



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 23, No. 4 2021

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## Executive Director's Column

It's New Years Eve 2021, usually a reflective time, of the good and not so good times of the last year. But this year I find it difficult to reflect. It is the hardest year of my life, one that has seen my oldest son steadily decline from Alzheimers and an undiagnosed medical condition effecting his physical abilities.

Jennifer and I struggle with providing him the care that he needs, while trying to get him the medical treatment we hope might improve his condition. As difficult as it is for him, he never stops saying thank you when we give him a drink, kissing our hands, and giving us that bright smile he has always been

known for.

I admit there are times when I'm not capable of really doing anything. But as Jennifer reminds me, "sink or swim" and as we push on we gain strength from each other. And I am reminded, we all are dealing with the most difficult issues that we have faced in our lives, loved ones passing, and serious illness. That's why it's so important to carry on, be the person we have always been, and for the most part, he is doing that. So I will too, I will play rhythm bones, play the drum, find delight in rhythm

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## Steve Brown

As I look back on my life it always amazes me how certain things effect and change your life. Having Jeremy, a person with Down Syndrome, at 21 did that. And getting a package from Percy Danforth containing two pairs of rhythm bones also changed and impacted my life far beyond my expectations.

I played drums throughout my childhood, and into high school. I took a private course at the Berklee School of music, and even dabbled in piano and violin. I played rock and roll, Jazz, blues, and bought a doumbec and started playing belly dance music. I went to Folk festivals, and even attended the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in 1969.

But my music playing had to be put aside when I married and had a child. I had to focus supporting them, but music was my passion. I had developed an interest in a variety of traditional music, and began attending fiddle contests in the middle and late 70's, but it wasn't until my brother introduced me to Percy Danforth that I made a true connection with rhythm bones. My brother Denny had done some work with Percy transcribing rhythm patterns for him. Denny gave me Percy's address, and three weeks later a package wrapped in brown paper arrived at the door.

When I opened that package, it was the first time I had seen rhythm bones, and nearly drove the whole house crazy trying to learn them. But a couple of months later, after an evening spent with Percy and his wife Fran in a Boston hotel, it all started to gel. Soon I was sitting in with all types of musicians, and driving anyone who would listen crazy with my

enthusiasm.

I also began my lifelong search to connect with other rhythm bones players. I found John Burrill "Mr. Bones of Boston" and spent time with him at his apartment in Brighton, I found Johnny Muise, a Cape Breton rhythm bones player who lived in Boston. And I was always on the search, contacting any players I heard about or saw, Mance Grady, Sandy Davis, Rod Fuller, Hank Tennenbaum, and anyone I heard about.

Fiddle contests became my addiction and I attended and jammed at as many as I could. In September of 78, I sat (Continued on Page 3)



Stephen Brown by Catherine Kingcome

## Editorial

In April, I lost my wife of 60 years of marriage. Some of you knew Janet from when we hosted Bones Fests IV and IX and the evening meals were in our home.

Now I am figuring out how to live as a widower. Projects help and the upgrade of our website was a big one. I also do similar things for my church and my barbershop chorus, and this Christmas season had deadlines that interfered with getting the newsletter completed and on time.

Mitch Boss passed and his obituary is in this issue. Sad indeed.

Our Executive Director, Steve Brown, has not been profiled until this issue due in part because we know him from the large number of articles he has contributed to this newsletter. His time has come and his profile begins on Page 1.

Mardeen Gordon's part of the Bones Fest XXV Bone Tone Workshop presented some ideas that were new to me. She summarizes her workshop in this issue and I hope this leads to further discussions.

Rowan Corbett found time in his performance schedule to attend a few Bones Fests and also lead a workshop. He shares his rhythm bones story.

We heard about Nicolas Dupin in the last newsletter after he won the All-Ireland Bones Competition. He shares his rhythm bones story.

