



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 26, No. 1 2024

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Hello good people! This installment of the Rhythm Bones Player gives us a great look at our history. This issue is presented out of sequence, and as a result, I would like to take a look forward, as well as back. In Volume 26, No. 2, we announced the Rhythm Bones Society Leadership Mentor Program. I would like to invite anyone who feels they could contribute to contact us using the link below:

<https://forms.gle/8o5EDqXvqTaStsCu8>

Steve Wixson does the incredible, if not Herculean task, of keeping the Rhythm Bones Society going. It is easily the work of a half dozen people, and he seems to manage it by himself. I would imagine he could use some help – especially from his Director, lol! I make light of the fact that I'm not always on the spot, but again, we could use your assistance. The hope is to create a pipeline of diversified talent that can help the Rhythm Bones Society thrive for

years to come.

This issue of the newsletter takes us through the history of the Rhythm Bones Society. It is a testament to the early participants and founders. I often use the term “Bones Ambassadors” to describe key figures who have managed to keep our tradition alive. Today, you will read about a number of them. If your mind is like mine, you will aspire to be like them. Join the RBS Leadership Mentor Program.

We are also including a book review. “Tambo and Bones,” written by Carl Wittke and originally published by the Duke University Press in 1930. It is important to remember that the height of rhythm bones playing in the United States came in the 1800's. A time fraught with racial injustice. The minstrel show was in some ways equivalent to (Continued on Page 2)

A Brief History of the Rhythm Bones Society

The Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) will be 25 years old on September 25, 2024. It came into existence in 1999 on the back porch of Russ and Wilma Myers' house in Brightwood, Virginia, when 22 attendees at Bones Fest III signed the By-Laws. At that time there were about 100 pages of rhythm bones information on the Internet and now there are over 20,000 pages searching for 'rhythm bones' with countless more if you could do a meaningful search with just 'bones.' RBS has made a difference!

Background

There has been no record found of an organization like RBS. In a telephone interview, Ted Goon, a 1950s recording artist who also sold rhythm bones, said he organized several clubs where players could gather, but provided no documentation to prove it.

The legend Percy Danforth had the first rhythm bones instructional video that was sold to individuals. Fred Edmund, a drummer, made a rhythm bones instructional book and video and rhythm bones, and wrote a newsletter that he mailed to people who bought his products that also promote a rhythm bones organization (Fred's newsletter highlights are on Fred's Player Profile Page on our website). Fred talked Everett Cowett into hosting the first Bones Fest, and Ev in his opening remarks

said, “I'd like to talk to you all about having a real big Bones Festival.” Bones Fest II had a few more attendees including Steve Wixson who bought a pair of bones labeled ‘Rhythm Bones’ and using that found the Bones Fest II announcement on (Continued on Page 3)



Editorial

It is hard to believe the Rhythm Bones Society has been around for a quarter of a Century, and the actual anniversary is September 25, 2024. We can celebrate it at Bones Fest XXVIII hosted again by Randy Seppala in Clarksdale, Mississippi on May 2-5, 2024.

The Page 1 story is a brief history of the Rhythm Bones Society. There were twenty-two people who signed the By-Laws officially creating the society, and there are four still active, Mel Mercier, Spike Bones Muhrer, Parker Waite and Steve Wixson. Steve Brown, not technically a Founding Member, was actively discussing such a society, and read about that in his Reflections on Page 3.

Many Founding members have passed away, Joe Birl, Dave Boyles, John Cahill, Terry Carroll, Everett Cowett, Dan Cowett, and just recently Tommy Cowett, Vivian and Ed (presumed) Cox, Russ Myers, and Matteo Vitucci. The rest of the Cowett family including Bonnie became inactive with the passing of Everett Cowett who is thought of as the father of the Rhythm Bones Society, and also inactive are Charlie Breeland, Deborah Brower, Kevin Dunn, and Tom Rice. We lost contact with Sally Carroll.

Following the Page 1 article are reflections from some of our Founding Members on our 25 years as a society.

Steve Brown, our previous Executive Director, emailed me some pages from a book his brother had used for research titled "Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage" written by Carl Wittke and published by the Duke University Press in 1930. The book was deemed important enough to republish with the same title and can be purchased via the Internet. I present sort of a review that covers the 19th Century minstrel show from a rhythm bones point of view. This is not a scholarly article, but I hope is something to think about.

