



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 23, No. 3 2021

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Executive Director's Column

Once again I've come face to face with the power of rhythm bones to fascinate and entice people. This time it was at the Eastern Mass Rhythm Festival, a yearly gathering of hand drummers from a variety of traditions. Now I will tell you I have had marginal success with hand drummers. After all beginning drummers are quickly rewarded when hitting a drum with the sound of their drum, while rhythm bones players must work to achieve the beginning sound of their instrument, and eventually to control and shape it to music. I recall a hand drummers festival I attended and had a booth at a number of years ago where drummers, though fascinated with rhythm

bones, would give them a full 30 seconds of attention before moving on to the next booth. I imagined myself and Jeremy by ourselves, while all the festival participants attended the multitude of activities around the festival.

Much to my surprise when we arrived at the workshop site, there were a number of people gathered around waiting for the workshop to begin. There were several drummers, dancers, and curious attendee's all ready to start their journey on rhythm bones! It soon became clear that I had a group of willing and
(Continued on Page 2)

Bones Fest XXV Highlights

Bones Fest XXV, our Silver Anniversary Fest, was to be this gala event near the United States' capital city, but was again a virtual Fest held with Zoom teleconferencing technology. It is remarkable that Bones Fests have been around for twenty five years. Quite an accomplishment due to the talented people who have banded together to preserve and pass on this unique and old musical instrument and gather annually to celebrate it.



While we want to be together in person, teleconferencing has its good points. First, in some ways, it is more intimate as we feel like we are only four to six feet away from each other. Second and more important people from around the world can attend. The Board of Directors doesn't yet know how to do it, but there will be a Zoom component to future in-person Bones Fests.

The format like last year was individual introductions and workshops. However, there was only one meeting room instead of the three last year, and this meant that attendees were together for all sessions.

A composite Zoom Gallery screenshot is on Page 8, and a key to attendee names is on Page 3. Not everyone turned on their video, and the screenshot on Page 8 shows the attendees who did use video.

Following are a few points to remember from each of the workshops. Videos of several workshops

will wind up on our website and be announced as Posts on our Homepage.

Making Rhythm Bones: Steve Brown:

[This Workshop is in three parts, Introduction, Shin Bone Making and Wood Bone Making. It was a video for college students at a technical college in county Galway, Ireland.]

"Welcome to this little introduction to rhythm bone making. Today we will focus on making them, the kinds of materials they are made out of, and a little bit of their history. We assume the very first rhythm bones players used rib bones. We don't know how old that was, but the technique was passed down from one person to the next."

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Steve Brown, Emcee and Bone Making Workshop leader

Editorial

I am always excited after a Bones Fest, and this year is no different even if it was again a virtual Fest. I am disappointed that we could not celebrate the 25th or Silver Anniversary of Bones Fests, but we have another chance as we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the *Rhythm Bones Society* in 2024. Let's blow it out in '24. And hopefully, we will meet next year in-person.

The BFXXV Highlights start on Page 1, and thanks to workshop leaders for the information they share. There are a few Letters to the Editor with reflections from the Fest and Dave Boyles passing. There is an update on our website update.

And new Bones Fest attendee, Matt Maise, shares his technique for teaching kids how to play rhythm bones. Thanks, Matt.

Letters to the Editor

I was very impressed and honored to be included in the Bones Fest. Always have great questions and comments from so many good rhythm bones artists. It is a great learning experience for any player at any level. I think we should really look forward to a great live event next year and hope this silly virus dies out. Rhythm bones sound so much better live than through a computer speaker. Cheers. Thanks again. Braddutz.bandcamp.com

As a new member, I don't have the depth to comment, based on how past Fests compare, and I wasn't able to attend the zoom on the day that the Fest took place, but I sure appreciated the postings of some of the components on our website as they were very useful and encouraging. All I can really comment on is how much I appreciate the amount of work it is to put something like this on, how many people are involved and how many moving parts need to come together to bring such an undertaking to fruition. Thanks to all those whose energy made this possible! *Thomas Ferkel*

As I have found since joining RBS, rhythm bones are not just a musical instrument. They magically draw people

together and bring out the best in us. I feel privileged to have been part of RBS and look forward to many more years of fun in great company. The highlight of BFXXV for me was right at the end, when Parker Waite with tears brimming through a joyful smile said "I love this." Slán go fóill, *Tom Connolly*

Thanks so much for a most wonderful day of learning and inspiration about rhythm bones. It felt so good to just immerse myself in rhythm bones information and sounds. I haven't yet found someone here in Chicago to learn from so I learn from inside my percussion soul and go by feel. I would love to learn some of the technical things we talked about today. I especially enjoyed learning the two-handed ideas and exercises.

