Peter Johnston learned to play the bones from his grandfather. He then passed that tradition on to his son Nathaniel, who at 15 has already become a formidable player.

Nathaniel is somewhat quiet, somewhat reserved. In a musical situation however, Nathaniel speaks volumes. As a fiddler, a drummer, or a bones player Nathaniel knows exactly how to commu-

nicate, to interact, to jam. This is a young man who looked around and saw that the American style of two handed bones playing with wooden bones was well represented; however the Irish tradition of playing animal bones in one hand was not. Situating himself at the center of a crew of phenomenal musicians from the RBS membership playing an Irish tune, Nathaniel delivered a stunning performance. I'm really looking forward to seeing this young man develop and hope to hear him playing the bones for years to come.

The Tin Roof Pickers opened and closed the event and did a fabulous job. I joined them to open the show and then it was off to the races! Sharon Mescher and Bernie Worrell had two great numbers and Sky ended his firecracker performance with a near perfect imitation of the Mescher style. Both were a fitting tribute to Jerry and a celebration of his legacy. Jeremy Brown closed out the first set by once again winning the title of the world's happiest bones player. For the grand finale the Shedhoppers joined the Tin Roof Pickers. All of the bones players assembled on the dance floor and the band launched into a chorus or two of "Momma Don't Allow" (no bones playing 'round here). Good stuff to say the least! The Shedhoppers always end with "Country Roads" and it only seemed fitting to close the concert with that number.

As close to perfect as I feel Bones Fest XIX was I need to make (at least) two apologies. Tim Reilly came to the stage early in the first act expecting to play to a CD. I failed to figure that out with the sound man, forcing Tim to sing A cappella and accompanying himself on bones. Everyone in attendance appreciated his flexibility. He nailed it. Unfortunately my other big mistake in laying out the concert program cost us something. Somehow I missed an entry from Randy Seppala and Jessye Bartlett. It really would have been nice to get those Nickel/Silver spoons ringing out in that room with Jessye on the fiddle. I've seen Randy perform on the spoons in the style of his mentor Johnny Perrona before and I wish we could have shared it with the crowd.

Sunday morning began with a farewell breakfast at the Clarion. For many it was

our last opportunity to connect and to celebrate our fellowship. What a wonderful site to see so many of our members enjoying a meal together.

We had access to the Morgan Room through Sunday afternoon. It served as a drop point and a hangout spot for those that weren't quite ready to say goodbye. Scott Morrison, Art Sands, Steve Brown, Adam Klein, Spike Bones and I were all glad to contribute. We did get one interested soul, Genevieve, who arrived with a strong single tap. By the end of our session she had the tap, the double and the triple – at least some of the time. It was promising that we were able to close Bones Fest XIX on a lesson, a passing on of our tradition.

I need to start wrapping this up so I'll do my best to keep it brief from here out. Again, I'm sure I'm leaving folks out and so I do apologize. That being said, I need to recognize a few more key contributors.

One of these contributors was recognized during the fest – Steve Wixson. For those of you who aren't aware, Steve is the very heart of the Rhythm Bones Society. Without his efforts I'm not sure that the RBS would exist. As part of the fest the Mescher Family with a little help from the RBS board presented Steve with a set of Mescher ebony bones. What a fitting reward to recognize all that he does!

My drummer friend Jon Kalbaugh provided the sound system for the student center and was with us for more than 12 hours on Friday and over 8 hours on Saturday. I handed Jon a set of unfinished Whamdiddle bones on Friday and he came back with a set of practically finished bones on Saturday. He even dug into Randy Seppala's bargain box to pick up a set for a friend of his. Overriding his objections I did manage to pay the man for his services, but in a compromise we diverted part of his compensation toward his first year's dues as a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Welcome Jon!

The Bones Fest XIX logo and t-shirt design were composed by Marek Bennett. We were able to put roughly 100 t-shirts in people's hand this year! I think they look great and should serve as a fantastic conversation starter for anyone who wears them. Skully made a great mascot!

Spike Bones provided the television

we used during the remembering Walt and Jerry Session. He also pulled the audience in at the Opera House using his patented flamboyant brand of showmanship. Mary Lee Sweet once again filled the role of videographer and I look forward to seeing what she captured.

Tim Reilly and I talked about the passage of knowledge and traditions from the "kings to the knights" and how the "knights become the kings". It's amazing to see that in action as Sky Bartlett assumes Tim's post on the board. Many thanks are in order to Tim for his service and I am excited to welcome Sky to the board! I understand that Tim and Kenny Wolin even managed to sit in with a heavy metal band in Shepherdstown after the concert . . .

Bones Fest is always an invigorating experience. It's our community that makes it great. Thank you to everyone who participated in Bones Fest XIX. It really was a gift to me to be able to host this event. We all know that there are people that love us but to see it demonstrated so clearly . . . I'll say it again, it's a gift. There's no other way to describe it. May your bones be with you and I can't wait to see you all at Bones Fest XX! *Skeff Flynn*

[The Rhythm Bones Society is happy to announce that Bones Fest XX will be in Homer, NY (Cortland area) on August 4-7, 2016, hosted by Gerry Hines. Just imagine the T-shirt.]

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From bottom of stairs up and then left to right. Left Stairs: Skeff Flynn, Pete Johnston, Ernie Duffy, Nathaniel Johnston, Bill Vits, Scott Morrison, Spike Bones, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet.

Right Stairs: Jason Ryan, Steve Brown, Jeremy Brown, Sharon Mescher, Jennifer Brown, Wilma Myers, Tim Seals, Blue Hammond, Steve Wixson, John Cohen, Mitch Boss, Randy Seppala

Center from left to right: Janet and Gerry Hines, Kenny Wolin, Tom and Bernie Worrell, Hank Tenenbaum, Jon Kalbaugh, Dennis Riedesel, Art Sands, Annette Boss, Adam Klein, Ivan Brown-ing, Jessye and Sky Bartlett, Mariah Mullins, Stan and Jean Von Hagen.



Steve Brown, Jeyyse Bartlett, Kenny Wolin, Nathaniel Johnston on rhythm bones and Scott Morrison



Steve Wixson and Steve Brown leading meeting



Shedhoppers from Finale



Tin Roof Pickers and Skeff Flynn

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Address Correction Requested