I have talked to Sule Wilson on the telephone a few times over the years, and appreciate his talent. He has not attended a Bones Fest, but he did contribute his profile for our website and for this issue of the newsletter.

John Meader, from the 'Birthplace of Country Music Museum,' attended Bones Fest IX. I checked in recently and learned of DeFord Baily who would at times play rhythm bones on Grand Old Opry.

We had our first General Membership Meeting using Zoom technology, and the minutes of the preceding Board meeting and the membership meeting are in this newsletter. Our Bylaws authorize the Board to set the time and place for meetings and allow members to be notified electronically, so holding a meeting electronically seems within the spirit of our Bylaws.

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Executive Director, Steve Brown, using Zoom teleconferencing technology called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM, EDT as the Nomination Committee for 2022 Board Members. The current Board Members have agreed to serve for another year, and a motion to that effect was approved by acclamation. The Nomination Committee meeting was adjourned but discussion continue.

Since there needs to be a General Membership Meeting before the end of 2021, the Board selected the date of Saturday, November 11, at 2:00 PM Eastern Standard Time for this meeting using Zoom. The agenda will consist of election of Board Members as well as any new business to come before the group. There will be a discussion about the location of Bones Fest XXVI next year. There will be an open forum where attendees can ask questions about leadership and technical issues. The meeting will conclude with the Jerry Mescher Tribute video that was scheduled but not shown at Bones Fest XXV.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:41 EDT. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

A General Membership Meeting was held using Zoom teleconferencing technology on November 11, starting at 1:00 PM, EDT. There was a quorum as members present is a quorum.

This meeting is normally held at the annual Bones Fest, but this year we ran out of time.

Steve Brown, Executive Director, opened the meeting presenting the slate nominated by the Board acting as the Nominations Committee. He opened the floor for further nominations, and being none Gerry Hines moved and Jim Quiram seconded that the nominations be closed. The motion passed.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

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](http://rhythmbones.org)

Elected Board members for 2022 are:

Steve Brown, Executive Director  
Bill Vits, Assistant Director  
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer  
Skeff Flynn  
Sharon Mescher  
Dennis Riedesel  
Kenny Wolin

There was a discussion on the location of Bones Fest XXIII and the hope of an in-person Fest. Kenny and Teri Wolin are interested in hosting this Fest, but they have not formally committed.

A general discussion of various subjects followed, and the meeting adjourned about 2 PM. The Jerry Mescher video was not shown as planned. Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

(Steve Brown continued from Page) in with an Irish band, the Green Castle Band, and became their permanent percussionist, later making two records with them and opening for my favorite band, DeDannan. During the week it was the day job, but on the week ends I played as much as I could, contra dances, festivals, coffee houses, and of course fiddle and banjo contests.

Irish music became my focus and I started attending the regular sessions in Boston, and anywhere I could. Soon I was playing in several bands, had begun playing Bodhran, and listening constantly to the music.

I had always sold wooden rhythm bones for Percy, but after purchasing bone bones from Nicholas Driver, I started thinking about making them. While hanging around a traditional music shop in Cambridge called Sandy's Music, Sandy Sheehan convinced me I could make real bone rhythm bones. I kept looking for bone, ribs at first, but I had heard from Nicholas Driver that he used the leg bones of cows.

I was selling wooden rhythm bones at a fiddle contest, when I ran into an eccentric old man who asked, "do you ever make them out of bone?" This was Milton Shapanka, a retired merchant marine sailor who often worked in bone. Milton invited me over to his workshop, and I started advising him on what the bones should look like, and he showed me how to work with bone, and how to finish them. Soon I was making bone rhythm bones on my own. The early ones were terrible, and it took me years to get the process right.

A good friend, Doug Reiner, who played banjo was asked to make wooden rhythm bones for the Music Emporium in Cambridge, and Doug asked me if I would come over and advise him. Soon I was helping Doug sell rhythm bones at the New England Folk Festival, and later was asked to do workshops on rhythm bones and other percussion instruments.