I will soon review a newer book titled, "The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy" by Bob Carlin. Sweeney and Frank Brower, the first minstrel bones player, performed together, and there is a lot about Brower in the book.

(Continued From Page 1)

Rock and Roll, or Hip Hop, in that it traveled the world – a true American cultural export! It is not our role to excuse, celebrate, or denigrate, the content, or context of the minstrel show. Our goal is to examine the history of our instrument. You will find excerpts from this historical text that will allow you to do just that.

Michael Baxter just put out his 2024 Rhythm Bones Society Ensemble video and it is absolutely fantastic! Huge thanks to Michael for his work on this. To anyone reading this, go check this out, it's a wonderful representation of the diverse group of bone players involved with RBS.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-HxmCZVH6Kw>

I hope that all of you have had opportunities over the Spring and Summer to get some good playing in. If you are polite, respectful, well practiced, and complimentary to the music, you should be welcome wherever you go. There are exceptions, so don't take offense if you encounter them, but generally if you follow these guidelines you'll be accepted. May your bones be with you!

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

(Continued From Page 1)

the Internet. Steve had an academic background and searched the Internet discovering the 100 pages mentioned above (<https://rhythmbones.org/documents/InternetResearch1999.pdf>) as well as the email address of many players who he contacted. RBS was organized at Bones Fest III.

Rhythm Bones Central Website

What do you give a father who doesn't want anything. Martha Cowett pondered that question and came up with a rhythm bones website for her rhythm bones playing father, Ev. You can see it at <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/MarthaEarlyWebpage.pdf>.

Jonathan Danforth had web design experience and took over from Martha. In addition to a more professional website with more content, he selected a muted yellow background color that continues as sort of a brand (red=255, green=221, blue=153).

Steve Wixson took over maintaining it and then doing one upgrade. At

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Editor
Steve Wixson
wixson@epbf.com

Executive Director
Skeffington Flynn
skeff@fingtone.com

Web Site Coordinator
Steve Wixson
webmaster@rhythmbones.com

Board of Directors
Skeffington Flynn, Executive Director
Steve Brown
Tom Connolly
Dennis Riedesel
Dean Robinson
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer
Kenny Wolin, Assistant Director

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 website: rhythmbones.org

the persistence of Skeff Flynn to get a website that someone else could take over, it was upgraded using the WordPress platform. While there is a learning curve with WordPress, it is straightforward to maintain, and it has powerful features that non-web designers can use.

With many years of newsletters, the WordPress website serves as an index to all that previously unorganized information. It has two sides, one with information about playing rhythm bones, and the other a Museum with exhibits; player profiles, history, Bones Fest highlights, RBS history, media, contests, art & images, Percy Danforth, Ted Goon, and odds & ends. It has over 300 web pages with more than 600,000 words making it the largest resource for rhythm bones information in the world.

By-Laws + IRS 501(c)(3)

How do you organize a new society? Help came from the Jews Harp Guild who gave us not only their By-Laws but

their documentation on how they got IRS (501)(c)(3) non-profit status. The main change was the name to 'Rhythm Bones Society' plus allowing meetings to be held over the Internet. The non-profit IRS application was approved on its first submission.

Board of Directors

The By-Laws established a Board of Directors to carry out day-to-day business for the membership who meet once a year to elect Board Members and vote on other matters of interest. The Board also serves as the Nominating Committee for general elections though anyone can be nominated at a membership meeting.

The first Board was elected at Bones Fest III with Everett Cowett, Executive Director, Russ Myers, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members at large, Steve Brown, Sally Carroll, Mel Mercier, and Jerry Mescher. Mel from Ireland gave us an International Board. The current Board is listed on Page 2, and the following have served, Sky Bartlett, Sharon Mescher, Bill Vits, Tim Reilly, Jonathan Danforth, and Gil Hibben. Steve Brown served as Executive Director for 17 years.

Newsletter

At the first Board meeting, a newsletter titled *Rhythm Bones Player* was authorized including color which at the time was expensive. The first issues were four pages in length, and then eight pages except for two large special issues that each summarized a decade of Bones Fests. A paper copy is mailed to members as a membership benefit.

The American Folklife Center has an interest in folk instruments including rhythm bones and a copy of each newsletter is mailed to them. After many years, a letter arrived stating that it was now housed and fully cataloged in the Library of Congress. While the Editor gets credit, he is happy to share it with everyone who contributed content to the newsletter.

The Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University also receives the newsletter and from time to time professionally binds them into Volumes for placing on shelves.