I hope to be able to join you all next year in person and possibly get some ideas from other people. *Lisa Ornstein*

I only had contact with David Boyles at the Orlando Bones Fest when I was very new to bones playing and all you great folks. I remember sitting with him at BB Kings after the performances and talking about how I didn't think I would ever be able to do some of the things that others had done. His comments to me were not to worry about it, but to develop my own style and have fun with it which I guess I have. Sadly that was the only time I got to meet him. *Gerry Hines*

I can not recall which Bones Fest it was, but it was one of my early Fests. I was shy about playing and David some how picked up this and asked me to come up and play with him. I will always remember his kindness. *Mitch Boss*

Executive Director Column Continued

enthusiastic students anxious to learn rhythm bones and more than interested in them. Serves me right for pre-judging drummers and underestimating rhythm bones themselves! We had a most enjoyable hour teaching, playing, and learning rhythm bones, and a number of them even took rhythm bones home themselves. Rhythm bones can adapt and be used in a variety of music, is there

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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

a future for them in drumming events? Could we see them at Drum circles, belly dance performances, and in a variety of drumming traditions? Stay tuned!

Dave Boyles was a charter member of the RBS, excellent musician, and the Black Bart behind the Black Bart Bones company. He brought rhythm bones and rhythm bone playing to many people in Wisconsin and around the country. He was a fixture at musical events around Milwaukee, and brought Bones Fest to Wisconsin, and the Milwaukee Irish Festival. He was a larger than life character who brought his enthusiasm, and passion to rhythm bones. Dave passed away in June from a rare disorder, and will be sorely missed in our little organization, and events.

This issue of the News Letter has a couple of nuggets, a review of the second virtual Bones Fest, and an article on teaching rhythm bones to kids by Matt Maise. I hope you enjoy it! *Steve Brown*

Each part of this Workshop is a separate video that can be found on Steve Brown's Player Profile page in our Museum.

Concepts in Independence: Kenny Wolin; "I started with some of my own exercises as a percussionist that I've converted from the snare drum world to rhythm bones, and that I use as morning exercises. These are hand dependent exercises to work on and smooth out the transition from hand to hand. Example: rhythm in one hand, rhythm in both hands and rhythm in other hand and back to both hands.

"This was followed by hand independence ideas. I started with a simple rhythm in one hand and showed how to spice it up using the other hand. The example rhythm was; 1 and [2] and 3 4 (no click on beat 2) and it helps to count it out. Then I added the other hand playing on beat 1 and 3. It really helps to speak that rhythm out loud. If you are struggling with this break it down into the first two beats and slow it down. I added off beats, triplets and more in the other hand. You can take any rhythm you are comfortable with and move it from hand to hand and then add to it with the other hand."

How to Improve Your Playing:

Junior Davey: "The best thing for improving your technique is to get them in your hands as often as you can doing your single taps or triplets or whatever. When I am practicing triplets I try and get them as crisp and as sharp as possible." [He demonstrated several of his favorite patterns, some influenced by his bodhran playing, and then brought in former student Noel to demonstrate an off-beat pattern."

Junior was the adjudicator in this year's All Ireland Bones Competition, and he explained his process to everyone including this year's winners, all in attendance, whom he feared (jokingly) might be hostile.

Bill Vits: "If you can play two or three times a day that is better than one long period cause our mind resets, our body resets.

"Another thing I do is go for long walks and practice, and I know I look stupid but I don't care. I'd really like to do a study of how rhythm bones playing affects your heart rate - I bet it cranks

it up another 5 to 10 beats per minute. And you can practice with a metronome which has the range rate of our heartbeat. Find your sweet spot that lets you do what you can do." [Bill demonstrated some rudiments]

Essence of Irish Playing:

Tommy Hayes: "The knowledge of the melody is important when you try to work and play Irish music with rhythm bones or the bodhran. One of the first things I tell beginning players is you need to have at least 50 melodies in your head, and know the tune and where the tune goes. Irish music is really simple. It is 4/4 or 6/8 with variations on the same." There were demonstrations of these.