I always thought it important to connect with the older players, and would often invite them to the New England Folk Festival to help teach the workshop. This became a regular tradition and in my 40 years of attending the folk festival I have had help teaching from: Percy Danforth, John Burrill, Ev Cowette, Russ

Myers, Johnny Muise, Shorty Boulet, Ernie Duffey, Sky Bartlett, Skeffington Flynn, Bruno Giles, Dean Robinson, and many more. Over the years we have taught many hundreds of people to play the bones both adults and children..

Somewhere in the mid nineties I began to get invitations to attend what they called "Bones Fests" from Fred Edmunds. I somehow had made it onto his mailing list and began getting his newsletters. I started buying wooden rhythm bones from him as Percy had died, and Doug was no longer making them.

The first "Bones Fest" was held all the way in North Carolina, and the idea of traveling all the way to North Carolina to play rhythm bones didn't appeal to me much.

It was around this time that I was contacted by Ev Cowett whose daughter Martha had given him a website on rhythm bones as a Christmas present.

When Everett heard about the New England Folk festival and the workshops, he had to come. In the spring of 1999, he and Russ Myers, and Martha came to the festival and were floored with the number of people we had learning rhythm bones.

Ellen Stern from Arkansas also attended that year, and discussion about starting a rhythm bones players organization was hot and heavy. But it wasn't until September of that year that talk became reality as the Rhythm Bones Society was born at Bones Fest III in Brightwood, VA. I was nominated to serve on the Board of Directors, and have ever since.

Being a regular attendee at Fiddle contests, I was well acquainted with competing, though there was little opportunity to compete on rhythm bones. I did compete two years in the Unique and Unusual Instrument contest at the Watatic Mt. Country Music Festival, coming in third the first year, and winning it the next year.

I had heard about the Bones and Spoons contest in Avoca, Iowa, was intrigued and competed in 2002. Yiridy Machar came in first, but I only came in 5th.

Through the Rhythm Bones Society newsletter we began to hear about a contest in Ireland called the All Ireland Bone Playing Competition. Several rhythm bones players who met in Avoca

all agreed to go to Ireland and compete, though as it turned out only Yiridy Machar, the winner at Avoca, and myself actually went.

I was lucky enough to win that year, 2003, and 2004. Since that time I have competed three more times, and have been the only American to Judge both the senior and junior division. Abbeyfeale is like a second home to me now, with multiple friends there.

A great joy to me has been how my son Jeremy has connected with the rhythm bones and rhythm bones players. He learned to play in his way from sitting at my booth at the New England Folk Festival, and has played at numerous Bones Fests and endeared himself to everyone in the organization.

My association with Steve Wixson has been a most amazing experience. He is without a doubt the hardest working person I have ever known and is responsible for the high quality newsletter we produce, and the running of the organization. I have written numerous articles for the newsletter, including interviewing Ronnie McShane, Paddy Moloney, Beniot Bourque, and under Steve's tutelage written many historical articles, for that I am eternally grateful.

Here I am at 71 years, young in comparison to some, but feeling like I want to continue to make a contribution. Thanks to all the membership, the Board, and of course, my wife, who without their support and help my work would not be possible. I leave you with Ev Cowett's timeless response, "May your bones be with you!" *Stephen Brown*

[See Steve's Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

Catherine Kingcome, who did the Page 1 drawing, is a noted artist throughout the UK, Ireland, and the world for her paintings depicting traditional Irish musicians. See [catharinekingcome.co.uk/](http://catharinekingcome.co.uk/)

## James Yoshizawa Facebook Video

A nice Facebook video of member James Yoshizawa accompanying Eimear Arkins ([eimeararkins.com/bio-1](http://eimeararkins.com/bio-1)) singing an Irish tune. [facebook.com/james.yoshizawa/videos/4200258873395964](https://www.facebook.com/james.yoshizawa/videos/4200258873395964)

**(Continued from Page 1)**

bones players, and other musicians, and be thankful that we still have him. If you're struggling with your personal situation, take heart, stay in touch with what you love the most, and do those things that bring happiness into the world, Jeremy does, and I will too!

