

Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 26, No. 2 2024

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Executive Director's Column

It is such a joy to write this editorial. Bones Fest XXVIII was a huge success! We had roughly 45 bones players in attendance, and that means everything. So often over the years I have heard folks say that it is like a family reunion, with a family you didn't know you had. This year was no different.

Our primary venue, the Shack Up Inn, was the perfect place for us to get to know each other, to have musical performances, jam sessions, and talks. The weather was kind to us – not too hot for Mississippi – and I even spotted some Irishmen taking videos of the rain, an irony to be sure! The Hopson Commissary was a perfect venue for eating delicious food and listening to great musicians. I am not sure Randy could have planned it any better, including some on the fly moves to ensure our success.

The thing that makes a Bones Fest great are the people. This year was no different. We had guests

from Ireland, as well as as players from all over the country, from San Diego, to Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan, West Virginia, New York, Florida, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Missouri, Iowa, D.C. and, Tennessee.

Randy also enlisted some fabulous musicians for us. Reverend Robert Reynolds played resonator guitar and vocals, Edwin "Fast Eddie" Consolmagno added his harmonica, Detroit singer, Maggie McCabe, added vocals. That core served as the primary back up band for us over the weekend.

The bones player who was most missed was Jeremy Brown. Jeremy was the son of our previous executive director, and fearless leader, Steve Brown. Jeremy was famously called by his father "the world's happiest bones player." I think that anyone (Continued on Page 3)

Bones Fest XXVIII Highlights

What I will remember most about Bones Fest XXVIII is the passing of "Super" Jeremy Brown just days before the festival date. Steve Wixson and I were discussing who we should memorialize at the festival; Steve mentioned that Bill Vits had not been remembered and we planned to do him when we learned that Jeremy was gone. I was able to contact my friend Kurt Gronvall, who was at the Fest on Thursday and Friday, and owns Globe Printing in Upper Michigan who printed our T-shirts. He was

able to make a banner for Jeremy, which he donated and brought down with the shirts. On Thursday many arrivals were shocked to hear of Jeremy's passing, even if we all knew he was quite tentative. But the spirit of "Super" Jeremy Brown prevailed and I saw nothing but happy smiling people for the next three days. We will all miss your smiling face Jeremy, you taught us to stay happy and keep on smiling, no matter what comes our way. Rest in peace fellow rhythm bones player.

As in so many festivals that I've

been in involved with you spends months and months planning and making arrangements and when the actual event starts rolling it goes by in a flash and is suddenly over.

XXVIII started rolling on Thursday evening with blues and jamming, and kept building in a crescendo climaxing in the BIG BONES SHOW at Ground Zero. The skill level of rhythm bones players was truly astounding. We have an organization with such (Continued on Page 3)



Randy Seppala and his Bones Fest XXVIII Acrylic Fest Graphic Creation

Editorial

There are four Founding Members of the Rhythm Bones Society who are still active after 25 years, and three were at the Fest, Mel Mercier, Spike Bones Muhrer, and Steve Wixson (the complete list of all 22 Founders was presented in the Vol 26, No 1 issue). During these 25 years we have accomplished much, and we celebrated at this Fest with a 25th anniversary session with projected images for discussion and a composition titled 'Roll On' for a rhythm bones ensemble from Mel Mercier. Let us keep 'rolling on.'

On Page 1, Randy Seppala starts his Bones Fest XXVIII summary sadly noting the passing of Jeremy Brown, son of former Executive Director, Steve Brown and his wife, Jennifer (see the Banner prepared in his memory shown in the photograph on Page 8). Jeremy was the first down-syndrome person I had been around, and I learned a lot what he could and could not do and the happiness that radiated to those around him. Turns out that for months and months before each Fest Jeremy impatiently waited for it to come. I thank Steve and Jennifer for sharing Jeremy with us.