Bones Fests

The first gathering was in the backyard of Everett Cowett's house with twelve

attendees, and only in retrospect is it called Bones Fest I. It had the feeling of a family reunion with family you never knew you had, and that feeling persists through all Bones Fests.

There is an exhibit in the RBS online Museum titled 'Bones Fests Highlights' that present the highlights, photographs and video from every Fest (<https://rhythmbones.org/bones-fests>). Below are single highlights that help remember each Fest. Each Fest had a host who volunteered to organize it, and they should be applauded for their effort.

Bones Fest I was the first. II saw the Fest held at a public venue. III saw the start of RBS. IV saw Fests expand from a single day to a weekend and had the first public show. V saw the first Fest Graphic and T-shirt. VI was held in a planetarium. VII was held in the Kentucky Theatre. VIII saw organized workshops. IX was the first time a host held a second Fest. X was the largest with 89 attendees. XI included a public show at the Milwaukee Irish Fest. XII saw part of its program canceled by the Obama 100,000 political rally. XIII saw the on stage marriage proposal of Kenny and Teri Wolin. XIV had the most workshops and the wedding of Kenny and Teri. XV is the Performance Fest with 9 hours of public performances. XVI was in Disney World. XVII has the first Flash Mob. XVIII celebrated Percy Danforth. XIX had the public show in an Opera House. XX included a workshop for youth at a Nature Center. XXI was interrupted by Hurricane Harvey. XXII was in the New Hampshire White Mountains hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett who met at a Fest. XXIII was the Blues Fest. XXIV was virtual around the world due to COVID. XXV celebrated the 25th Bones Fest virtually. XXVI had both in-person and virtual events. XXVII was back to New Hampshire. XXVIII is back in Clarksdale, Mississippi and will celebrate the 25th Anniversary of RBS.

Facebook

In early years there was a Yahoo chat group that at times was used a lot. We now have a Facebook presence with fairly robust posting.

RBS YouTube Channel

Originally we used our own website to post videos. With the arrival of mobile devices we recently created a RBS You-

Tube Channel for new videos or videos that do not run smoothly on mobile devices.

Awards

RBS has recognize several individual for promoting the Society or rhythm bones in general. They include Ted Goon, Honorary Member, Russ Myers, Fellow, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy, Special Recognition, and Mitchell Boss, Community Enrichment. Those receiving the Meritorious Service award include Joe Birl, Steve Brown, Al Cowett, Dan Cowett, Everett Cowett, Martha Cowett, Mel Mercier, Mary Lee Sweet, and Steve Wixson.

Membership

The annual number of members goes from 69 to 114 which is enough to pay for the website and printed newsletter. Bones Fests pay for themselves. Mem-

Founding Members Reflections

Steve Brown. In September of 2000 I found myself on a plane headed for Chattanooga, TN. Highly unusual for me as I hadn't been on a plane since 1968. I was soon to attend the 4th Annual Bones Fest hosted by Steve Wixson and his wife Janet. I had been flirting, if you will, with the prospect of attending a Bones Fest since the first in 1997. I had been doing rhythm bones business with Fred Edmunds, a retired doctor and avid rhythm bones player since 1995, and he had invited me to the first two events held in Greensboro, NC. I remember myself thinking who in their right mind would travel all the way to Greensboro to play rhythm bones? Then in 1999, Ev Cowett, Russ Myers, Martha and Val Cowett traveled all the way to Natick, MA to attend the New England Folk Festival. Other attendees included Ellen Stern, Johnny Muise, Rob Rudin, Brett Walker, Mance Grady, and over a hundred participants. We had an amazing workshop, with all participating, and an impromptu meeting to discuss the possibility of a rhythm bones players organization, and promises to attend the 3rd Bones Fest in September, a promise I was to break due to family illness (see photograph on Page 4). Low and behold Bones Fest III was to establish the Rhythm Bones Society, and I was nominated to the Board of

Directors. Unable to avoid attending any longer, I made my way down to Chattanooga to fulfill my responsibilities as Board member, still highly skeptical as to why anyone would travel all the way to Tennessee to play rhythm bones!

Soon I was under the spell of the most amazing rhythm bones playing gathering I had ever attended! Meeting the most amazing players and people, feeling like I was with a family I didn't know I had! We began to joke we were like the Duck billed Platypus, almost extinct!