Just received the sad news Mitch Boss has passed away. I received a phone call from him last week telling me that he was very ill and about to enter hospice. "Tell everybody I love them, and miss seeing them at the bones fests!" I've never had anyone call me to say good bye, and as difficult as you might think it to be, I loved the fact that I could tell Mitch how much I loved him, and enjoyed our friendship. He was one of a kind, great player and performer! I will miss his humor, and his smile.

How delighted I was to read the profiles of rhythm bones players in this issue (myself not with standing). Two players I was not familiar with, Sule Greg Wilson, and Deford Bailly and two who are good friends. Rowan Corbett has been a delight since he showed up in Alexandria, Va., and Nicholas Dupin and I go back many years to our running around Ireland together. These folks are the heart of what we are, a living, breathing organization that continues to grow, despite these difficult times! Do me a favor, pick up those rhythm bones and rattle them loud and clear, just let people know we are here, and we're not going anywhere!

## Rhythm Bones Tone

Ever since I got my first triplet, way back in 1983, I have been experimenting with ways to alter the tone of my bones while playing them.

I discovered very quickly that the easiest way to get a deeper tone is to slide your stationary bone up into your palm, changing the point of contact without changing the weight and motion of the active bone. It doesn't matter whether you are using one or two fingers between the bones, the sound will change. No matter what material your bones are made of, with a little experimentation you can find a sweet

spot where it is the deepest. You will also notice that as the stationary bone gets shorter, the tone also gets softer, which makes it possible to mute your playing for small, intimate jams.

It is very difficult to slide the bone into different positions while playing, however, so the most variation I could get was to use two different kinds of wood in each hand and position one for the lowest tone and one higher, to get two different notes. Lifting the active bone farther from the palm in a "scissor" motion also changes the contact point slightly, which raises the pitch of the tone, and can be done while playing. I experimented with different combinations of wood and worked on my scissor technique, but never really achieved the melodic quality I was looking for.

When Mickie Zekley of Lark in the Morning invited us to sell the bones through the incredible booth they set up at the back of the Music Meadow at Strawberry Music Festival, with free admission in exchange for helping with tear down, we jumped at the chance. They created a display near the front of the booth where I could teach people to play during the breaks between bands. It was during one of those lessons that I met a man from Ireland, whose name I do not remember, and he showed me how to hold the bones in such a way that it is possible to change the shape of the sound chamber while playing, creating higher and lower tones. With two fingers between the bones and the ring finger holding the active bone, lift the middle finger to open the chamber and the tone rises. If you use two pairs with different tones, and can change the tone with both hands, you can get four distinctly different "notes".

In the quest for a richer, deeper tone, I tried making the bones thicker, drilling holes in them, changing the shape and length, but nothing made a big difference. I thought if the bottom of the stationary bone was hollow, it would work, so I got a large wooden spoon, cut the handle off and placed it as the stationary bone with the concave shape facing the active bone, which makes a larger resonating chamber. When I lift my middle finger it changes the tone more than with flat bones, giving me the deep, soft tone I

was seeking and a wider range of notes. This has become my preferred technique, combining spoons and bones to create the "spones".

I also designed a 3D print file of a hollow bone with an opening on the side that I thought by placing my finger in different positions over the hole might change the tone. Unfortunately the free 3D printer at the library could only print with a porous plastic that has a very flat tone. Someday I'll try printing my file with hard plastic, ceramic or metal and test my theory for real.