Jim Connor came to Bones Fest VIII and did not get to perform, and I was so glad he came to Bones Fest XXVIII. He learned to play rhythm bones from legend Ted 'Mr. Goon-Bones' Goon, and you can learn about Ted in his own Exhibit in our Online Museum. Jim is the only person we know of who learned to play rhythm bones from Ted. Jim was on the road for 60 years playing his banjo and rhythm bones in 68 countries. His story is told in RBP, Vol 25, No 4.

Vgo Terry has been to three Fests and his skills are impressive. He is a multi-instrumentalist and tells the stories of the music he plays. For Bones Fests XXIII and XXVIII, Vgo presented the History of the Blues in hour long sessions. His story is way overdue, and will be featured in the Vol 26, No 4 issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player*.

You are in for a treat when you read Beth Shelton's Bones Fest XXVIII highlights. She is a writer of note and wife of bones player Mark Shelton.

Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Skeff Flynn at 1:25 PM in the Shack Up Inn, Clarksdale, MS, with all present except Steve Brown and Dean Robinson.

A motion was made and approved to accept the minutes of the last Board Meeting as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson did not have a Treasurer's Report and apologized. It will be forthcoming.

The Nominating Committee was called to order at 1:28 PM. All current Board Members have agreed to serve another year, and were nominated by acclamation

Our Youtube channel is underutilized. In the future new videos and any videos with long load times will be placed on our channel.

Our issue with paying ASCAP fees was discussed, and will be address for the next Fest. This year all of our venues have an ASCAP license, so we are covered.

The motion was made and approved to add up to \$600 to the budget for BFXX-VIII. This is to cover increased food costs.

The possibility of a world wide Virtual Bones Fests close to our actual anniversary date, September 24, 2024, was tabled until later.

We need a host for BFXXIX, and no one has volunteered. This will an item in the General Membership meeting.

Joy Watkins donated the rhythm bones of the late Walt Watkins to RBS. These will be inventoried for possibly giving them to attendees at the next Fest.

Motion was made and approved to adjourn at 2:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

Minutes of Board of General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Skeff Flynn at 2:22 PM in the Shack Up Inn, Clarkesdale, MS with a quorum of 'members present.' Motion was made and approved to approve the minutes of the last membership meeting as printed

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

Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.com

in the newsletter.

The first order of business was electron of the Board for 2025. Steve Wixson reported on the results of the Nominating Committee, and the floor was opened for additional nominations. There being none a motion was made and approved to elect the nominees by acclamation. They are: Skeffington Flynn, Executive Director, Kenny Wolin, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board members at large, Steve Brown, Tom Connolly, Dennis Riedesel, and Dean Robinson.

There was a discussion about a host for Bones Fest XXIX. One person expressed interest and the Board will follow up.

There being no new business, a motion was made and approved to adjourn at 2:35 PM.

Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

(Highlights continued from Page 1)

a variety of talented players that we can surely call this "the most eclectic festival we have had" as Steve Wixson said to me. I am so glad we had perfect weather and everyone enjoyed themselves again at the incredibly unique Shack Up Inn and additionally this year the Hopson Commissary, providing two unbeatable venues for our festival. Big thanks to both of these grand facilities.

Big thank you also to all 45 Fest attendees, each and every one of you are what made this gathering an overwhelming success. The workshops, jamming and individual performances were well presented and informative. The "Discussion of Irish Bones" and "Vgo's History of the Blues: part 2" really added the some perspective and reverence.

Then came the BIG BONES SHOW at Ground Zero and it was an EXTRAVAGANGA!!!!!! Everyone played wonderfully and world premier of Mel Mercier's "ROLL On," performed by a Rhythm Bones Ensemble to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Rhythm Bones Society, was nothing short of sensational. WOW!!!!!!!!