Junior Davey: "If I were playing a three hour session, I would use rhythm bones periodically. The musicians who like rhythm bones don't like the rattling for two or three hours. It is nice to add the dynamic of percussion to a session." Junior demonstrated his style.

Nicolas Dupin: "I can add a few things. It is not the grip that is the essence because even Irish players use different grips such as Tommy Hayes and Junior Davey. To me the one handed grip is more Irish than anything though now you do have a few younger players playing double handed. Also in my experience, 95% use bone bones. The sound of Irish bones playing is connected to rib bones. There's a strong connection between Irish bones playing and bodhran playing. And most players prefer playing in 4/4 time. If you search YouTube for Irish Bones you will find mostly reels."

Essence of Two-Handed Playing:

Bill Vits: "I like playing quarter notes in one hand and filling in with the other hand. Work using one hand to keep the pulse and fill in with sixteenth notes using the other hand." He demonstrated with many different rhythms from simple to complex in the other hand.

Brad Dutz: "I play with slate, rib bone, and wood and almost never play with the same two pair. As a two-handed rhythm bones player, I might play the A-section of a piece on slate, the B-section on wood and maybe the bridge or C-section on both of them. That way you have different sound textures or colors. Another really helpful thing is to know

(Continued on Page 6)

Website Update

The rhythmbones.org website continues to mature with new posts, a 'When and a Where to Play' and a 'How to Use This Website' pages added to the Homepage. There are two new Museum Exhibits; 'Rhythm Bones Contests' and 'Odd and Ends' which has items that are not significant enough to have their own exhibit. It starts with a dedication to rhythm bones players known to have passed away since the RBS was formed.

Links to the *Rhythm Bones Players* newsletters now work on mobile devices, however, most mobile pdf readers cannot jump to a page within a pdf meaning you have to scroll to the referenced article which is a maximum eight page scroll.

There are about 300 pages created in a fairly short time so expect errors and let us know when you find them. Thanks

And PLEASE check out your Player Profile page. Update or give information to create one.

Key to Photograph on Page 8

Top Row: Kenny Wolin, Steve Wixson, Sharon Mescher, Graham Hargrove, Noel from Ireland, Hans Weehuizer, and Ellen Stern.

2nd Row: Dennis Riedesel, Parker Waite, Jim Runner, Nicolas Dupin, Norman Nickols, Brad Dutz, and Lisa Ornstein.

3rd Row: Teri Wolin, Mardeen Gordon, Stan Von Hagen, Judy Wolin, Tom Connolly, Andy Riffin, Jeremy and Steve Brown.

4th Row: Tommy Hayes, Skeffington Flynn, Mary Lee Sweet, Randy Gordon, Brian Sheehan, Tommy Cowett, and Heidi Hess-Bynum.

5th Row: Ron Bruschi, Annika Mikolajko-Osman, Dano Schultz, Bill Vits, Michael Ballard, Arleen Krupa, and Ann Coulter.

6th Row: Junior Davey, Jonathan Danforth, Dean Robinson, Steve Litsios, Medl Mercier, Gerry Hines, and Matt Maise.