This was the beginning of my long term relationship with the RBS. Over the years it has not only become a second family to us, but an oasis in the midst of our chaotic life. The amazing newsletter with so many interesting and important articles, the support of so many amazing people, not to mention players of our instrument. Some of my best friends in the world came from the RBS. It has enriched my life so much, and that of my family. My son Jeremy who passed away in April truly loved his rhythm bones family, and his rhythm bones family loved him! Looking at the pictures and video of him at Bones Fests is a consolation to us that is so enduring. And seeing the tribute to him at Bones Fest XXVIII this year means so much to us.

In my 25 years association with the RBS it became clear very early on the Steve Wixson was a force of nature. From his telephone interview with Ted Goon, almost totally forgotten, finding the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour footage of Jerry Mescher and his father

playing, to the countless amount of time and effort to produce a high quality newsletter, he has surpassed accolades you could possibly describe him with. I was Executive Director for much of those 25 years, and I could have not done it without Steve. We in the RBS owe him a debt of gratitude.

But the true measure of an organization is its members, who support and ensure that it continues, and we have had the most amazing members over the years. Some have come and gone, some continue since the beginning, but all have left their mark and contributed to what we are today! I want to particularly thank the core of new leadership, Skeffington Flynn, Kenny Wolin, Tom Connolly, Dean Robinson, and all past and present Board Members for their dedication, and support of our little instrument.

And as Ev Cowett reminded us so many times, May your bones be with you!

Al Cowett. Our father, Everett, had his 'bones' stolen (image explaining that to the police), and in trying to replace them met Dr. Fred Edmunds who knew a few rhythm bones players. The two met and decided to hold a get-together, and it was a grand time. It was a strange collision of like-minded individuals who loved to make noise by slapping sticks together. The Bones Fest was always the highlight of Everett's year, and he would be so happy to see that it continues to this day.

John Cowett. "A Gift, Thee Gift, Be A Gift!" Martha gave our Father a Gift [the first RBS website]. One that he received

with Joy and Wonder. Ev always embraced life with excitement and passion. With this gift he was all in not knowing what would or could happen, "What is a webpage?" What can this thing do?" I believe he said.

Ev's excitement and passion for the rhythm bones in his hands carried on and the boners of the world came together and experienced years of strength and endurance. The Boners of the World have the passion, excitement, and desire to keep up that rhythm and playing hard and strong. The rhythm bones have been an instrument in the human experience and thankfully will remain an instrumental Cornerstone as humanity clicks and clacks onwards. Thank You Martha for giving a gift and I hope all of us will be willing to give a gift.

"It's Wonderful what a Gift can Do!"

Mel Mercier. The Rhythm Bones Society is a 21st Century phenomenon. But the stories it has told itself, up to now, have largely been 20th Century ones. Has the time come for the society to find and tell itself the 19th Century stories of the bones? I believe it has.

In this, it's 25th anniversary year, the society has an opportunity to reflect on its roots, continuing to trace them through the last century with renewed vigour, and following them as they go deeper, into the 19th Century. Deepening its knowledge of this recent history of the bones may help illuminate a path forward for the society into the second quarter of the 21st Century, and beyond.

There is so much to celebrate at this moment - so many wonderful people and experiences to be grateful for over the last 25 years, and in those few, but vital, formative years leading up to the first Bones Fest. Those who established the society and those who have continued to nurture this unique community through their passion, love and hard work, deserve to be elevated and honoured in our stories. Without their vision and leadership we would not be a community, a democratic family of equals.

The Board plays a crucial role in the structure of our society. Those who serve on it provide valuable leadership, guidance and ideas, and our community has been blessed with passionate, wise, gentle and consistent leadership from the Board for a quarter of a century -



Photograph from Steve Brown's 1999 NEFFA Rhythm Bones workshop. From left: Rob Rudin, Mance Grady, Bret Walker, Ev Cowett, Martha Cowett, Russ Myers, Johnny Muise, and Steve Brown standing.

that's really something. The Board also represents the community. Ideally, in my view, it would also be representative of the society, a microcosm of the community. In our democratic community, opportunity for leadership extends out beyond the Board. Leadership in thought and action, initiative and innovation, are in the gift of every individual member of the society

In that spirit, I write here to suggest that part of an approach to a collective reflection on the past and shaping the future might be to ask ourselves some questions. What, I wonder, does it feel like to ask our individual and collective selves questions about, for example, our 'whiteness'? Or the relative status and representation of men and women in or society? Obviously, I don't have all the questions and I have even fewer of the answers, but I do have an interest in encouraging and participating in a conversation about these important issues within our community. As they used to say on the radio back in the 70s (1970s, that is) "responses on a postcard please," or in the newsletter, and maybe a special session at the next Bones Fest?

Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer. Prior to 1983, I was an professional educator teaching high school science and creating a company called 'Ed Tech' that produced educational materials. That all ended in a fire setting me adrift from my professional life to try something new. I set out to design a teaching character, but needed something unique to define the character ... a hook.

Then I met Percy Danforth and rhythm bones and instantly got hooked myself. I soon adopted the name "Spike Bones," Spike being a personal name and Bones being a major character in every minstrel show in the 1800s and who played the rhythm of course.

For the next 15 years, I performed in many venues, but always felt professional alone as a rhythm bones player and lacking a sense of community. Then in 1999, I attended my first Bones Fest at Russ Myers house in Virginia. WOW.... what a bunch of fresh air...I had found my people...all bones all the time. What a brilliant, lovely, and inspiring group of new friends.

Since then the highlight of every year... must do list.... was to attend the next

Bones Fest. Each time meeting new boning friends. Special friends one feels a deep relationship with even though you see them once a year

In 2008, I had the honor to host Bones Fest XII in St Louis, the first Fest west of the Mississippi River. What a treat...I recommend watching a special documentary I hope to make in the future.

In addition to the Fests, four times a year I would receive in the mail the RBS newsletter filled with so much history and insight into rhythm bones around the world. Thank you Steve Wixson for being such a driving force behind the newsletter as well as being such a unique rhythm bones player yourself,

So thank you Rhythm Bones Society and congratulations on 25 great years. And RIP to all my great friend who have passed away. I am so fortunate to have known and boned with you. Hope to play with you again when I pass to the other side.

Steve Wixson. The Rhythm Bones Society has been a blessing in many ways. It took my childhood hobby and turned it into a retirement avocation. It changed me from a one-handed to a two-handed player. It gave me a chance to visit new cities as well as Ireland. The first born in a family typically has the need to be productive, and RBS helps satisfy that need for me.

Coming from an academic background, editing the newsletter has been rewarding, and researching is fun especially when you find a gem of information. Having the Library of Congress house and catalog this small journal is a nice reward that I share with all who have contributed to our newsletters.

Bones Fests are exciting and the Saturday night performances with such talented performers is magic. Thanks to the hosts and workshop leaders for volunteering.

But when all is said and done, it is the people who bring the greatest satisfaction.

Kevin Dunn. I played bagpipes and bones for an Irish band, but we broke up last year and I haven't been playing. I would say I am a supporter rather than a player at this point. I am glad to know y'all are still making music.

Tambo and Bones A Book Review

In the history of 'playing the bones' the Minstrel Era is but a blip in the timeline of rhythm bones that dates back at least 5500 years when the first artifacts were found. The Minstrel Era lasted about 60 years professionally followed by amateur performances into the 1960s, but it was the heyday for rhythm bones being popular as a stage musical instrument as well as what must have been a very large number of people, exposed to them by the many minstrel troupes that circled the globe, playing them as performers or for fun. This is borne out by the number of our members who learned to play from their father or a relative who was or learned to play from minstrel players.

The minstrel show was the first distinctly American contribution to the theatre, and many books and articles have been written about the minstrel era and even how it affects us today.

Recently one book was deemed important enough to be republished. The book 'Tambo and Bones' was written by Carl Wittke and published by the Duke University Press in 1930 and the new version by Hassell Street Press in 2021.

Carl Frederick Wittke, (1892 -1971), was an American historian, and a specialist on ethnic history in America. Wittke wrote 13 scholarly books, wrote hundreds of articles for scholarly journals and popular magazines, and wrote 262 critical book reviews.

Many of the authors who write about the Minstrel Era might mention rhythm bones as one of the original four minstrel instruments, but they do not identify it as important to the era: the movement was more important than the instrument performances. This article looks at the Minstrel Era from a rhythm bones point of view, though it likely applies to the tambourine as well as the banjo and fiddle.

The Reprinted 'Bones' Pages.

This following are excerpts from pages that mention 'bones.' As you read these reprinted bones stories you get to know Wittke's writing style and can anticipate stories about other aspects of the minstrel era which if interested might justify buying the book. If all you are interested

in is the bones stuff, then you don't need to buy the book because here they are.