Over the past 25 years The Rhythm Bones Society has created Brotherhood/ Sisterhood, an alliance, dedicated to the presentation, preservation and perpetuation of the ancient art of rhythm bones playing and Bones Fest XXVIII is proof that it is working. Discovering that there are more bones players out there than we first thought and bringing them together at an annual festival to celebrate and teach our bones playing tradition is a brilliant idea and way to ensure the survival of rhythm bones playing. It is vital that we keep this organization going for at least another 25 years. Thank you for attending Bones Fest XXVIII and being a member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Best always. Randy "DaBonesMan" Seppala

(Exec Director continued from Page 1)

who had the pleasure of interacting with Jeremy would agree with that title, his joy was infectious. Jeremy passed just before this year's Bones Fest. Randy was kind enough to organize a banner to hoist in his honor during the fest. What a great way to remember him. He will be missed.

Attendees filtered in on Thursday, and immediately connections were either made or rekindled. We jammed, and bonded, and genuinely got excited for the days to come. What a blessing to be able to come together as a community.

On Friday, we introduced ourselves – though we ran out of time for everyone, which puts a note in my head for future Bones Fests. There were workshops, followed by a wonderful "History of the Blues" by Vgo. Kenny's advanced workshop was certainly appreciated by all and you can see Stan Von Hagen's enthusiasm later in this newsletter.

Friday evening we headed over to the Hopson Commissary for a Southern Buffet, with none other than the international sensation Watermelon Slim. The Hokum Cats played inside the Shack Up Inn after that, while several of us headed to the back porch for an acoustic jam. What a delight!

From a personal note, I need to say two things about my interactions with Jim Connor. First, he offered me a napkin at one point in the Mississippi heat, saying, "I thought about wiping your brow during the jam, but I didn't want to throw you off". What a dear soul! Second, I got to do a harmonica duet with him at some point at the evening. Afterwards he said, "that was obligato – you played the notes you were obliged to, and I played the ones I got to." What a treat!

Throughout the weekend several of us were practicing a brand new piece by Mel Mercier. I won't cover the names here as they are accurately represented elsewhere in the newsletter. I will say that it was an intense expreince that I will never forget. We hope to upload content to the website in the future on what went into making it happen. As Beth Shelton quoted Mel, "the vision is the process".

I won't rehash the show at Ground Zero, as I feel others have covered it. The exception is that I realized that I really could have used some help. In fact, the RBS could use some help. During the General Membership Meeting Mel pointed to a lack of women on the board. Well, in a volunteer organization like this it often comes down to who is willing to serve.

As a result, I would like to announce

the Rhythm Bones Society Leadership Mentoring Program. I will try to both create a sign up form, as well as to reach out to several candidates that I feel are well suited over the summer. The idea here is that we need a pipeline of leadership candidates that can help continue to guide the RBS into the future. If you are interested and you haven't heard from me, please reach out.

When Mary and I left Bones Fest, we flew to Ireland. I was able to serve as the adjudicator for the Junior All Ireland Bones Competition. That story will need to wait for another day. Until then, may your bones be with you! Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeff Flynn*

Letter to Editor

I was exposed to the rhythm bones maybe 35 years ago at the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games (gmhg.org/) and had to learn to play them. My favorite rhythm bones to play are my cow shin bones, but have also played wooden rhythm bones. I have played rhythm bones along with the guitar, bouzouki and mandolin in a few Irish bands over the years. I did visit your web site and was blown away with the few YouTube videos I watched. It's inspired me to practice using two sets of rhythm bones simultaneously. *Terry Schomer*

A BFXXVIII Reflection

After returning home, I was thinking about all the fun I had playing the bones, jamming with others, listening to friends and new friends play the bones, and remembering the visiting and laughter with older and new bones society members. In the blink of an eye, I realized, for me, having the opportunity to sit with attendees, learn from them, share life's experiences, and belly-laugh, was just as necessary as playing the bones.