Meanwhile, I am playing my spones with both hands, improving control with the tone changes, and following the baseline with my four notes to create melodic rhythms. I hope this inspires boners everywhere to explore the boundaries of bone tone. *Mardeen Gordon*

[See Mardeen' Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

## NTCMA Founder Bob Everhart Obituary

The National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests is no more. Tom Worrell (member Bernie's husband) reported that its Founder and Director, Bob Everhart, passed away on August 20, 2021. The festival attracted a large number of performers including Bernie and her brother, the late Jerry Mescher, and one of the many contests was the Bones Contest that Bob called the World



Bob Everhart from RBS 1999 NTCMA Video

Bones Contest (early on the All-Ireland Bones Competition had not yet come into existence).

I attended the Festival in 1999 to video it for Bones Fest III, and the first person I met was Bob. He gave me an overview of the Festival and said I should meet Jerry Mescher. I attended the Bones Competition where Jerry was the emcee, and it was the contest where Bernie won. I met Jerry who introduced me to his family and many others, and I went to Jerry's well attended Bones Workshop.

The COVID pandemic had stopped the Festival and Bob's passing means it is no more. Many of our members have competed in this contest, and it is sad to see that competition go away.

The All-Ireland Bones Competition has higher standards, but maybe we still need a competition for non-Irish style players. If you have thoughts on this issue, email them to me and I will print them in the newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

## Sule Greg Wilson

Born and raised in Washington, DC, I learned to play rhythm bones from my dad who learned as a kid growing up in Philadelphia in the 1920s and '30s. I've played rhythm bones for the Carolina Chocolate Drops string band, with



Sule Greg Wilson with his Clif Ervin rhythm bones

Ronstadt Generations, behind blues and swing performers, and the Repeat Offenders R&B band, as well as my own CDs—The Drummer's Path, Runaway Dreams, Colored Aristocracy (Sankofa Strings), and The Uptown Strut (Sankofa). I've also played 'em in Latin ensembles and more.

I'm offering a monthly series based upon my book, The Drummer's Path. Entitled A Year on the Drummer's Path: Proficiency, Community, Integrity, it goes in-depth on each of the 12 Principles outlined in The Drummer's Path. By the way, I discuss rhythm bones history in that book, too!

My prized rhythm bones are two sets of Clif Ervin teak rhythm bones, made from the same piece of wood, and notched like the ones in the William Sidney Mount painting titled, 'The Bone Player.' See Sule's Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.

## DeFord Baily

DeFord Bailey, born December 14, 1899 and died July 2, 1982, was an American country music and blues star from the 1920s until 1941 (see his photograph on Page 8). He was the first performer to be introduced on Nashville radio station WSM's Grand Ole Opry, the first African-American performer to appear on the show, and the first performer to have his music recorded in Nashville. Bailey played guitar, rhythm bones, and banjo in his career, but is best known for playing the harmonica, often being referred to as a "harmonica wizard." [Abstracted from Wikipedia.]

David Morton was a friend, wrote a

biography about DeFord, and gave us permission to reprint his rhythm bones story.

"DeFord also experimented with various means of accompanied his music... At other times, he clacked sticks or bones together with one hand while holding the harp with the other." [From page 99]

"Another venerable instrument was the bones. 'We'd take the two low ribs of a steak, beef ribs. We'd cut 'em so long and dry 'em out in the sun or in the oven, and sandpaper them till they got nice and smooth. Then we'd go out and see who could beat them the best: You can make a pretty good sound clappin 'em between your fingers.'

"Years later, when DeFord was a star on the Grand Old Opry, he would run across some polished commercial bones in Chattanooga - one pair made out of ivory, one of ebony - and for a time used them in his Opry act." [From Page 21]

[DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music by David C Morton, 1993, University of Tennessee Press.]

David made one recording of DeFord playing rhythm bones. There is a new Player Profile Page for DeFord, and when we get a copy we will post a link to it on his Page. *Steve Wixson*

## Bones Calendar

**NEFFA**, April 22-24, 2022. It is a virtual event this year.. See [neffa.org](http://neffa.org)

**All Ireland Bones Competition**, May Bank Holiday, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. See [feadhbythefeale.com](http://feadhbythefeale.com)

**Bones Fest XXVI**. Summer, 2022, Washington DC area. When details are available there will be a Post on our website.

**NTCMA Festival**, Bob Everhart, the director passed away this year and that likely marks the end of this Festival. See the story on Page 4.

## Nicolas Dupin

My name is Nicolas Dupin, I'm a Frenchman, born in 1961, near Paris, where I was raised and did my studies (in English and American language and literature). I have been living in Brittany for a long while now.

I have always loved music and listened to a lot of it, in all genres. My father and sisters played piano, and I started off playing classical guitar when I was a kid, then moved on to folk guitar, then electric, playing rock and reggae music in teenage bands. As an adult, I also studied jazz tenor saxophone for a few years, but then had a kid, got a job, and stopped playing music altogether.

In 2001, I went to Ireland for the first time. A few years before that, wishing to take up music again, I had started studying bodhran, rhythm bones and spoons on my own, thanks to various VHS videos (like Mel Mercier's and Tommy Hayes,' among others). I had been introduced to Irish music by a French friend of mind, who was married to an Irish dancer, and who played the fiddle. I ended up joining his traditional Irish music band playing bodhran. I first went to Ireland because I wanted to improve my bodhran playing.

At the time, wanting to seriously get into traditional Irish music, I was totally convinced that a « real » Irish percussionist HAD to be able to play bodhran AND rhythm bones AND spoons! Which is what I tried to do. So I kept going back to Ireland for years, and still do. I've been playing rhythm bones for over twenty years now.

In 2001, I went to Inisheer, where a bodhran summer school had just started, mostly to improve my bodhran playing, but as it happened, some of the Irish tutors on the island, who were there to teach bodhran, were also legendary bones players, like Mel Mercier, Tommy Hayes and Johnny McDonagh. That's where I began to realize that there was much more to bodhran and rhythm bones playing than what I had thought before.

Later on, also on Inisheer, and elsewhere in Ireland, I got to meet other fantastic bones players, like Junior Davey, a mutiple times bodhran and rhythm bones

champion, who soon became a mentor and great friend. In Ireland, over time, I got to meet many Irish bones players, and some two-handed American bones players like Steve Brown. I had heard of Steve Brown from Mel Mercier and some Irish friends, and I later got to meet him. We became friends and I have been using his rhythm bones since then.

In 2005 or 2006, I'm not sure exactly, at the invitation of Steve, I went to Abbeyfeale where the Irish Bones fleadh was being held. I even competed there (Ronnie McShane was the adjudicator at the time), but I didn't even get placed!

Over the years, I learnt from a lot of people. Mel Mercier, Johnny McDonagh, Tommy Hayes, Junior Davey, but also from Steve Brown, David Murphy (a rhythm bones champion from Abbeyfeale) and other American and Irish players. I also practiced a lot on my own, playing mostly to traditional Irish music. I've also played in quite a few traditional Irish bands, and still do. I've tried two-handed bones playing, but never managed to amount to anything. I still play and practice a lot, and with the Internet now, I can steal plenty of chops from all sorts of players !

In 2021, I was the first Frenchman (and the only one, to my knowledge) to become "all-Ireland Senior Bones Champion," after a competition adjudicated by Junior Davey. It was a great surprise for me and a fantastic honour !

My style of rhythm bones playing, I believe, is closely linked to my bodhran playing, even though bodhran playing has evolved a lot during the last 20 years, much more than Irish rhythm bones playing, I think. Still, I try to play both rhythm bones and the bodhran as much as possible in an Irish style and find one-handed rhythm bones playing better suited for that.

I think my style of rhythm bones playing is a bit different from the style of a lot of other one-handed players, in the sense that I use a lot of single strokes in between triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets and longer rolls. I think it comes from my bodhran playing: when I play the bodhran, I often fall back on a basic structure of single beats, to keep a rythmic continuum going, which creates a simple pattern to go back to, and I add various ornamentations on top of that,

instead of relying mostly on various connected rolls, with few single strokes, like a lot of other players do.

There aren't many rhythm bones players in France, and I play the bodhran more often than I do rhythm bones, the bodhran being a more well-known instrument here. But I'm still very fond of rhythm bones, and keep trying promoting rhythm bones playing in France as much as I can, and I keep discovering new possibilities with rhythm bones all the time.

I'd like to thank all of the wonderful people I've met along the way, especially Mel Mercier, Junior Davey and Steve Brown, who have been a great inspiration to me since day one. *Nicolas Dupin*

[See Nicolas' Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

## Rowan Corbett

Bones Fest XIV was my first introduction to the Rhythm Bones Society in July of 2010. It was incredible to see so many different styles of play of an instrument that I'd become so in love with. I would attend again for Bones Fests XIX, XX, and virtually for XXIV. But that initial event would flood me with so much knowledge about an instrument that I'd pursued for so many years with very little connection to any other of it's players.

When I first encountered rhythm bones, I didn't have much frame of reference for them musically or culturally. In 1994, I was just a month away from graduating high school and had joined my first real band. That group, the Greencastle Minstrels, at the time played primarily at the Colorado Renaissance Festival and had a repertoire of Irish, Scottish and English songs and tunes.

By that point in my musical journey, I had sung in a few choirs and was a very bad guitarist at best, so in a group that played as many instrumental pieces as vocal songs, I quickly needed a way to make myself more useful. They already had a guitar player who was far better than myself, but they did have something that they thought I might try. My band mates handed me a set of inexpensive rosewood rhythm bones and showed me how to do a roll. So, for those first two months, I became very handy for any songs in 6/8 time.

That might have been as far as it went for me, but for the fact that Ren Faires tend to have large musical communities that get together several times a day to play in large groups. And many festivals encourage performers to have impromptu shows throughout the day. So I was given lots of opportunities by some very patient and kind people to jam and experiment in a live setting and learn the idioms of the traditional folk music scene.

In addition to the music, I was also fascinated by rhythm bones in and of themselves. I practiced constantly in those first few months, mostly on my 45 minute walk to and from work. But again, I still didn't have much of a model for what the instrument could do, so I played triples over and over again. Until I chanced upon Michael Ballard.

Mike, visiting from California, was walking through the lanes of the Colorado Ren Faire while playing rhythm bones. My encounter with him showed me how much more was possible with the instrument. From this point I really began my exploration of the instrument.

Soon after, I saw a performance of Artis the Spoonman: the first example I had of someone playing bones outside of traditional folk music. I was already a fan of the band Soundgarden, who featured Spoonman in a music video in a song inspired by him. That a folk instrument could hold its own while sharing the stage with electric guitars was an exciting prospect.

Over the next few years I would become aware of rhythm bones' relationship to the banjo and through that it's connection to early African American music. Though I am a native of North Carolina and lived there on and off for many years, I hadn't encountered many other Black people who played traditional music.

In 1997, I began my long musical partnership with Brooke Parkhurst when we formed Tinsmith. Initially an Irish band, we eventually began including Brooke's Old Time banjo playing as well. With my guitar playing much improved, we added modern sounds and textures to traditional music. My rhythm bones playing also became funkier with the influence of rock music.

I met my other long-term collaborator, Rob Hinkal of the band iYAIMY not

long after moving to Washington DC in 1999. His acoustic-rock guitar playing style and love for off-kilter rhythms brought out a whole new dimension for my rhythm bones to mesh with.

Through both bands and working at the House of Musical Tradition in Takoma Park, MD, I became a member of the wider folk music community and finally started to learn more about the place of rhythm bones in African American history. I met other rhythm bones players that looked like me such as Mike Baytop and Dom Flemmons, which led to my eventual association to the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Rhiannon Giddens asked me to join the Chocolate Drops in 2013 and I would tour with her across the US, Canada, and Europe, through 2016. Our mutual friend and fellow bones player, Greg Adams, was instrumental in my education about rhythm bones in early African American music and its place alongside the banjo. Now a banjo player myself, my rhythmic sensibilities are deeply informed by the phrasing that is inherent to rhythm bones.

Now, almost three decades from when I first picked up the instrument, rhythm bones continue to teach me. They influence my technique and approach to every other instrument I pick up. And as I work with others, trying to relay what rhythm bones have taught me, I discover new ways to think about music. New ways to think about my connection to history and new ways to show people just learning the bones for the first time what instrument can show them in turn.  
*Rowan Corbett*

[See Rowan's photograph on Page 8 and Player Profile Page in the RBS online Museum.]

## Mitch Boss Obituary

We lost another true spirit who lit up the lives of people around him both on stage and when standing next to you.

Mitchell Boss died on January 1, 2022 peacefully with his family at his side.

Mitch was profiled in the newsletter in issue, Vol 20, No 1, and you can read it by going to the RBS Museum, clicking on the Player Profile Exhibit and selecting Mitch Boss. There are also audio and video of him performing.

His performances were high quality and quiet and frequently combined with humor. Notable examples are duets with the late Walt Watkins, Steve Brown, and Ernie Duffy.

His humor was contagious. Here are samples. "I have been playing rhythm bones since I was seven and I'm starting to get the hang of it. I usually wear my bee suit when I play rhythm bones to protect myself from flying debris. My sweetheart, Annette, says she been listening to me play for 61 years and she will be glad when I get the timing right, which means, when she's off shopping."

[Note: Annette attended every Bones Fest with Mitch and we all got to know her.]

To recognize his contributions, musical and otherwise, the Board created the Community Enrichment Award and presented it to Mitch at Bones Fest XX. You can read his hilarious remarks from that presentation by clicking on 'Award Thanks' on his Player Profile Page.

To say, "Mitch, rest in peace," just doesn't seem fitting. How about, "Keep everyone up there entertained and laughing." *Steve Wixson*

## Mitch Remembered

Just saying the name "Mitch Boss" brings all sorts of images to mind. The reactions that come to me are a smile, a belly-laugh, and the knowledge that my life has been enriched by this once-in-a-lifetime friend. There is no more appropriate expression than, "God broke the mold when he created Mitch." But, when I think of Mitch, Annette is always there, too. I cannot separate the two spirits.

Mitch blessed the RBS with his perfect-timed humor, his love for rhythm bones and the Society, and his pervasive fun-loving presence. Thank you for all the irreplaceable memories, Mitch.  
*Sharon Mescher*

In 2005, I discovered the Rhythm Bones Society. That was because Frank and I perform music and tell stories dressed in 19th century clothing. He plays banjo and guitar, I bought a pair of rhythm bones at a Civil War reenactment and needed help playing them.

(Continued on Page 8)



Nicolas Dupin by Emmanuel Boitier  
(Story on Page 6)



Rowan Corbett (Story on Page 5)  
Photo by William Petruzzo



DeFord Baily (Story on Page 5)

(Continued from Page 7)

In 2006 I discovered Mitch and Annette Boss. Sometimes you just feel a connection to someone, even though you just met. Frank and I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with Mr. and Mrs. Boss!

Mitch was very good at playing

rhythm bones and always dressed in clothes that left no doubt that he would be on stage. When he took the stage, you just knew the show was “gonna” be good!

He especially liked sharing the stage with a friend. The two of them would

really ham it up and have everyone laughing! He enjoyed performing and his joy was contagious!

I will miss the quiet, gentle, Annette and the fun-loving entertainer, Mitch Boss. *Mary Lee Sweet*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*