Page 7. "These Negro performances were spontaneous and almost instinctive. In more recent times, some of the chain gangs of Negro prisoners working on Southern roads, still fall quite automatically into singing while they work; the "end men" on the chain develop a real talent for improvising new stanzas, while the others chant the chorus, swinging their picks and tossing them around with a dexterity that suggests the skill of the professional minstrel end man with his tambourines or bones. From their pathos and humor of the Negroes, their superstitions and their religious fervor, their plaintive and their hilarious melodies, their peculiarities of manner, dress and speech, the white minstrel built his performance."

Page 43. "According to the generally accepted account, Whitlock, on one occasion, happened to be practicing on the banjo with his friend Emmett, when Brower and Pelham, quite by chance, came to call at Emmett's boarding house. It occurred to one of the group to develop an ensemble performance, with the result that the quartette began to practice for a public presentation of their minstrel acts. Emmett played the violin, Whitlock the banjo, Brower the bone castanets, and Pelham the tambourine. Their first show was presented either in Bartlett's billiard parlor in the Bowery, or in the Branch. Hotel, a favorite rendezvous for showmen in New York City. Some of the leading circus men of that day, including Nathan Howes, were present to witness this first minstrel performance.

"According to Emmett's account, many in the audience were disposed to ridicule the new experiment in theatricals, and the show began with the crowd jeering this new and strange musical combination of violin, banjo, bones and tambourine. For although the single blackface performer had become an established feature, this new combination had never been tried, not even on the comic stage. The costumes and other novel features of the program were apparently planned by Emmett."

Page 45. "From all accounts, there was great interest in "the first night of the novel, grotesque, original and surpassingly melodious Ethiopian Band,

entitled, the Virginia Minstrels," as the first show was eloquently described in language which became a feature of the extravagant advertisements and press stories of later minstrel performances. The announcement in the New York Herald characterized the show as "an exclusively minstrel entertainment combining the banjo, violin, bone castanets and the tambourine, and entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas." In the course of the evening's program, all four performers sang and danced, jigged in solo and double numbers, played their respective instruments singly and in various combinations."

Page 57. "The Buckley Serenades probably were the first to produce burlesque opera as part of the regular program. One member of the family was a virtuoso on the Chinese fiddle. Another was skillful with the bones and imitated drums, marching soldiers and horse-racing with great success."

Page 77. "The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, minstrelsy invaded many of the western towns along the route. It was in the summer of 1869, for example, that Murphy and Mack's Minstrels delighted large audiences for ten days in the famous Salt Lake Theatre of the Mormons of Utah. Two years later, the Joe Murphy of this minstrel troupe returned to the Mormon capital as an Irish comedian. Among the minstrel favorites of the Pacific Coast were Ben Cotton, a song and dance man, Charley Backus, of the famous Birch, Bernard, Wambold and Backus combination (an organization which made its debut on the west coast as the San Francisco Minstrels), Joe Murphy, a bone player and singer at auctions and cheap entertainments in Sacramento who had risen to the distinction of being the champion bone player of the Pacific Coast and later went into Irish comedy."

Page 88. "Bryant's Minstrels also visited Cincinnati in the summer of 1870 and played at Pike's Hall. The program perhaps deserves special mention, because it shows clearly how variety acts were becoming regular features of even the best minstrel performances.

"After a more or less traditional first part, Dan Bryant, as conductor a la

Maretzek, presented a concert, featuring Eugene, the wonderful burlesque prima donna. In a character act, entitled "The Drum Major," Dan Bryant displayed his unusual skill as a manipulator of the bones. There followed a farce, a burlesque duet by Bryant and Griffin of Gens d'Armes, a stump speech, a banjo solo, and an act called "Daniel in the Bryant's den." The next number was the famous "Shoo Fly," as "vitalized and made a public necessity of by Dan Bryant and Dave Reed," a song given by these two stars for at least two hundred and fifty nights on Broadway."

Page 104. "During the season of 1882-1883, there were at least thirty-two minstrel companies on the road, most of them large and pretentious organizations. When Haverly's Mastodon Minstrels played at the Drury Lane Theatre in London in 1884, there were at least sixty visible performers in the show, eighteen end men with tambourines and bones, and six star end men who were presented to the audience in relays. Needless to add, there was less and less evidence of genuine Negro characterizations in these elaborate spectacles. They were vaudeville or variety shows but hardly the blackface art of the 'thirties' and 'forties.'"

Page 132-3. "Here the story of the decline of American minstrel shows ??? might end, were it not for the fact that the "talkies" promise a revival of this venerable art. Probably this new version of minstrelsy will have only a remote resemblance to the performances of the early burnt cork artists. Seven minstrel shows were on the "talkie" programs by May, 1929, and "the twinkle of tambourines and the rhythmic rattle of the bones" are being heard again in Hollywood. Optimists say that "Hollywood has gone minstrel." It permits the introduction of many specialties, very little plot is needed, and there is virtually no limit to the "wise cracking" by which the minstrel boys can enliven the film. Universal seems to have started the new experiment with "The Minstrel Man," starring Eddie Leonard. Into this film, Leonard took with him two of the old songs with which he was identified in the days when he was on the minstrel stage."

Page 136. Add the excerpt.

Page 140. "Tambo" and "Mistah

Bones,” names derived from the instruments with which they added to the hilarity and din of the show. Frank Brower, of the original “Big Four,” the Virginia Minstrels, seems to have introduced the bones into minstrelsy. At first, they were of bone, as the name implies; later they were made of ebony or some other hard wood. “Tambo,” who performed on the tambourine, was expected to go through wild and grotesque maneuvers for the benefit of the audience, while performing on his instrument. As minstrelsy developed, the number of endmen increased, until sometimes dozens of performers graced the extremities of the half circle, and had to be introduced to the audience in installments, the greatest blackface stars naturally being reserved for the last.” [there is more that follows if needed.]

Page 223. “Dan Bryant was one of the greatest of the minstrel kings. His real name was Daniel Webster O’Brien. As a boy, he had worked as a baggage porter in hotels. Before the close of the ‘forties, this young Irishman made his first appearance as a minstrel in New York. Bryant played with many companies, and in 1857, his own company opened in New York City. Ten years later, he took it to California. Dan Bryant’s chief claim to fame rested upon his ability as a dancer of such favorites as “The Essence of Old Virginny,” and “Shoo Fly.” He had few rivals in “shaking up a grotesque essence.” “Shoo Fly,” a song and dance, usually was done with Dave Reed, an endman and performer with the bones who was so famous for his rendition of “Sally Come Up” and “Shoo Fly,” that he became known as the “Sally Come Up Man.” Mert Sexton was a close rival of Bryant in these Negro dances. Jerry (O’Brien) Bryant, the older of the Bryant brothers, was a comedian and endman, who had begun his minstrel career as a ballad singer.”

Page 224. “Billy Morris, another partner, was an endman and expert tambourinist, who sang with a very sweet voice such favorites as “Peter Gray” and “Ruben Wright,” in the late 1850’s. Johnny Pell of the same company, played the other end with the bones.”

Page 226. “E. Freeman Dixey began his career at the age of eighteen, in Boston. He was noted as a bone player, and

for his playing of wench roles. In 1862, he became the partner of Carncross, and thus Carncross and Dixey’s. Minstrels, one of the best minstrel organizations in the United States, was launched. so Thomas B. Dixon’s 1847-1890) specialty was the old ballad “Sally in Our Alley. Sam Hague was one of the rare examples of an English minstrel manager and clog dancer who came to the United States to follow his profession. He toured the country in the 1850’s. While here, he organized a colored troupe, known as Hague’s”Georgia Minstrels, and took them to England. In 1866, he was the owner and manager of a mixed company of white and black performers playing in London.”

Page 233. “Other favorites of the Pacific coast audiences were Joe Murphy and Fred Sprung. The former began his career as a bone player and singer at auctions and cheap entertainments in San Francisco, and later became the champion bone player of the west coast. The latter was a native of Germany, an excellent basso and a successful interlocutor, with much experience as a singer with the Mississippi River Boat Minstrels.”

Highlights

There are 15 references to rhythm bones from a book of 269 pages. The following are short highlights from the above excerpts.

Page 5. What makes up a minstrel performance.

Page 43. Virginia Minstrels formed.

Page 45. How the performance was received, plus a curious note - “entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas.” It would be nice if that means what it says in today’s understanding of racism.

Page 57. Another was skillful with the bones and imitated drums, marching soldiers and horse-racing. We like to think we are better than they, but that page reminds us of our professionals like Kenny Wolin and the late Bill Vits who do things like that.

Page 77. The spread on minstrelsy and Joe Murphy being Champion of the Pacific Coast. We now have the All-Ireland Bones Competition and Murphy is an Irish name.

Page 88. A Dan Bryant recognized as a skillful player.

Page 104. Noting some minstrel troupes had as many as eight rhythm bone players.

Page 132-3. Minstrels shows make it into the movies.

Page 136. Describes the semi-circular seating arrangement.

Page 140. Recognizing Frank Brower as originating bones into minstrelsy. Also records they soon became made out of Ebony.

If you are interested in more details about Frank Brower, go to my article on him at rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V6N1.pdf. Soon I will review a book by Bob Carlin on Joel Sweeney that has a lot more about Frank Brower.

Page 223. Dave Reed becomes famous bones player.

Page 224. Some well known players recognized.

Page 226. Dixey was a noted bones player.

Page 233 Joe Murphy recognized as champion of the West Coast.

Discussion

The Minstrel Era was both a movement and stage performances. The Era might not have started without the performances and the performances would not have continued for so long without the movement. I wonder if the movement could have started from some other trigger if minstrelsy had not come along.

The Virginia Minstrels found something unique and unexpected with the format they developed with the violin, banjo, tambourine, and rhythm bones. The violin has a long history in folk and classical music. The tambourine has a shorter history that parallels rhythm bones and during the 1800s was well known. The banjo with its African roots was just beginning its history with players like Joel Sweeney. Rhythm bones are likely prehistoric.

Rhythm bones were played before the start of the Minstrel Era. The banjo and rhythm bones performed together in circuses and other venues. The Virginia Minstrels found a format where performers and performances could be staged without a host, like a circus, and that changed everything for performers.

Performances like these could not have continued if they were not top notch. The pages of this and other books describe

performers being talented. In these excerpts rhythm bones players competed with each other which like our Bones Fests and the All-Ireland Bones Competition inspire players to improve. 'Bones and Tambo' were more than instrumental as they had to tell jokes and stories and interact with the MC, that is the Interlocutor.

[Sidebar. I memorized an Emily Dickinson poem as a kid and it popped into my mind as I was editing this article. It is one of her most famous poems written during the Minstrel Era.

"I'm nobody! Who are you? Are you nobody, too? Then there's a pair of us — don't tell! They'd banish us, you know.

"How dreary to be somebody! How public, like a frog. To tell your name the livelong day To an admiring bog!"

Could she have seen a minstrel show and the two nobodies are Bones (who I make the narrator) and Tambo, and the frog is the Interlocutor. Or does she just describe the social state at that time that welcomed in the minstrel show. Or like a good poet, write something understand-

able on many levels.]

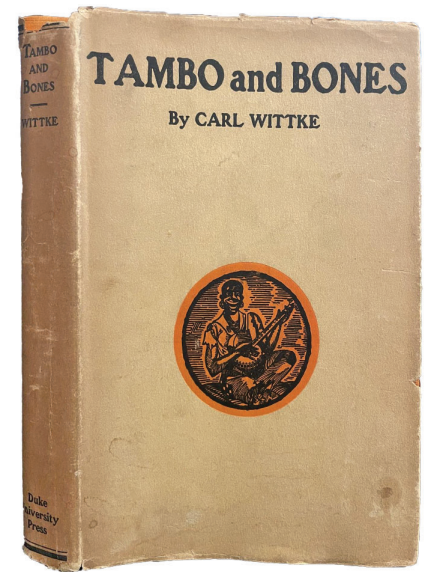
Was it the 'bones' that the Virginia Minstrels added that was something special. We players know that people are amazed when they hear rhythm bones for the first time. People could make them from dinner leftovers or buy them from catalogs, and learn how to play them.

So, here is a question. Would the minstrel show have flourished if the end man was not a rhythm bones player. I don't know, but I will continue to research this theory.

Over the years the movement changed as did the music. Rhythm bones were there at the beginning, there when minstrel troupes were large, and there in amateur shows at the end a century later. What does that say?

The timeline mentioned at the start of this article expands like this; early artifacts found in China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Etruscan Italy. Troubadours carried them across Europe to England, and Europeans brought them to America. The Minstrel Era begins and ends, rhythm bones artists like Brother

Bones and Ted Goon had successful recording careers in the 1950s, musicians in Ireland recorded for several decades thereafter, and RBS is formed and its story begins on Page 1. *Steve Wixson*



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Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

Address Correction Requested