Bones players. Who are these people? I would proffer that bones players who are seasoned, those just learning, or those simply curious, come together to enjoy the company of like-minded people, and/or lose oneself in unbridled fun. Personally, at the core of the Rhythm Bones Society is a group of people who instinctively know they are brothers and sisters in soulful spirit. *Sharon Mescher*

Photographs from the Shack Up Inn and Hopson Commissary



Rob McC, Stan Street, Johnny McC, Josephine McC, Randy Seppala



Eddie Consolmagno, Rev Robert Reynolds, Randy Seppala



Jim Connor - Intermediate Workshop



Vgo Terry - History of the Blues



Kenny Wolin - Blues Bones Workshop



Michael Ballard and Dennis Riedesel - Beginner Workshop



Skeff Flynn, Tom Connolly and Mel Mercier Irish Bones Discussion



Watermelon Slim and Ron Bruschi at Hopson Commissary



Lots of Jamming

Photographs from the Big Show at the Ground Zero Blues Club (The blue color in these images comes from a blue spotlight. Must be blue for Blues!)









Bruno Giles, Jim Runner, Kate Barfield and Sky Bartlett and Ernie Duffy all performed with the band



Skeff Flynn with Mary Gunderson King



Tom Connolly, Vgo and Mel Mercier



Dennis Riedesel with Vgo



Jim Connor sings his most well known song - Grandma's Feather Bed



From Mountain View, Kieth Symanowitz buck dancing, with Jenny and Tom Sartain. Later Maggie McCabe, beginner rhythm bones player joins them on stage.



Skeff, Sharon, Mark, Kenny, and Mel perform Mel Mercier's 'Roll On' composition



Vgo and Mary Lee and Frank Sweet

Where Bones and Blues Collide. Celebrating the Rhythm Bones Society 25th Anniversary at Bones Fest XXVIII

Traveling south past Clarksdale on Mississippi Highway 49, the historic Hopson Plantation came into view, rising from the Delta's flat cotton fields. We turned west toward the Hopson Commissary, a century-old building, now a tourist attraction and event venue.

A collection of rustic sharecropper cabins and refurbished silos situated next to the tarnished Hopson cotton gin, The Shack Up Inn is one of the country's most unique, and The World's Oldest B&B (Bed & Beer. See a photograph of its performance venue on Page 8).



We were looking forward to spending the weekend with about 45 other folks from around the country and beyond, sharing the ancient and esoteric art of playing rhythm bones.

From The Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) webpage: "Rhythm bones are one of the oldest man-made musical instruments, likely prehistoric. Two slabs are held between the fingers and clicks are made with wrist and arm movement. They can be played one- or two-handed.

As the name suggests, they are made from animal bones, but also other materials like wood shaped like a bone. As one would expect, each material produces a different sound." [sic]

Rhythm bones have contributed to many musical genres, including 19th century minstrelsy, traditional American, Celtic, blues, bluegrass, and zydeco.

Bones Fest XXVIII, May 2 - 5, 2024,

was held in Clarksdale "Home of the Blues", Mississippi, where Deep South agriculture history and the South's distinctive blues music are featured and celebrated. It was a movie-like setting for this historical gathering.

At check-in, I met Steve Wixson, editor of the *Rhythm Bones Player* Newsletter, Secretary/Treasurer of the RBS, and "keeper of the flame," as my husband describes him. Steve welcomed me enthusiastically, but I informed him I was not a rhythm bones player – just a spectator. Steve assured me I would be playing the bones at some point during the weekend. I was doubtful, but he knew.

Festival host Randy Seppala presented a treat for the Thursday night jam session. Acoustic blues and Americana musician, Reverend Robert Reynolds played resonator guitar and vocals; Edwin "Fast Eddie" Consolmagno added his soulful harmonica; Detroit singer, Maggie McCabe, filled the hall with her expressive vocals; and Randy "DaBones-Man" Seppala played bones, washboard, conga, and a variety of other percussion instruments (see top right photograph on pag 4).

As the rhythm bones players in the audience jammed along with the earthy acoustic blues, I had an overwhelming feeling this was no ordinary music festival. Bones Fest was a family reunion. Musicians from varied backgrounds, connected by their common interest, some having known each other since last century, were coming together once again for their annual jam session. All were welcomed into the family.

My husband, Mark Shelton, was invited to perform with four other players on a composition by Mel Mercier, one of the world's leading Irish percussionists. To honor the 25th Anniversary of the RBS, Mel wrote "Roll On," a chamber music piece using the traditional rolls and taps of rhythm bones. Featuring five individual bones players, the rhythmic intricacies wove through the players creating an exciting and dynamic ensemble.

The quintet included some of the bones family royalty: Skeff Flynn, Executive Director of RBS and rhythm bones champion, Sharon Mescher of the famed "Mescher Bones" group, and Mel Mercier, whose father Peadar Mercier performed with the Chieftains and was Ireland's first professional bodhrán and bones player. Kenny Wolin, percussionist with "The President's Own" United States Marine Band, brought his classical training and flawless technique to the mix and presented an advanced workshop focusing on the blues shuffle. Mark Shelton, Dallas-area percussionist and first-time Bones Fest attendee has played rhythm bones in thousands of performances over the past thirty years.



Left to right: Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Mark Shelton, Kenny Wolin, and Mel Mercier

After hearing the rhythm bones quintet rehearse, revise, and refine, I asked Mel if I was hearing his original vision for the piece, or was it a process. He answered, "The process is the vision."

Mark Shelton said, "It's a rarity to hear an ensemble of bones playing in unison. The different timbres coming from the variety of materials form an interesting composite timbre. It's not your typical bones playing."

I overheard one attendee use the phrase "bones chords" to describe the cluster of timbres produced by the ensemble.

We stayed overnight in the appropriately named Dogtrot Cabin giving us an authentic sampling of sharecropper days gone by. Frogs skipped along as we walked the pavestones to our screened front porch. Birds sang and played under the eaves. With unpainted walls, an old clawfoot bathtub, and a back porch



swing, we were comfortable guests in the vintage shack.

After lunch on Friday, I headed over to the Hopson Commissary and met Tate Antici. He and his wife, Chelsea, are the owners of Hopson Hospitality. They host blues, rock, roots, country, and everything else bands from anywhere to entertain folks amid the blues relics and agricultural antiques.



Hopson Plantation, home of the first mechanical cotton-picker, is where Joe Willie "Pinetop" Perkins drove a tractor and played boogie-woogie and blues piano. I felt like I was walking on the hallowed ground of musical pioneers.

Friday night back at the Shack Up Inn's "Juke Joint Chapel," Joe McLerrin & The Hokum Cats entertained with their lively blues renditions and encouraged bones jammin.' Joe's young son played drums while his precious daughter stood next to her dad and danced to the energetic rhythms (see the top left photograph on Page 4).

Saturday morning, I listened to "The Irish Discussion" with Mel Mercier, Skeff Flynn, and Tom Connelly, rhythm bones maker from Cork, Ireland. Learning that written history of Celtic rhythm bones playing began around the mid-1900s made me wonder about unknown or unrecorded rhythm bones playing mysteries. The conversation about the All-Ireland Bones Competition held each May gave me reason to plan another Ireland vacation.

The Saturday night finale at Morgan Freeman's Ground Zero Blues Club in downtown Clarksdale was an evening I'll never forget (see photographs on Page 5). With an iconic setting, the crowd was friendly and excited. Folks ate Fried Green Tomato Sammiches with Gitback Sauce and Mississippi Delta Catfish Dinners while waiting for the show to begin. The rhythm bones family gathered for the farewell event, showing love and support

for each other as stories were told, songs were sung, and bones' clickety-clacks reverberated through the venue. I felt the closeness of folks forever connected by a common thread.

The evening reached a highpoint as Reverend Robert played and sang with other musicians. Without warning, Mark put a pair of bones into my hands and before I knew it, I was swept into the ceremonial conga line parade, where fifty or more people improvised percussive patterns and wove through the partying crowd of the juke joint. With two sticks placed strategically between my fingers, I was happy Mark had shown me how to produce basic tones. Surrounded by expert players playing intricate rhythms, I could at least click along on the upbeat, smiling so big my face hurt.



Sunday morning, we said our goodbyes and drove away. Traveling south through flat Delta farmland, we reflected on Bones Fest, the nostalgic setting, and the unique culture. Music has a way of connecting souls. We are grateful for the warm welcome into the Rhythm Bones Society family. *Beth Shelton*

[Beth is a writer of books and Internet posts that you can review on her website at https://ebshelton.com.]

Reflections From Attendees

Bones Fest was an eye and ear opener. I had never attended in-person, but glad I made the decision to head to Clarksdale. Hearing and seeing the various styles of playing plus meeting folks that have a passion for playing this primitive percussion instrument was a both inspiring and fun. *Mark Shelton*

I have attended all but one Fest for 10 years. For me some of my best experiences have been the teaching sessions. I remember the 1st one (Beginner) with, I think, Steve Brown at the Grand Rapids Fest in 2014. Since then, I have moved on to Intermediate, and in Clarksdale, the Advanced. Kenny Wolin's session this

year was outstanding to me. Learning and practicing various blues riffs gave me insight, no only to blues rhythms, but also to several new variations that I can add to my playing. I was so enthused after this session that I practiced some of them almost non-stop throughout the rest of the jams. Thanks Kenny. *Stan Von Hagen*

Living in San Diego, I rarely have occasion to meet other RBS members, except at Bones Fests so I see them as, in part, a reunion of friends old and new. Sadly, as the years pile up, some of our members pass on. This year, Jeremy's passing was particularly sad. His enthusiasm and joy in playing and meeting friends was amazing to experience. He will be sorely missed.

The Shack Up Inn is, in many ways, unique, eclectic and probably a bunch of other adjectives I don't usually use to describe Bones Fest venues. It provided places to jam, teach, learn, mingle, eat good food, drink interesting local beer (and more familiar choices as well).

By the end of the weekend, my hands and wrists ached, I was tired, and I am looking forward to doing it again next year, God willing. *Michael Ballard*

Many thanks for once again giving me a trip of a lifetime! I loved this Bones Fest from start to finish!

The music played and organized by Randy was superb. I felt really privileged to be getting private concerts and workshops from world-class talents like the amazing Jim Connor, the incomparable Watermelon Slim, the fantastic family group the Hokum Cats, the multi-award-winning Maggie McCabe, and the articulate and talented multi-instrumentalist Vgo.

To sum it up – the Bones Fest was a fun-filled, friendly festival of music and sharing, with world class talent performing, in a unique part of the world. And I felt the spirit of Jeremy hovering over us all weekend, quietly smiling and clicking away. Slán go fóill, *Tom Connolly*



From left to right, standing in front, Keith Symanowitz, Tom Connolly, Mary Lee Sweet, Kenny Wolin, Susan Riedesel, Bruno Giles, Frank Sweet, Mel Mercier, Ellen Stern, Randy Seppala, Sky Bartlett, Mellisa French, Ernie Duffy, Stan and Jean Von Hagen, Jim Connor with banjo, and on stairs, Pat LaBree, Cindy Connor and Vgo Terry with small banjo. On stage, Ron Bruschi, Marie Bruschi, Michael Ballard, Sharon Mescher, Kate Barfield, Dennis Riedesel, Maggie McCabe with guitar, Spike Bones Muhrer, Heidi Hess-Bynum, Tom Sartain, Nikki Shaner-Bradford, Jim Runner, Jessye Bartlett, kneeling, Becky Shannon, Erin Sharkley, kneeling, Travis Kostell, Skeff Flynn, Mary Gunderson King, Jenny Sartain, Steve Wixson, Randy French, and Mark Shelton.

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested