



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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## Executive Director's Column

Winter is here. A season of death and rebirth. It is with a heavy heart that I need to acknowledge the deaths in our community. Jerry Barnett, Stan Von Hagen, Bernie Worrell, and Tommy Cowett have all passed on since last I wrote to you all. You will find memorials both in this newsletter and on our website.

Having acknowledged the deaths, where we will find the rebirth? Rhythm bones have brought so much joy to my life. I have a concept of Bones Ambassadors that I believe I have shared with our community before. In the 1900's I can point to a handful of rhythm bones players that kept our tradition alive. Without them, I would not be playing rhythm bones today.

I think of Percy Danforth. A man who is rumored to have sold over 30,000 pairs of rhythm bones in his lifetime. Percy took every opportunity to introduce

folks to rhythm bones. Many current and former members of the RBS learned about rhythm bones from Percy.

Jonathon Danforth, Percy's grandson, has served on our Board, contributed to our website and continues to participate in upholding rhythm bones playing traditions. Search YouTube for "Shake Your Bones" by the Jethros – you're in for a treat.

I think of Joe Birl, who allegedly sold over 100,000 pairs of rhythm bones in his lifetime. He is the only known rhythm bones player to hold a patent with the US government on a modification to the rhythm bones. He came up with the idea to add a notch to make them easier to hold. He also created a Bakelite mold so he could mass produce rhythm bones and for many years you could find (Continued on Page 2)

## More Musing About Types of Rhythm Bones

Last year I wrote an article about the size and shape and material of bones (RBJ Vol 25 No. 4). Since then I have been working on a more definitive and comprehensive article - but the subject is so huge I think I will be at it for another while! So meanwhile here are some things I discovered and re-discovered in the last few years about this topic. I hope you find it interesting.

I've seen and heard really small bones made in Yorkshire before the first World War (from whalebone I think). They were small so they could be carried in a soldier's limited pocket space through both World Wars. They are 5" long, 3/4" wide and 1/4" thick. I have since discovered that my neighbour from two doors down, Jack, has a pair he bought when he was in a skiffle band in college in Dublin in the 1960s-70s which look and sound almost exactly like the World War bones. I keep trying to meet up with him to compare the two pairs and photograph and video them together, but Jack travels a lot, This month he is in – guess where? Yorkshire!

The smallest bones I have been asked to make were 4", last year by a lovely man called Brian Walker who lives in Florida. I made them from the thoracic vertebrae – more about this in a later article!

And the smallest bones I have ever made were

from a failed attempt to make goat shin bones! I had searched for suitable goat bones for more than 10 years and only in 2016 did I finally get decent ones from a gentle creature called Rug who died of natural causes. The "failed" pair I made a few years (Continued on Page 4)



These rhythm bones were made for Tom Connolly by Parker Waite. The two narrow ones are Teak, the wider ones are Rosewood. Sanded to 1200 grit, and finished with WATCO Teak Oil. Parker said, "The pattern is my modification to Joe Birl's plastic rhythm bones."

## Editorial

I was working on my Editorial when our Executive Director's Editorial arrived, and it got me thinking. Our membership numbers are down from earlier times, though dues are enough to pay for our very large website, pay for printing the newsletter as a member benefit, and having the financial strength to hold annual Bones Fests that typically though not always are break even events. As Skeff points out we have lost many old timers who made important contributions to our society, and newcomers have not taken their place.

We might conclude that after a quarter of a century we are slowing down except that attendance at Bones Fest is strong. Maybe we need to refocus our direction.

This is an unusual issue that has six pages instead of the normal eight. The newsletter is printed on two 11 x 17 inch sheets paper that when folded to 8.5 x 11 size has four pages for each sheet. Most of our readers read the newsletter on our website so that restriction no longer exists for most readers. Initially color printing was expensive and used on the outside two pages (except for the Bones Fest Highlights issue). Color now costs nothing for whatever we put on our website. Members will still receive a paper copy that may have one or more blank pages.

Founding Member, Mel Mercier's challenge to look as 19th Century rhythm bones playing to help us see our future may be an answer, and I am excited about starting a project to do just that as part of the rebirth Skeff has written about in this issue. Many of can contribute to this Project, and I hope you contact me with your ideas.

**(Editorial continued From Page 1)** his rhythm bones in music stores. His estate owns the trademark on the term "rhythm bones" and it is through their good grace that we are allowed to use the term. Joe was an incredible player, and unfortunately, like many others, he is sorely missed.

I could go on about several other giants that kept our tradition alive in the 1900's. Ev Cowett comes to mind. The man that organized the very first Bones Fest, and

who was the first Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society. When he organized the first Fest he thought that he might be one of the last rhythm bones players in the US. But he managed to find others, and to bring them together. He trained just about his entire family to play rhythm bones, and unfortunately, we now mourn the passing of his son Tommy.

So where will we find rebirth? Steve and Jennifer Brown recently lost the happiest rhythm bones player of all, their son Jeremy. Yet Steve is already planning to host a Bones Workshop at the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) in 2025, as he has done for so many years in the past. Steve's presence as the longtime Executive Director of the RBS, along with his steadfast commitment to NEFFA, his tireless efforts in making and selling rhythm bones, and his fostering of relationships in Abbeyfeale with the All Ireland Bones Competition and Fleadh By The Feale Committee are almost incomparable in the effort to keep rhythm bones playing alive in the 21st Century. This is where we see rebirth.

Michael Baxter has decided to use his skills in videography over the past few years to produce collaborative rhythm bones playing videos that bring together players from several continents. This year might be his best effort yet. You can see both a trailer and the full video on the RBS homepage. Huge thanks to Michael and everyone involved. This is where we see rebirth.

Board member Tom Connolly runs Irish Bones. Hand crafting rhythm bones for a diverse customer base, shipping to a variety of countries. He is also our most active Facebook contributor, routinely engaging folks on anything related to rhythm bones. This is where we see rebirth.

Martin O'Donoghue, from the Fleadh By The Feale committee recently reached out to me to see if there were American rhythm bones players interested in attending the All Ireland Bones Competition this year. Anyone interested? Reach out to me if so. I intend to go, as I have for the past 3 years. Board member Dean Robinson has been there every year that I have been.

Together, we have developed relationships with the rhythm bones playing

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

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

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

community in Abbeyfeale. A little birdie told me Steve Brown was considering making the trip back this year, as he has done so many times in the past. This is where we see rebirth.

For my part, I perform publicly on rhythm bones (among other things) with some regularity. I am always happy to give a demonstration, always happy to talk about rhythm bones. I always have an extra set somewhere, just in case I meet someone who takes to them. Whether I sell them or donate them, I want to be sure I can pass the tradition along. This is where we see rebirth.

We've had quite a bit of loss in recent years. I miss my old friends. I hope to make new ones. I miss the old rhythm bones ambassadors. I hope to help train new ones. If you are interested in getting more involved in the RBS in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out. This is where we see rebirth.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

## Wilma Myers Obituary

Wilma Myers, wife of the late Russ Myers, passed away on September 12, 2024 as reported to us by her daughter, Jeniffer. Russ and Wilma were hosts for Bones Fest III where the Rhythm Bones Society was founded. We did not get Wilma on stage, but as shown in the photograph she knew 'how to hold them.' She was a retired OBGYN head nurse.



## Walter Messick Obituary



Walter Messick passed away on February 28, 2022, and his formal obituary is at <https://www.dispatch.com/obituaries/b0058918>. He was primarily a creator and seller of handcrafted dulcimers, and his instruments won numerous awards and were sold around the world.

He also made a variety of other folk instruments including the uniquely shaped rhythm bones shown in the photograph above. In a story in our newsletter, he said. "I made a jig for my band saw where I could cut hundreds at a time, and then sanded and finished them. I made thousands of pairs of bones selling them at craft shows and later on my website."

## Bones Fest XXIX Preliminary Information

Bruno Giles (with help Steve Brown) is the Host for Bones Fest XXIX. It will be held Natick, MA, a suburb of Boston on August 7-10, 2025. Historically, the East Coast has had the most attendees.

Bruno has secured the Fest Hotel, and the venues for meetings and workshops.

More details will be released soon including the Registration Form and the Registration Fee.

Below is hotel reservation information.

Book your group rate for  
BONES FEST 2025

If you have questions or need help with the link, please do not hesitate to ask. We appreciate your business and look forward to a successful event.

Event Summary:

BONES FEST 2025

Start Date: Thursday, August 7, 2025

End Date: Sunday, August 10, 2025

Hotel: Courtyard Boston Natick for 159.00 USD per night

Last Day to Book: Tuesday, July 8, 2025

Telephone: (508) 655-6100

Reservation Link: <https://www.marriott.com/event-reservations/reservation-link>

There is a bus from Logan airport, an express to Framingham, about a mile from the hotel in Natick. Someone will pick you up at the Framingham station.

## 19th Century Rhythm Bones Project

As part of our 25th Anniversary celebration, former Board Member, Mel Mercier, challenged us to look back to 19th Century music to see our future.

Russ Myers, when he was recorded for posterity by the Library of Congress, was shown a Broadside announcing a German rhythm bones player performing at the Bronx Theater in 1740. We need to get a copy of this broadside.

With this information, we should expand the challenge to the 18th and maybe 17th century rhythm bones music.

If you are interested in researching this challenge, use the Contact Us page.

## Rhythm Bones at a Drum Circle

There are many drum circles around the country, Pioneered by a number of musicians, many of which studied with Babatunji Oltunji, Master drummer from Nigeria. One of the hallmarks of the drum circles is an inclusiveness in regards to experience, instruments, and playing level. I have had very good success, playing rhythm bones at drum circles, and people seem to be fascinated with them.

As with anything, it's probably best to check in with the leader of the drum circle and ask them if it's appropriate to play rhythm bones in that context. Drum circles vary with rules and expectations. Again, most of the drum circles that I've been to are very inclusive and welcoming.

The drum often seen at drum circles is a Djembe, A large, and very loud drum taken from the African tradition. Some of the other instruments might see at a drum circle could be shakers, tambourines, And other handheld percussion. You also see a variety of drums, not only those from the African tradition, but some other traditions as well, such as native American frame drums, Doumbecs from the Middle East, And The Irish frame drum the Bodhran. Once I saw a base, Tom Tom from a drum set, and it was played with Sticks.

But how do rhythm bones fit in at a drum circle? It's really important to go with the flow of the music, and and not take it as your personal solo time. In some ways it's relative to many of the music that we play we don't want to overwhelm the rest of the players or deviate from the basic rhythm. Many of the drum circles that I've seen request you to leave your ego at the door. Remember, this is a group experience and not a place to show off. This is true for all the musicians attending a drum circle not only rhythm bones players. It's a community.

You don't see many rhythm bones players at a drum circle. In fact the only other person I know that plays rhythm bones are the drum circle is Bruno Giles, excellent drummer, harmonica player, and of course, rhythm bones. For several

(Continued on Page 4)

**(Continued From Page 3)**

years in a row, I attended the eastern mass rhythm festival and offered a rhythm bones playing workshop, which was very well attended. So now we see some of the drummers picking up rhythm bones.

How do you find a drum circle in your area? Of course you might find some listings on Facebook. For some reason, drum circles very often are found at universal Unitarian churches. There may be specific people in your area that organize drum circles. In our area, David Curry does a lot to organize a variety of drum circles in amazing environment. One drum circle was held at the fruit land Museum in Harvard mass, outside with a gigantic bonfire, and has organized the Easter mass rhythm festival. One thing that you might encounter, with a lot of noise, the rhythm bones may get drowned out. Volume at a drum circle can go from really quiet to very loud. They also vary in size some as large as 40 or 50 people, and some all the way down to a few drummers. It would make sense to investigate first where are they and get a sense of how big they are. The drum circle I've been attending in Fitchburg at a Unitarian church, only has about 10 drummers on a good day, so quieter drum circles definitely would complement rhythm bones.

There's nothing like playing rhythm bones with a group of drummers, especially when they haven't seen them before and are excited about them. I'm always available for questions, and would love to hear your stories! My cell phone number is 978-7272899. Have fun! *Steve Brown*

**(Musings continued on Page 1)**

before that, sourced from a butcher called Billy(!), but the goat was quite small and I still have that pair – very hard to play without seriously damaging your wrist – they are only 3 ¾” long and are tubular. They look more like tiny tubular bells! The bone is really thin but very hard.

The biggest bones I have seen were in Padstow in Cornwall, rib bones, about 11” inches long and 2” wide at the base. I recently read an article in the Rhythm Bones Society archive called “Bones and the Man - Toward a History of Bones

Playing” written by Robert E McDowell in the Journal of American Culture <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/McDowellHistory.pdf> where Robert said:

“The great performer Frank Brower, who introduced bones to the professional minstrel stage in 1841, sawed into twelve-inch lengths the rib-bones of a horse.”

Robert goes on to say that this size didn't last long in the Minstrel era and bones were reduced to between 6” and 8” which are the lengths that the vast majority of bones seem to fall between.

As a general rule the longer the bone, the thinner and narrower they should be, and conversely if you have heavy or thick bones, then I think they work much better if they are short. I have a short heavy set made for me by our RBS colleague Parker Waite in March 2020. One pair of the set is teak, the other rosewood. They are quite dense and heavy, beautifully polished, with tapered thickness from top to bottom, and a notch at the top for easy gripping – Parker told me it is his modification of the Joe Birl pattern. They are loud!

The first pair of bones I made in 1979 are about 5.5” long and quite thick, about ½” to ¾”, and 1” to 1 ¼” wide. Of course I had no clue what I was doing at that time – now I know a little more but I learn every day. At Christmas just past I bought Tomahawk steaks and made a pair of bones from the rib. They were beautiful, a very consistent 1” wide all the way down, a little thick at almost ½” and the bone itself was quite thick. I've looked for rib bones for many years that are not too thick on the outside but that have good thick bone with little marrow. Very difficult to find here in Ireland, as most cattle are slaughtered at about 2 years old, but the Tomahawk bones delivered and I will have to eat more steak I think! One “issue” with the Tomahawks was that they were quite curved, so following advice from Stephen Brown I paired them off with different straighter partners. Steve told me how it is quite common to have one straight bone and one curved bone.

Most recently, last week in fact (early January 2025), a man called Billy Scribbles joined a conversation in the RBS Facebook page and he introduced us to a Catskills woodsman called

Mike Todd (1877-1960) who played rhythm bones that I can only describe as “clappers”. Billy is recreating them. They are straight, but with nice flared out tops so they can be held easily, and they taper out to a thicker section towards the bottom then taper back in. They have a very pleasing soft sound, very different to my ear from other wooden rhythm bones.

My favourite wood for making bones is olive. It is just beautiful to see, to feel, and to work with. When you carve and sand it, the wood is very forgiving and co-operative – it almost feels soft while working it, yet when finished the bones produce nice clear clicks and clacks. It is really difficult to get good pieces of olive here in Ireland for a reasonable cost but I managed to get some last year and made a few pairs. I thought they were great and I decided to get a second opinion so I sent a pair as a gift to the famed Johnny Ringo McDonagh. Here's what he said: “Yes I tried them there's a nice tone off them and I liked the grip on them, around the same time I got a Bodhran off Brendan White, so I will do a little demo for Facebook, I've been tied down with stuff so I'll do it when I get a chance, many thanks for them, wishing you all the best from now on, regards, Johnny.” I am looking forward to Johnny's full review of the bones and also of Brendan's bodhran! I also discovered since then that sometimes you can buy olive salad utensils whose handles can make really lovely bones. I tried lots of them, and had success with a few. If you can get salad utensils where the handles are about ¼” thick with a slight curve, grab them! Cut the handle off, and with some patient sanding and shaping you will produce beautiful bones. I am always on the lookout in high-end kitchen stores – I have found the cheaper utensils are not nearly as good.

On the subject of making “cheap” wooden bones, I had a request two years ago from a teacher in Scotland for cheap bones for a class of children who had special needs. I remembered making a pair in 2017 for a man in Portugal called Diogo Fernandes, who also had a limited budget. I went to the local hardware store, got some pine stripwood – used here for edging around wooden floors – and created curved pieces by soaking them overnight then bending them

around a series of nails to keep them curved. When they dried out in a few days the curve stayed. You don't need much of a curve, and I discovered if you bend pieces about 3 feet long you can get enough of a curve without straining the wood too much. I was very dubious about whether this would work – I am pretty sure the stripwood was not pure pine, but made up of pine pieces and glue pressed together – but it worked! So I made four pairs for the Scottish kids and did a series of videos of the process. I checked in with the inimitable Junior Davey (5 times Irish Bodhrán champion and 2 times bones champion at Abbeyfeale). Junior teaches many kids to play, and he thought the pine bones, about 6 inches long or maybe a little shorter, would be very suitable. I will check in and see how they are getting on over there in the wilds of Scotland and report back at a future date!

I have also seen metal bones and have made a few attempts myself. On one trip to a kitchen store looking for olive, I came across two large spoons with a bright copper-like finish. The handles were beautiful, and had a good weight to them, so I bought them to experiment with and forgot about them for a couple of years. Then I got to know the wonderful Annika Mikolajko. Those of you who know of Annika will know that as well as being a fabulous musician she makes very creative use of bones – her most famous trick is to hold one against her cheek and tap it with the other, giving some lovely echoey sounds. Annika first bought an aluminum pair from me that I had made by hammering a piece of extrusion into shape, and when I told her about the “copper” ones in 2021 she had to have them! They give a lovely ringing sound and are more like bells than bones to my ear.

Over the past few months I have reached out to a few well-known players to get their thoughts. Here is what three of them have said:

**Rossa Ó Snodaigh** of the legendary band Kila:

“Tom a chara, tá súil agam go bhfuil biseach ort anois. (Translation: Tom my friend I hope you are well now)

Bone length: Best if they are at least as long as the bottom of your hand to the tip of your middle finger. Heaviness comes

into play thereafter and the longer and heavier the less flexible and slower they become to play.

Wood V Bone: Bones have a very bright clacking sound due to the cavernous quality of the dried out interior. This allows them to be heard in most settings. They can of course be played softer by changing where the two bones percussively connect.

Wooden shaped bones have a soft clucking sound which is more useful when playing in smaller sessions.

Rossa Ó Snodaigh”

**Tommy Hayes**, another legend:

“Hi Tom

I have 2 pairs of Nicholas Driver bones that I have had for at least 45 years not sure what length they are as I'm away from home at the moment but they are the right length for me

I also play wooden ones and it really depends on what sound I require on a recording or live

I should also add that I usually play 3 bones as I prefer the sound dynamics

Cheers

Tommy”

**Stephen Brown**, bonemaker extraordinaire:

“Hey Tom ... I've always found that length is somewhat determined by the bone I am using. Leg bones tend to be cut on the short side, intense to include that large portion at the end, which is not ideal. I hope this is making sense. I try to get the bones as long as possible 10 inches if I can. Then I can trim off the parts that I can't use. 7 inches is the goal, lately I've been going under 7, but still trying to make it as close to 7 as I can... I have several pairs that the Drivers made including one that Aubrey driver made...there are a number of companies that go over 7 inches and in some cases to 8 inches, and I think of Mardeen of Shooting Star bones. Some of the old Danforth bones can also be over 7 inches 7 1/2 or more ... wood is so much easier to work with than bone and you can pretty much make them the length you want . Whereas with bone you really have to trim off the unusual parts. Anyway hope this is helpful, take care, Steve.”

I love developing and messing around with bones materials and designs,

and I also love to discover older more traditional instruments.

And I still stick to the seven things I have learned about the size, shape and material of bones, which I mentioned in the last article:

1. Bones players preferences vary hugely.
2. Nice looking bones are no good if they don't play well.
3. Some ugly bones play beautifully.
4. Lots of lengths, widths, curvatures and weights can produce great action.
5. Even bones made to a standard pattern from non-bone material have individual characteristics.
6. There are many different opinions of the same pair of bones.
7. The bones decide.

I hope you enjoyed reading this, and later this year I will keep working this year on a more in-depth article. *Tom Connolly*

## Facebook Update

What an incredible year we've had on this Facebook group for the Rhythm Bones Society! We've had over 140 posts, over 460 comments, and over 1,700 reactions from over 250 plus members! It's an exciting time.

Tom Connolly has been our top contributor this past year, and we hope he'll lead us in 2025. There have been posts about making bones, playing bones, and just generally our particular outlet of expression.

I would love to see more videos of us playing. It seems to me that the basic mechanics of bones playing are more or less common to us all. Of course there are some techniques that belong only to a few of us, but it is really what we each decide to do with our techniques that is most impressive to me.

So as we head into 2025, let's share our performances! Let's use this Facebook tool to shine a light that our fellow bones players can follow.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*



## Who is 'The Bone Player'

I first saw an image of "The Bone Player" back in 2016 while attending the New England Folk Festival in Mansfield MA. I was wandering around looking for a unique musical instrument and decided to search for some musical spoons when I discovered Steve Brown's Rhythm Bones Table. After talking me into purchasing a pair of bones, he slid a postcard reprint across the table of William Sidney Mount's famous painting which I would later learn, proudly hangs in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. It depicts a well-dressed African-American joyfully playing the rhythm bones. As an amateur genealogist, I was immediately intrigued and wanted to know more about this person. But after many tries over the years, I found nothing, until recently.



Bruno tells us that the model for The Bone Player is 'Andrew Brewster'

Again I tried, beginning my search on Ancestry.com, along with a quick Google search, only to find that someone had indeed identified the elusive man in the painting. The Bone Player's name was Andrew Brewster, born around 1820, and lived in Brookhaven NY. This revelation came from the book titled "The People in the Paintings of William Sidney Mount" written by Katherine Kirkpatrick and Vivian Nicholson-Mueller (<https://www.arcadiapublishing.com/blogs/news/the-people-in-the-paintings-a-nineteenth-century-long-island-artist-features-people-of-color>). Their book explores the diverse

subjects depicted in Mount's artwork, particularly focusing on his portrayal of Black and multiracial individuals. The Bone Player, owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is one of eleven paintings featured in the book

According to online sources, Andrew was 47 when William Mount painted him. It is unknown if Andrew actually played the bones or just modeled for the painting, but since many people in the households of the Brewsters and Mounts were musicians, it seems more than likely that he did indeed play them. Mount painted "The Bone Player" and "The Banjo Player" whose name was also discovered to be George Freeman. He was commissioned to paint them to be made into lithographic prints to be sold in Europe.

The most striking aspect of Mount's work was how he portrayed people of color in the early nineteenth century. Unlike the usual portrayals of the time, where the subjects were usually shown in the most unflattering manner possible. Newspapers also often drew Black people in racist cartoons with exaggerated features. His work was finished several years before the Civil War, at the height of tense slavery debates. Mount's painting depicts his subjects in a more humane and almost elegant manner. The expression of pure joy on Andrew's face in playing the rhythm bones is something all rhythm bones players can relate to.

Over 150 years after the Bone Player's name had been lost to history, the unknown musician can finally be recognized and celebrated

We can almost hear, someone asking him back in 1856, "Andrew Brewster, will you play the bones for us? The painting reveals his answer

For more information about Andrew Brewster, "The Bone Player" and other subjects of the paintings of William Mount, please check out "The Art of William Sidney Mount: Long Island People of Color on Canvas", written by Katherine Kirkpatrick and Vivian Nicholson-Mueller (The History Press, September 2022). *Bruno Giles*