7th Row: Aaron Plunkett and Clair Schiller

Individuals



Michael Ballard



Ron Bruschi



Tommy Cowett



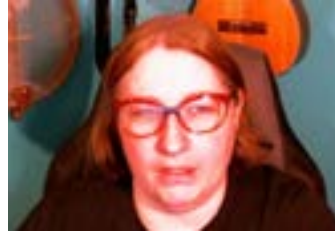
Jonathan Danforth



Dennis Devine



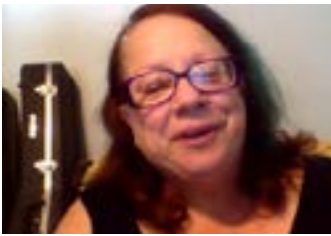
Randy Gordon



Heidi Hess-Bynum



Gerry Hines



Aileen Krupa



Steve Litsios



Matthew Maise



Sharon Mescher



Norman Nichols



Lisa Ornstein



Aaron Plunkett



Dennis Riedesel



Dean Robinson



Jim Runner



Claire Schiller



Dano Schultz



Brian Sheehan



Ellen Stern



Mary Lee Sweet



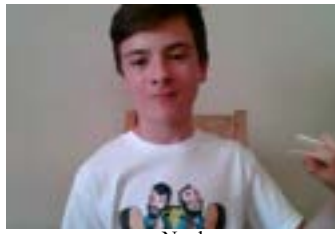
Stan Von Hagen



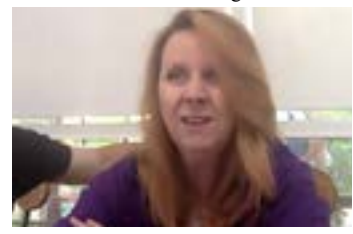
Parker Waite



Hans Weehuizen



Noel



Teri Wolin

Workshops



Kenny Wolin - Concepts in Independence



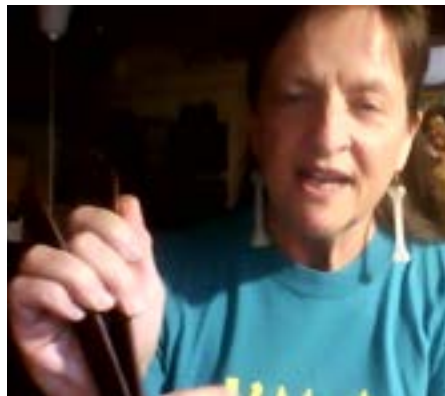
Bill Vits - How to Improve Your Playing and Essence of Two Handed Playing



Junior Davey - How to Improve Your Playing and Essence of Irish Playing



Nicolas Dupin - Essence of Irish Playing



Mardeen Gordon - Bone Tone



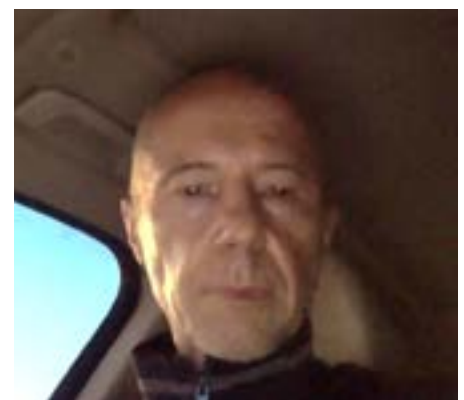
Brad Dutz - Essence of Two-Handed Playing and Bone Tone



Graham Hargrove - Essence of Two-Handed Playing and The Quadruplet



Annika Mikolajko-Osman - Bones Fest XXV Concert Demonstrating Different Styles of Playing



Mel Mercier - Special Presentation - Jerry Mescher and his Impact on Rhythm Bone Playing.



Skeff Flynn our Technical Host



Tommy Hayes
Essence of Irish Playing
(a power failure force him to Zoom on a smartphone)



Tom Connolly and his Goat Bone Story

(Continued from Page 3)

when to lay out and maybe not play the B-section. I think it is super important to leave space so there is room for the music. I'll also change rhythm bones." He demonstrated some of the different types in his collection.

Graham Hargrove: "I want to a slightly different tack on this subject. For me the essence is counterpoint; it's a single rhythmic line against a single rhythmic line, and even rhythmic counterpoint against your feet because your feet are two very useful percussion instruments. I like to get a holistic, whole body approach to this stuff.

"I want to look at two walking patterns that I use all the time when I am practicing rhythm bones. I use a straight back and forth walking pace that has all kinds of music that is going to work with it. If you have the language in your body, no matter what the complexity of the rhythm is, you can figure a way to put it into your body." He demonstrated the other walking pattern and lots of rhythm bones playing using them.

Bone Tone:

Brad Dutz: "There are so many different ways to change tone. For me, the easiest and quickest is changing from one finger between the bones to two fingers. Another way is to turn the stationary bones using the thumb and first finger so it strikes the moving bones on its edge. For me it works good using slate and wood rhythm bones. Still another way is to use two fingers on the stationary bones. There were demonstrations that may not sound as distinct over computer speakers."

Mardeen Gordon: "The easiest way to get a deeper tone is to slide you stationary bones up and it doesn't matter whether you are using one or two fingers between the bones, that deepens the sound. You can find a sweet spot where it is the deepest. [she demonstrated her standard grip.] You can also change the tone by changing the size of the sound chamber formed by the two bones and your fingers. With two fingers between the bones, lift the middle finger to open the chamber and the tone rises.

"I took a wooden spoon and cut the handle off and place it as the stationary bone with the bowl shape on the inside of the chamber which makes a larger

resonating chamber. When I lift my middle finger it changes the tone more than with regular bones giving me a deep, soft tone. If I do that with two different woods in the right and left hands I can get four different tones.

"I also designed a hollow bone with an opening on the side that I thought by placing my finger over the hole might change the tone. Unfortunately the 3D printer could only print with a thin plastic that has little tone. Someday I'll try to do it when I can 3D print using ceramics."

Classical Bones Performance: Anika Mikolajko-Osman: "The aim of the concert is to show that rhythm bones are "multipurpose" and can be used in various music styles. They fit with ethnic, film, pop, jazz and even contemporary music as well.

"You will see a new music video made especially for the Bones Fest. I use mostly instrumental music, and you will also hear a premiere with piano, soprano, and rhythm bones.

"It is also very interesting, that there is so much difference in sound between each pair of bones. Another grip, material or just another handmade pair means a completely different sound. That's why bones are a one of a kind instrument."

This video is online at [youtube.com/watch?v=EFa5a2w_1E0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFa5a2w_1E0) or play it from her Player Profile page in our Museum.

The Quadruplet: Graham Hargrove: "This is a technique lesson and it doesn't matter if you are a one handed or two handed player and works with the American or Irish Grip. The technique is a momentum technique like the triplet with its three bounces. [He demonstrated it.] My fingers are very relaxed and I can go from a reasonably slow tempo to a fast tempo. This is a very versatile technique and I am biased as I think we all should be doing it." [It is difficult to describe the technique in words, but a video of this Workshop is on Graham's Player Profile page in our Museum. Graham got the technique from Aaron Plunkett's instructional video and Aaron, who was an attendee, provided a few additional comments on the technique.]

The Goat Bone Story: Tom Connolly

"Almost as long as I've been playing rhythm bones I've been looking for goat bones. I started my search in earnest

about 10 years ago, and have looked in all corners of Ireland! I got some at one point from an environmentally conscious butcher called Billy Grene but they were too small. Eventually I did get to make some shin bones. They are completely different in tone, weight, look and action to any of the beef bones I've made. It was a bitter-sweet success as the source was a 5 year old buck belonging to my son-in-law Joe, the beautifully gentle Rug, who died prematurely earlier this year. In my workshop I summarized my quest and paid tribute to Rug. Slán go fóill."

Jerry Mescher and His Impact on Rhythm Bones Playing: Dr. Mel Mercier:

"I first saw Jerry on the stage at Bones Fest IV, and it was the usual format of everyone getting up and doing their stish. When Jerry got up he just blew me away. At that time I was thinking about a PhD, and I had more or less decided that I wanted to write it about bone playing and especially about two-handed bones playing. I knew nothing about it and the first person I had met who played two handed was Percy Danforth. Later I met Everett Cowett and Russ Myers and saw the blossoming of rhythm bones in North America.

"When Jerry got up he told his story which was tied up with his father, Albert, who had taught himself how to play the bones sitting at his player piano. Jerry learned to play from his father and how to farm. When Jerry played, I was really taken back by what I saw, heard, and felt. So at that point I decided that I had to write about Jerry Mescher.

"So I did write my thesis primarily about Jerry and his dad and sister Bernie [who later learned to play] and that farm and the passing on of practices and traditions."

[A link to an abstract of the thesis is on Mel's Player Profile page in our Museum and it has a link to the thesis. If you want to learn to play Mescher style, Mel has transcribed the Mescher Tradition into sheet music.]

With returning and new rhythm bones attendees and a great group of workshop leaders, this was another memorable Bones Fest. *Steve Wixson*

Teaching Rhythm Bones to Kids

[Charleston, SC based percussionist, Matt Masie, has gained a love and appreciation for the rhythm bones over the last three and a half years. Here he shares some of his techniques behind teaching them to kids. You can contact him at mattm.7819@gmail.com.]

Most of my students come to me to take orchestral percussion lessons or to learn to play the drum set. It's my secret goal, however, to turn all of my students into rhythm bones players!

What I'm going to share with you in this article are techniques that have worked best for me when teaching kids how to play rhythm bones.

With a few exceptions, most of my experience with teaching rhythm bones has been in the format of a private lesson. I always begin with a quick demonstration of the rhythm bones for my students in their first lesson. First I'll play a few taps between my hands. Their eyes usually widen just from watching that, so you can imagine their surprise when I start throwing out triplets and other combinations!

I have found that a good age to start teaching rhythm bones is around eight years old. It can be challenging (but still possible) to teach rhythm bones to kids younger than that. It's difficult for younger kids to hold rhythm bones correctly, let alone apply different amounts of pressure to each bone. In those cases it's best not to push it. It's better to come back to it at a later date when they are a little older and have developed the fine motor skills to properly hold and play them.

The Tap

I don't set my goals too high for my students at the beginning. The first lesson is usually just seeing if they can hold the rhythm bones correctly. I teach my students to hold rhythm bones on both sides of the middle finger. If they are able to do that, I may show them how to play a Tap.

Kids can get frustrated quickly trying to play the Tap, so I only work with them on it for a few minutes each lesson. I try not to push them to the point where they want to give up playing rhythm bones entirely out of frustration.

The classic example that I use in

regards to explaining how to play a Tap is to think of turning a door knob. I also like what David Holt says in his folk percussion instructional video, Folk Rhythms, about imagining you have a spider on your hand and you are trying to twist your hand quickly to fling it off.

There are several reasons why kids may not be able to produce a Tap right away:

1. They don't bring their hand all the way back (the skin should wrinkle at the wrist).
2. The rhythm bones are touching each other or are too far apart.
3. The rhythm bones are too loose or tight in the hand.
4. The Tap movement is too slow.

There is a lot to think about when trying to play a Tap. Again, I have found it best to only work on it for a few minutes each lesson with my students. They are usually able to play consistent taps after several lessons.

The Triplet

Watching their little faces light up when they play their first triplet never gets old! Some students can play them almost immediately, others can take as long as a month or even more. I'll spend a little more time on this technique in our lessons, usually up to ten minutes. I find that they will grow impatient with trying to play triplets if we go any longer than that. The key is to work on it a little each week and to stop before they get frustrated.

One of the best ways I have found to get a student to play triplets is to have them imitate a windshield wiper. Another is to imitate the hand movements of a flapper dancing (or at least my interpretation of a flapper dancing). We will actually stand up and dance like a flapper in lessons. Best to keep things as fun and light as possible! Also, moving both hands even if the rhythm bones are only in one hand helps to get the motion of the triplet down faster.

I've noticed that my students have a tendency to not look at their hand when they play (even if I keep nagging them about it!). I've realized that having them play in front of a mirror is the fastest way to get them to play the triplet. I'll usually have them sit down while I stand behind them so they can copy my movements as they are looking in the mirror.

Combination Exercises

Once they are able to play the triplet we'll then play exercises combining triplets and taps. I'll start with four beats of triplets followed by a tap. If they can do that I start subtracting triplets: three triplets and a tap, two triplets and a tap, and finally the most difficult to loop over and over, a triplet and a tap.

After they can play several combinations of triplets and taps, I'll play a two measure pattern and try to have them play the same pattern back. Eventually we trade four measure patterns back and forth, trying to get a "conversation" going between ourselves with both of us improvising off of each other.

From there I may pick a song (it can be from any genre) to have them play along with. I'll come up with a couple of patterns before we play the song and then off we go. In no time we are playing rhythm bones to music!

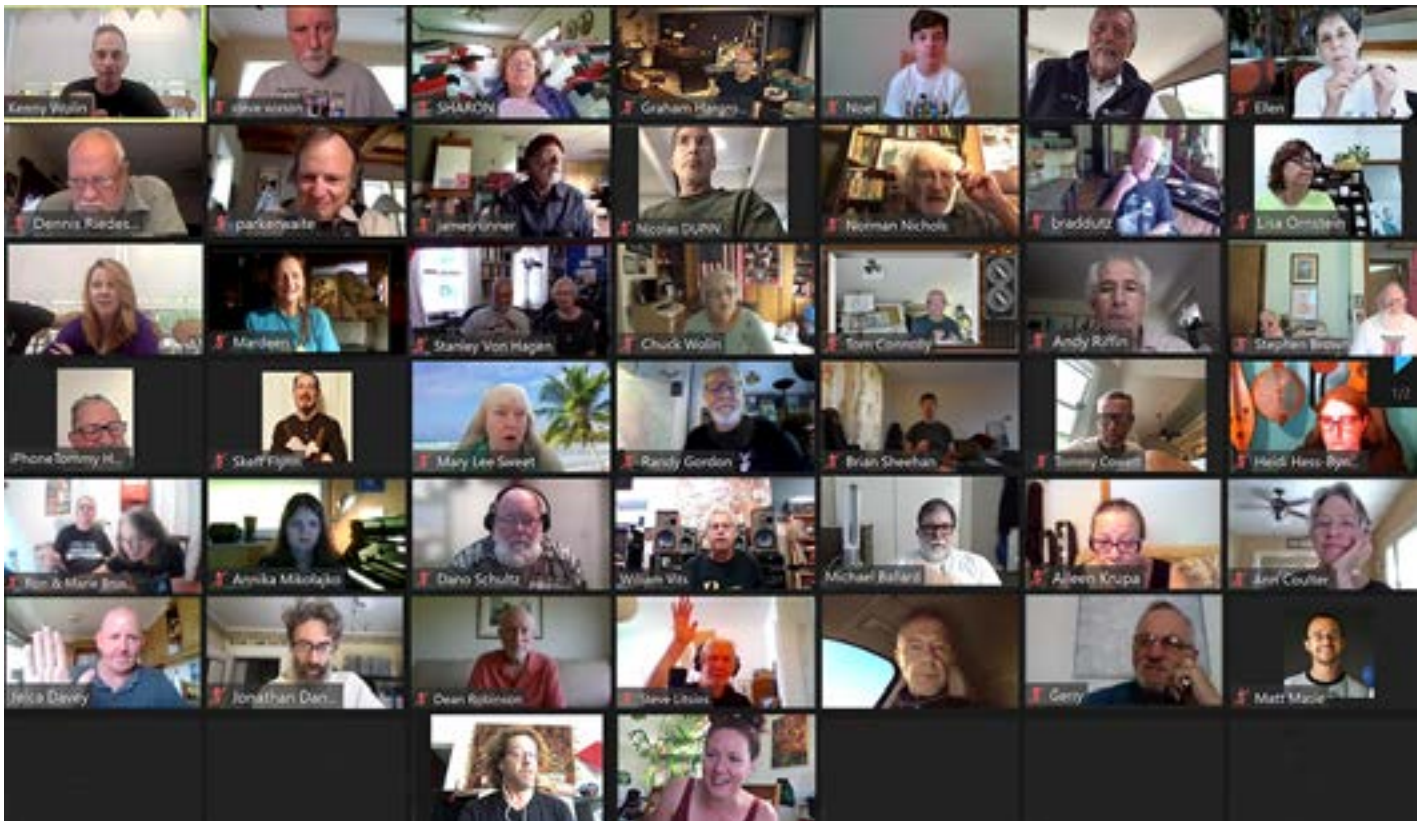
Once they learn how to play taps and triplets in their dominant hand, it's usually easier for them to learn the same techniques in their less dominant hand. They're always surprised when I tell them that it will not be nearly as difficult to play a triplet in their other hand. In fact, it's not out of the ordinary for them to be playing triplets after just a few minutes.

Closing Thoughts

I've come to realize over the last few years that not all of my students will share my passion for rhythm bones. Of course I feel sad about this, but I also understand that my students are on their own unique musical journey to discover how best to express themselves.

I am grateful for the students that continue on their rhythm bones journey with me. I always love when they tell me stories about how they brought their rhythm bones to school and gave a demonstration to their class, or how they showed their uncle the rhythm bones when he came to visit over the summer. They might not realize it, but by doing so they are helping to keep an ancient musical instrument alive for another generation.

Matt Masie



Bones Fest XXV attendees with their video turned on are shown above. See Key on Page 3 for their names. Without Video: Mitch Boss, Andy Cox, Scott Craig, Johnny Fennell, Sam Gould, Tod Roush, Michael Sakarias, Daniel Schiller, and Sander Slomovits.

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested