



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 24, No. 1 2022

*In This Issue:*  
*Michael Baxter*

*The Sound of*  
*Rhythm Bones*

*Michael Baxter's*  
*Promo Project*

*The Abner Jay*  
*Rhythm Bones*  
*Story*

*2022 All-Ireland*  
*Bones Competition*  
*is In-Person*

*Dennis Devine*  
*Finds Old Percy*  
*Recording*

*Art Sands* Obitu-  
*ary*

*Wixson's* Drum  
*Bone*

*Bones Fest XXVI*  
*Preliminary Indor-*  
*mation*

*Columns:*  
*Executive Director*

*Editorial*

*Letter To The*  
*Editor*

## Executive Director's Column

It's been almost 3 years since our last in person Bones Fest. I can't believe that it has been that long though the memories of that weekend still burn bright in my memory. It started me thinking, what makes those in person Bones Fests so special?

Though I was invited, I didn't attend the first three Bones Fests, thinking to myself, who in their right mind would drive all the way to North Carolina to play the bones? I got the answer to that question in 2000 when I flew off to Chattanooga to attend Bones Fest IV. One of the more inspiring week ends I have attended, and solidified Bones Fests in my mind and body.

What made it so special? The easy answer of course is the people, the brotherhood and sisterhood I never knew I had, the indescribable bond that we all felt that weekend and has endured at every Bones

Fest I have attended (21 in person fests).

But there is one interesting moment I always reflect upon when I think of that weekend. It was early evening and the party was just getting under way at Steve Wixson's house. Steve lives in the most amazing house literally built into a mountain, with a view off the deck looking into Georgia. Steve and his wife Janet had arranged a plentiful buffet, and people began to gather around the living room and dining room.

There was one room set by itself, with almost no furniture, and a stereo blasting many types of music. I poked my head in, only to see a number of rhythm bones players all playing at the same time, not in unison but seemingly doing their own thing. "That's ridiculous," I thought to myself. I would (Continued on Page 2)

## Michael Baxter

I've no exciting story to tell here, nor do I come from a legacy of great players. That said, I've loved Irish music since I was young. I went to see my first of many concerts with The Chieftains, back when they were all with us. That was the first time I took notice of rhythm bones. Martin Fay and Seán Keane had been fiddling throughout the night, when Martin lowered his fiddle, raised his hand, and started rattlin' the bones. I was too far away from the stage to see what exactly he was doing, but I never forgot that sound. I'm so glad I took my children to see them before Paddy Moloney passed away.

Gaelic Storm was the first Celtic band I followed from their beginnings. During the autograph session, my son, Sean got to sit on the shoulders of Pat Murphy. I was more excited than he was, as Pat thanked me for bringing my kids to experience Irish music. Pat played spoons, in addition to harmonica, accordion, and who knows what else.

Over the years, I listened to so much Irish music that the rhythms got embedded in my mind. I really think that laid the foundation for me, though it was some 20 years later that I actually played rhythm bones myself. Now it seems inevitable that Irish music leads to Appalachian, Bluegrass, Country Blues, although for some folks, it may lead the other way.

Some years later, I discovered that we have an Irish Cultural Center in the heart of Phoenix, AZ. That lit a fire under me, as now I was around people who loved their ancestry, music, and culture. I discovered that my family name is an Scottish/English border name, while my great, great-grandparents Joseph Baxter and Catherine Clare, both emigrated from Ireland. I started taking the (Continued on Page 4)



Michael Baxter

## Editorial

This is an unusual issue - only 6 pages. In the last issue, I mentioned that my wife passed and due to COVID a Celebration of Life service was not held. A window is opening up now, and I am spending time and energy preparing for that event. As a result, the newsletter has been compromised though it still has some good content. Hopefully that window stays open such that we have an in-person Bones Fest. The All-Ireland Bones Competition is in-person this May.

The Page 1 story is about new member, Michael Baxter. I don't usually run stories about new members, but Mike has made some unique contributions to RBS including the two stories on Page 4. I hope you will contribute to his BFX XVI Promo Ensemble Project.

The Abner Jay story began in 2000, but only now could I find enough about him to write the story.

Though not related to the Abner Jay story, new member, Dennis Devine, found a very good 1977 recording of Percy Danforth.

Art Sands passed away recently and his rhythm bones obituary in on Page 5. He attended three Bones Fests, and took great photographs, some of which were published in the newsletter.

## Letter to the Editor

My father played rhythm bones with Al Jolson (singer, comedian, actor, and vaudevillian). He was one of America's most famous and highest-paid stars of the 1920s, and was self-billed as "The World's Greatest Entertainer) on the street in DC in front of the burlesque houses for the lines going in. Pennies, nickels, and dimes. They rarely saw quarters. Jolson sang and whistled, and my father played rhythm bones and did sand dancing. Jolson taught my father his style of whistling and my father tried to teach me but neither of us was any good at it. *Hank Tenenbaum*

(Continued from Page 1)

never just play in a room like that!

A little while later, after a beer or two, I found myself slipping back in that room. It was crowded now, and everybody was playing away. The atmosphere was intoxicating, and soon I found myself dragging out my rhythm bones, and wailing away. We were separate, but together, in joyous chaos! We began to refer to the room as the "Bone Pit" like the mosh pits of punk rock. We reveled in it despite previous feelings, and realized we were forging a bond.

The next day at the Opry stage, we were a little more hesitant. Each one of us was to perform a short introduction piece. When my time came, I nervously approached the mic. After my presentation, I started off stage, and suddenly realized people were clapping, and Dave Boyles, who I didn't know at the time, ran up to me and gave me a big hug! I felt utterly at home, unconditionally accepted, and totally amazed. That, I think is the essence of the in person bones, the feeling of a family reunion of a family you didn't know you had. Let's hope they return soon!

Update on Jeremy: My son Jeremy continues to recover from Surgery and several bouts of Pneumonia in the Gardner Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. He's making slow progress, but progress nonetheless. Thank you to everyone for your concerns and kind words of support! *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XXVI Preliminary Information

The Board is trying to make a decision about Bones Fest XXVI. After two years of Virtual Bones Fests due to the danger of Covid infections, we are in a period of declining infection rates that may allow us to safely hold an in person Fest.

A survey was mailed to current members asking for their input. About half of the current members responded with 10 saying they would attend an in-person Fest, 12 might come if infection rates continue to drop, 19 would attend virtual and the rest would not attend.

After much discussion the Board leans towards a fairly unstructured event in Kenny and Teri's backyard on August

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Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

5-7, 2022 for the 12 who said they would attend plus as many as 12 more who might attend if the infection rate continues to drop.

Part of the reason not to go to someplace like Alexandria at this late date is the problem of traffic and parking.

The end result of the conversation is I sent out a save the date email. During the next few weeks the Board will prepare a preliminary program that will include outings to places that welcome our group of talented rhythm bones players.

We have learned something valuable from our Virtual Bones Fests - people who cannot attend an in-person Fest for whatever reason will attend a virtual Fest. For example, we had people from as far away as Europe and Australia attend the Virtual Fests.

The Board will include a Virtual component for future Bones Fests. It will require an audio/visual system so that everyone can hear and see each other no matter where they are. *Steve Wixson*

## The Abner Jay Rhythm Bones Story

In 2000, Abner Jay came to Chattanooga for a concert. He was an itinerant musician who played several instruments including rhythm bones. I was unable to go to that concert, but started researching him for a story. Unfortunately I could not find much about him then.

Recently I ran across a BBC podcast by a Laura Barton titled, *The True Story of Abner Jay*. She said, "Abner traveled in a converted mobile home which opened out into a makeshift stage, and he was possibly the last performer of the bones." [Author note: I sent her a link to our website.]

In the intervening years, people have recognized his talent and written articles and posted videos about him. Some of that information is on his Player Profile Page in our online Museum. To find it go to our website, click Museum, Click Player Profile Exhibit, and scroll down and click on Abner's name. The phrase 'Abner's Page' below refers to that page.

Here is a brief summary from Abner's Page. He was born in 1912 and died in 1993. He traveled and performed with many gospel and quartet groups in the 1930' to early 1950's. Most of his music reflected the Suwanee River, Southern life and gospel. He traveled the world, and performed for 'Juneteenth Day' in Texas, an annual holiday celebrating the end of slavery in the United States. He traveled in a small trailer that opened out into a makeshift stage. There is a great photograph of that stage on Abner's Page - click 'Another Story' and scroll down to the Jon Sievert photograph.

Sherry DuPree was a friend of Abner and she collected his gospel singing history (you can hear her in the 'Laura Barton BBC Story' on Abner's Page). She is a librarian and historian whose research focuses on African-American gospel music. She includes Abner in her 'Sherry S. DuPree Collection' housed in the Smithsonian Institute.

I found his gospel singing mesmerizing and call attention, even though it has no rhythm bones, to the last song on the *Backbone of America* album which starts at 40:40 into the recording (click

the image of the album on Abner's Page). His albums can be found in the Library of Congress.

There was another side to Abner Jay where he was successful in several show business ventures including working in a radio station, being an Agent and Promoter, producing records and some call him the grandfather and patron saint of Independent Record Producers.



Photograph of Abner Jay playing his rhythm bones. From the Sherry S. DuPree Collection

His daughter, Brandie, says he learned to play rhythm bones from his grandfather, and he made his rhythm bones from fresh bones bleaching them out in the sun.

She said you might find him in a Kmart parking lot where he set up his trailer house. Folks would come out of the store and come over and listen to his music and give him a donation. He could stop anywhere along a country road and play and get him some gig money and then move on. He was a frequent performer at Underground Atlanta.

Abner like to educate people on the origins of American Music. Here is a transcript a performance from the Florida Folklife Festival at the Stephen Foster Center. Thelma Bolton gave this introduction, "Folkways, always, right here in our very own park we have Abner Jay with his little daughter, Brandie. So rattle the bones - Abner Jay."

"You ask them educated people, school teachers and others, about original American music and they start telling you about jazz, j, a, z, z. How far can you go back with jazz, 1890, that's not far at all. They will tell you about ragtime. How far can you go back with ragtime, 1897, that ain't much older than I am.

"I'm the same to American music as John Dean was to Watergate. I'm uncovering 270 years of American music, and

nobody's doing anything about it except me.

"The first form of American music, and I am so sick and tired of people not knowing about American Music, the first form of American music was rattlin' the bones. The original American band was made up with bone players, 15 and 20 playing at one time - that is all the instruments they had. To modernize I added this harmonica.

"And this song dates back to 1620, that's how far rattlin' the bones goes. These are real bones. Bones come from the bone yard. When a cow gets stuck by lightning, you don't eat that cow unless you eat it at McDonalds. You heard what I said, didn't you. You take the cow to the bone yard and the possum eats the meat and we eat the possum.

"There ain't nothing better for you than baked possum with them baked potatoes around it. [Amen from the audience.] That's why I am 65 years old and I'm not bald headed or grey headed cause I grease my hair with possum oil.

"We're going to play you a little bit of *Rattling The Bones*.

"[Singing] Rattle, rattle of the bones, all the way home. Refrain repeats

"In 1620 we took a boat ride, when we got on the other side, and we were surprised. And late in the evenin' when the dark is start to grow, Every body rattles, they rattle of the bones. Refrain."

Abner continues with daughter, Brandie, singing and playing the jaw bone. Then comes hambone playing, and finally more stories.

There is an audio recoding and a video of Abner singing a longer version of this song on Abner's Page.

What a shame I was not able to talk to Abner about his playing and the history in the above performance. Beth Lenz' Master's Thesis says rhythm bones came to America by way of Europe, and that they came to Africa in the modern era by way of traveling minstrel shows that Abner called the American Band. There is more Abner Jay historical information out there to find, and maybe it will prove him right. Who knows? *Steve Wixson*

(Continued from Page 1)

family to the Irish Faire and the Highland Games. To top it off my wife is a red-head named Heather McCann. I've always felt the music is in my blood.

So where do rhythm bones come in? One day I stumbled across some videos of Dom Flemons, and was absolutely amazed. It turns out that we have a mutual friend in Phoenix, though I've never met him. That got me interested enough to order a set of real rhythm bones.

It wasn't until I found Brad Dutz's tutorials, that things started to click (pun intended). His two finger grip was essential for my success. After that I was hooked.

My informal education continued with an hour long conversation with Scott Miller, who shared more techniques with me, along with Barry Patton. I've found these folks to be very generous with their time and knowledge.

I bought several more sets and even had a woodworker friend, Dusty Travis make me some from Purple-heart and Osage Orange. He steam bent and fashioned them to my grip, so they play smooth and sound amazing.

I was working in Redwood City last year, so I drive up to Lark in the Morning and tested every set of bones they carried, before buying several more sets. My wife and kids ask me, "How many sets of bones do you need?" Well, we all know the answer to that.

I've found a passion for sharing the rhythm bones and Old Time Music with kids. I've played for my daughter's school, using a format that gives the kids a brief musical journey from Ireland & Scotland, across Appalachia, and down to the Mississippi Delta region. This really gives them a fun introduction to different styles of music that are all linked historically. It's the music of America to me, and it needs to be preserved. I'm honored to be part of the Rhythm Bones Society. *Michael Baxter* [Read his 'The Sound of Rhythm Bones' in the next Column]

## The Sound of Rhythm Bones

This video project began out of necessity, I suppose. I made it for folks like me, that have no idea what one wood sounds like over another, as well as natural bone. When I was searching online for my first set of rhythm bones, I was disappointed that I couldn't find many audio samples. Most rhythm bones players know it's just a matter of time, until you own multiple sets. Even so, it's nice to have some samples to help find the specific sound you're looking for. It also helps to avoid pairing two sets that are similar. In fact the only time I was able to "try before you buy," was at Lark in the Morning. If the store manager was annoyed he didn't show it, as I rattled every set he had in stock, repeatedly.

What really made this project fun, was the support shown by other RBS Members. I spoke at length with Scott Miller (Bone Dry Music) who is an authority on rhythm bones, and an amazing player as well. The next call was to Mardeen Gordon (Shooting Star Bones), asking her to make two sets that would be unique to my collection. She crafted a fine pair of Padauk/Vermillion and Vero-wood which are so comfortable to play. I then journeyed to Ireland to meet Tom Connolly (Irish Bones). Well, we actually met over a Zoom meeting, but "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." Tom was generous with his time and craftsmanship, demonstrating several sets of rhythm bones in real-time. He sent me a set of cow ribs, shins, and shibs (split cow shins), but my favorite are the vintage ribs that he gifted to me. Steve Wixson even sent me a box of rhythm bones that I didn't have on hand, to help round out the collection. He let me keep the old cow ribs, which I've wanted for some time now.

After gathering all these rhythm bones, the next step was to produce the video. I really wanted to capture the difference in tone among the sets, which took some experimenting. Of course, I needed some good tunes to play to. I reached out to David Bragger of Old Time Tiki Parlour, who I had seen play with Dom Flemons. David is a brilliant

player on both fiddle and banjo, and was kind enough to let me use his version of *Cripple Creek*. Friends Tom and Susan played guitar and fiddle for the intro.

During my music search, I reached out to the Boston-based Celtic Rock band Sláinte. After showing the video to Jon Harrington (the band's fiddler & manager), I was invited to play rhythm bones on a track called, *The Musical Priest*. I needed an expert, so I reached out to Percussionist Extraordinaire Brad Dutz, who gave me some great techniques for recording rhythm bones, and the band was happy with the result.

The feedback from everyone on the video was positive, so I proceeded to do a follow-up called *Tuning Your Rhythm Bones*, as suggested by Scott Miller. There are far better rhythm bones players than me, but this project was a good match, since I've been working in Audio/Video Production for over 30 years. I hope these videos will help buyers find what they're looking for. Perhaps they will find the elusive answer to that question of "How many sets of rhythm bones do you need?" The answer of course is, "Just one more set." *Michael Baxter* [The videos are on our website. The *Sound of Rhythm Bones* is on the 'What are Rhythm Bones' Page with a link from the 'Learn How to Play' Page. *Tuning Your Rhythm Bones* is on the 'Learn How to Play' Page. These videos are also on Mike's Player Profile Page in the Museum.]

## The BFXVI Promo Ensemble Video

Everett Cowett at Bones Fest I included this in his opening remarks, "I was hoping we could get together and do a little bit of bones synchronizing, harmonizing if you will."

Micheal Baxter has done this in a way that would amaze the late Ev. He invited members to download a music track of *Turkey in the Straw* by Matt Whyte, take a video of them playing along to that track using ear buds or earphones, email the video to Mike where he put it together into one video with all sorts of combinations of one or more players.

There is a sample image on Page 6, and look for a website Post announcing the premier of the finished video.

## Art Sands Obituary

Member Arthur Sands, III, was born on October 15, 1945, and passed away on February 20, 2022. He was a longtime independent insurance broker and an avid gardener.

Art was passionate about his Irish traditions and culture. He played rhythm bones in the traditional Irish band, TISPC (Traditional Irish Pub Song Club) shown in the photograph below. They performed in various Irish festivals including marching in five Baltimore Saint Patrick's Day parades. They also played in a local Pub not far from where he lives and became the house band for over 20 years. Originally Art was the spokesman and singer. Art knew a wealth of Irish songs because he was a fan of Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers.



We knew Art from Bones Fests at Shepherdstown, Homer and Lincoln. His short Bio in the Fest Program reads, "I am a neophyte bones player, having watched videos of Percy Danforth and imagined hundreds of minstrel bones players on stage. I became enthralled with rhythm bones, and I can't wait to



meet real rhythm bones players at this Bones Fest."

He and his wife, Linda, are shown on the front row at the Lincoln Bones Fest taking photographs (another hobby) of performers as he had at the other two Fests. Some of these were published in our newsletter and you can find a sampling of the best, enhanced with Photoshop (another hobby), on his Player Profile Page in our Online Museum

## 2022 All Ireland Bones Competition is In-Person

Hi to everyone who took part in our virtual bones competition in 2021. This year 2022 we are having the competition live in Abbeyfeale on Monday 2nd May. This is a call out to let everyone know that we are proceeding. Music will be supplied. Each competitor can play 2 tunes from this list. Reels, hornpipe, jig, slip jig, polka, slide barn dance, and march. Any questions please email them to [fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com](mailto:fleadhbythefeale2019@gmail.com) and I will answer them. We have 2 overseas competitors so far as well as 8 Irish competitors. We would love to see as many of ye in Abbeyfeale soon. *Martin O'Donoghue*

## Dennis Devine Finds Old Percy Recording

New member, Dennis Devine, saw Percy Danforth play at the 1977 Florida Folk Festival, and said he did not realize his importance at that time. He found a great recording of Percy playing at the Festival on the website of the State Library and Archives of Florida. Gamble Rogers, a legendary folk singer, is playing guitar and doing the emcee introduction and playing with Percy. Go to our website and click on the Post. Eventually it will be moved to the Percy Danforth Project Exhibit in our Online Museum.

## Wixson's Drum Bone

I took part in Michael Baxter's BFXX-VI Promo Ensemble Video, and using one of my two 'Drum Bones.'

The first is a tambourine with the jingles removed and a notch cut out so the thumb can hold it as the stationary bone (Jim Lande demonstrated his version at last year's Virtual Bones Fest.)

The other as shown in the photograph on Page 6, consists of a hairbrush with the brushes cut out and a drum skin epoxied to the brush frame. The handle has the shape of a rib bone and fits neatly as the stationary bone either between the thumb and index finger or between the first and index fingers.

You can use many items as the movable bone, and I have two favorites. The first is a regular drum stick cut to about 6 inches with the patented Joe Birl groove so it won't slip out of my hand. The second is a regular drum brush cut to about 6 inches with many turns of black tape on the end so it won't slip out of my hand. I like the brush a lot and use it in Mike's Ensemble video.

The brush has an interesting characteristic - it is flexible and behaves a bit different than a ridged rhythm bone. It can easily generate an extra click making a traditional quadruple easy to play.

We do not teach beginners much about the ring finger, however we use it to finish the tap, keep the movable bone aligned, adjust the movable bone so it strikes on the edge making a quieter sound, adjust the tension on the movable bone depending on the weight and length of the bone, to name a few.

Now there is one more use. It can move the brush from side to side on the drum bone skin much like the brush is used on a regular drum.

Recently I went to the dentist and used a mirror to watch the Dentist work on my tooth. The shape of the mirror was three times wider than the one in the photograph on Page 6. I need to look for bigger sizes and try to come up with a Base Drum Bone. *Steve Wixson*



Compressed image from Michael Baxter's sample BFXXVI Promo Ensemble Video. See Page 4.



Wixson's 'Drum Bones.' See Page 5.

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*Address Correction Requested*