



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 27, No. 1 2025

In This Issue:
Dom Flemons
Go back and Fetch
it

*What Are Rhythm
Bones*

*19th Century
Rhythm Bones,
Part One: The
Timeline*

Bones Fest XXIX

Columns:
Executive Director

Editorial

Executive Director's Column

Hello good people! Spring is finally here. This means that I can finally pull my literal head out from under the metaphorical covers, and start pursuing things that are fun!

The Carolina Wrens have already returned to my property and are singing sweet songs. The temperatures are rising to the point that I don't always need a jacket and several layers. Life is sweet.

So what's on the horizon? You should be aware that Steve Brown is Back at the New England Folk Festival this year. He's been selling bones and leading workshops there for longer than I've known him, and that's been a while. NEFFA runs April 25th through April 27th this year in Marlborough, MA. Visit <https://www.neffa.org/> for more information. You can also chime in on the Rhythm Bones Facebook group - <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/16M7yLCP7n/> - or send a message through

the RBS website - <https://rhythmbones.com/> - if you have questions.

That very weekend (Saturday April 26th from 2 - 5pm) I'll be leading a bones workshop in County Sligo, Ireland at the Coleman Traditional Irish Music Centre. I will be joined, and almost assuredly out-shadowed, by the great Junior Davey. Junior is a 2 time All Ireland Bones Winner and 5 time All Ireland Bodhran Winner. We'll cater to every bones player from beginner to advanced and admission is free to the public. It is of course suggested that you make a donation to the Coleman Centre. More information can be found currently on the Rhythm Bones Facebook group - <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/16M7yLCP7n/> - and soon on the Coleman Centre website - <https://www.colemanirishmusic.com/> (Continued on Page 2)

Dom Flemons "Go back and fetch it"

[Go Back and Fetch it!] Is a translation of the Ashanti philosophy of Sankofa—being sure to bring the wisdom of the past with you into the future. *Sule Greg Wilson*

Dom Flemons name has become synonymous with traditional roots music, and in particular with rhythm bones. As a founding member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops and a solo artist he has toured across the country and the World. He is a multi-instrumentalist playing guitar, banjo, jug, vocals, harmonica, drums, quills, fife and, of course, rhythm bones. The Carolina Chocolate Drops won a Grammy in 2010 for their album *Genuine Negro Jig*. His 2018 solo recording, *Dom Flemons presents the Black Cowboys* and 2023 recording *Traveling Wildfire* were both nominated for a Grammy in the "Best Folk Album" category.

Dominique Flemons was born in Phoenix, Az. August 30, 1982. He was Influenced by his Mexican American mother who was a former Flamenco dancer and there was always rhythm around when he was growing up. His African American father was first exposure to "country & western" music and soul music. Over the years, Dom has done his geneology and found that his mother's family includes musicians who

(Continued on Page 2)



Dom Flemons

Editorial

Dom Flemons as part of the Carolina Chocolate Drops and now as the American Songster is an Ambassador of rhythm bones. Steve Brown, a great rhythm bones player, interviewed Dom and wrote an article primarily to a rhythm bones audience making it unique from other articles about Dom. It begins on Page 1.

Since from when the website was upgraded to use WordPress, when you clicked on the “What are Rhythm Bones” tab on our Homepage you viewed three pages of poorly organized details and bad photographs. This article was written to replace those pages with better text and better photographs, and you can check it out online now. Note that links are underlined and can be clicked for more details. It begins on Page 4.

Former Board Member, Mel Mercier, during our 25th Anniversary Celebration, challenged RBS to study 19th Century music to help figure out our future. This issue presents the first part of that study which will add more data to the timeline particularly about rhythm bones in the US, and it turns out we already know a lot. Having a more complete timeline should give us the context from which to write the story Mel asked for, and my working title for the article is “The Minstrel Era: Why Bones?” It begins on Page 5.

This issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player* Newsletter is again less than eight pages long. So when I, as Editor, plea for story ideas and/or stories, it is a serious, sincere request. Stories can be of local or world-wide happenings. They can be of any length needed to tell the story. Photographs are good as the size can be changed to fit the space available. Or you could volunteer to do research say, for example, the 19th Century Music project.

(Exec Director continued from Page 1)

The following weekend kicks off the Fleadh By the Feale, featuring the All Ireland Bones Competition. I’m looking forward to competing this year after sitting out the competition to judge the Junior Bones Competition last year. The All Ireland Bones Competition will be held on Monday, May 5th. It should be

accessible both live and after the fact via the internet. More information can be found at - <https://linktr.ee/fleadhbythefeale>

I’ve been giving you a bit of a build up, but to an RBS member, what could be more exciting than BONES FEST!?!?! That’s right folks, Bones Fest XXIX is happening! We’ll be in Natick MA this year August 7th through 10th. Our Hosts are Bruno “Old Bones” Giles, and Steve Brown. Two excellent players and excellent people. This is one you won’t want to miss. There is more information in this newsletter, as well as on our website - <https://rhythmbones.com/>

This newsletter contains a number of gems. The lead is Steve Brown’s interview with Dom Flemons of Carolina Chocolate Drops Fame. Seeing Dom play the bones in a YouTube video with Rowan Corbett was the deciding factor in my decision to pursue the rhythm bones. If you haven’t seen it, I recommend you check it out.

<https://youtu.be/oLazWX8ux-PU?si=zyRBH6VasGyoonNw>

Steve Wixson follows up with thoughts about early US bones players and an announcement concerning the updated “What Are Rhythm Bones?” Page on our website. Please check out the articles, along with the updated page, and let us know your thoughts.

Spring is finally here! Let’s play some music. May your bones be with you!

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

(Dom Flemons continued from Page 1)
were employed by WPA in the 1930s in Phoenix where he is 6th generation on his mother’s side. On his father’s side, his grandfather was a holiness preacher from East Texas who had migrated to Northern Arizona after serving in the Second World War. He played some guitar in his youth but he quickly abandoned it for the church. Yet family lore tells of his older brother playing blues guitar in East Texas as well as his grandfather, Dom’s Great-Great-Grandfather, playing fiddle for square dances.

His first musical experiences were in school band where he played “auxiliary percussion”, small percussion instruments. He played in the pit orchestra where he learned how

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 27, No 1
First Quarter 2025
ISSN: 1545-1380

Editor
Steve Wixson
wixson@epbfi.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 web site: rhythmbones.com

to integrate the smaller percussion instruments into the music, and where he first experienced polyrhythms. In high school he played in the marching band and learned to play in a four bass drum line, further integrating polyrhythms in the music. Later in High School he became very interested in folk music, and picked up the guitar and harmonica. He listened to singer song writers like Bob Dylan, Eric Anderson, Big Bill Broonzy, Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee and Joni mitchell.

Dom was drawn to the music and pre-blues songster like Huddie Ledbetter better known as Lead Belly whose East Texas accent reminded him of his grandfather. He also became very interested in New Orleans style Jazz, and picked up the tenor banjo. He started collecting records and listened to a great variety of music. He was busking on the streets, and playing in Coffee Houses while going to college at Northern Arizona University. In 2004 Dom was

contacted by Banjo enthusiast/drummer/percussionist Sule Greg Wilson who was looking for Black banjo players in Arizona. They met at the Encanto Coffee House in Phoenix, and the two connected over a shared love of music. Sule became a major influence on Dom and his musical development. Sule was in the midst of planning the first Black Banjo gathering at Appalachian State University in the Spring of 2005. He invited Dom to attend which would be a pivotal point in his musical career. It was here that he met Joe Thompson, Mike Seeger, Bela Fleck, Tony Trischka and Rhiannon Giddens. It was also at the Black Banjo Gathering that he met Cliff Irvin, a rhythm bones player from Seattle, WA. It was his first exposure to rhythm bones, though he hadn't learned to play rhythm bones at this point, Cliff did spend some time with him but he didn't really pick it up.

Shortly after the Gathering in the summer of 2005, Dom formed Sankofa Strings with Sule Greg Wilson and Rhiannon Giddens. Dom then moved out to North Carolina and by the Fall of 2005 he formed the Carolina Chocolate Drops with Rhiannon and North Carolina fiddler Justin Robinson. While attending the Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention in 2006 he met a lady from Mars Hill, NC. She liked his percussive guitar style and gave him a set of rhythm bones. She gave him a lesson right there, and it was then that he began playing rhythm bones in earnest. Soon after he began incorporating rhythm bones into the Carolina Chocolate Drops music.

From there he put a lot of different influences into rhythm bone playing, chops from his school band days, underlying pulses from the fiddle and banjo music he was playing, and Brother Bones (aka Freeman Davis) Jazz rhythms he played on his records like the famous "Sweet Georgia Brown" which would become the Harlem Globe Trotters theme song. He also worked on playing what he called, "lead bones" to show case rhythm bones, incorporating different rhythm patterns in an artistic and abstract manner, such as the tune, "Genuine Negro Jig." He began to develop a style where he used his whole body to tell the story. He started researching the old minstrel shows through pictures, and

noticed that the players had their hands up in the air when they played. He began playing that way and continuing to use his whole body when he played. He also began listening to the music of Brother Bones (aka Freeman Davis) and the Jazz rhythms he played. He also ran into other rhythm bones players like Washington D.C. blues man Mike Baytop who gave him great advice. Old-time musician Matt Kinman also showed him a few tricks that he would incorporate into his sound. He also mention the significant impact The Rhythm Bones Society has had on him. It gave him a much greater sense of the larger world of rhythm bones playing, and he's jammed often with Scott Miller and Skeffington Flynn among the many who he's met over the years.

"I have also found that the bones have single-handed changed the way that I approach any other instrument that I play. What I mean by that is that the way that the bones require one to focus on the internal rhythm of a piece music, when to play when not to play and how elaborately when we do play bleed over into the way I play my other instruments. The syncopation and rhythm of the bones have been translated to the sound I make on the guitar, banjo or any other instrument I may play. It was a fundamental game changer for me."

As he played rhythm bones with the Carolina Chocolate Drops and others such as the Old Crow Medicine show, he began posting more and more video's on Youtube and other sites, and people started showing more interest in them and asking about them. He began collaborating with rhythm bones makers and producers, Stephen Gara from England, Joe Birl from Pennsylvania, Scott Miller from St. Louis, and yours truly, to sell rhythm bones at his performances. Between the performances and video's he influenced many people across the country and the world to begin playing rhythm bones. He's really become the Johnny Appleseed of rhythm bones!

Currently Dom is playing rhythm bones that were made by Stephen Gara, and a pair I had given him years ago, "they are my go to bones!" He has also recently collaborated with Jeff

Menzies to produce very high quality rhythm bones in a variety of exotic woods (jeffmenziesinstruments.com). He also has a collection of a variety of rhythm bones people have given him over the years.

As Dom has influenced so many people to take up rhythm bones I asked if there were any players he knows that are doing interesting things. He taught Dante Pope how to play rhythm bones who is a professional percussionist who Dom says is doing some very interesting things, and recorded a tribute to Brother Bones some years ago. He also mentioned seeing video's of a rhythm bones player from Portland, Maine, Kafari, who he met at a festival. Kafari actually learned to play from watching Dom's video's on YouTube. He felt his rhythm bone playing is very unique. Dom mentioned others in his immediate orbit including Sule Greg Wilson, Rowan Corbett, Hubby Jenkins and Rhiannon's nephew Justin Harrington who performs under the name Demeanor. He used to run into rhythm bones players at his performances, but says he doesn't as much anymore. He continues to look on the internet where he sees some of the newer players.

I asked Dom of all the records he has done which would be the most interesting for rhythm bones players. He mentioned his recording of Marching up Prospect hill as being particularly interesting for rhythm bones players. This is a tribute to sonny Terry and JC Burris, and featuring Guy Davis on harmonica and Dom on rhythm bones. The other record he recommended was the Black Cowboys album, and A version of John Henry entitled "John Henry y los Vaqueros featuring Dom and Dante Pope on rhythm bones."

Dom continues to grow as a musician and as a person. He and his wife Vania, and their daughter live in the Chicago area. Vania is instrumental in helping manage his business and organizing. He has a monthly radio program on WSM in Nashville, The American Songster Radio, and he continues his active touring schedule. He has performed an invaluable service to our instrument ensuring that will continue into the future while continuing to "Go back and Fetch it!" *Steve Brown*

What Are Rhythm Bones

Rhythm Bones are one of the earliest rhythm instruments in human history. The instrument has roots in China, ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, across Europe to England, and the United States. The Online [Museum](#) has a wealth of historical information.

Rhythm bones are sourced from animal (bones), vegetable (wood) and mineral materials. Each material offers a different tonality to the player, and some people like to mix and match materials. Go to the '[How to Make or Buy Rhythm Bones](#)' page to help decide which path to take.

The tone is also affected by the placement of the instrument in the hand. To hear how different materials sound, go to 'Listen to the Sounds They Make' below on this page.

Typically rhythm bones are somewhere between 4 and 8 inches in length, and curved so as to fit in the hand, usually with convex surfaces towards each other. There are various methods of playing rhythm bones, but in most cases one bone is fixed in place against the palm while the other bone is free to move back and forth mostly using arm motions. Go to '[Learn How to Play Rhythm Bones](#)' for a wealth of instruction resources.

The American style typically involves playing a set of bones with both hands allowing syncopated beats and greater tonal variety. Irish rhythm bones playing tends to be one-handed and comparatively understated. Three or four bones in each hand can also be played.

Rhythm bones are an extension of the body, and can be played in a minimalist fashion (close to the chest), or more energetically (with bigger arm and body motions). Each player develops their own unique style of playing. As with any instrument, it takes time and dedication to play rhythm bones well.

Come to a [Bones Fest](#) where attendees share techniques, workshops teach techniques, and we get a chance to perform with great backup music. There is a Bones Marketplace where you try out rhythm bones for sale and decide which kind you like. Here are examples.

Animal Rib Bone



Animal rhythm bone made from a cow rib. They are made from many animal ribs including bison, ox, goat and more. Rib bones have bone marrow inside which produces a complex tone. It is from this type of bone that Rhythm Bones got its name.

Animal Shin Bone



Animal shin rhythm bone made from the shin of a cow. A shin bone is sort of square and can be cut to make four rhythm bones. Because this is a solid bone it has a purer tone than the rib bone.

Wood



Shown above is a Wood example with this being a Danforth rhythm bone. It is shaped like a rib bone and made from maple wood. They are made from most any type of wood with hardwood like rosewood and mahogany producing crisper and louder sounds while softwoods like pine and cedar producing quieter sounds. Ebony has rich tone. Being wood the shape can be controlled to produce unique tones.

Mineral



Shown above is a mineral rhythm bone made out of plastic, and it makes a quiet sound. Another popular material is aluminum which sounds better than you think it would. Shape and other properties can be controlled such as the heavier bottom shown above to produce unique tones.

19th Century Rhythm Bones Project

Part 1: The Timeline

During the Rhythm Bones Society's 25th Anniversary Celebration, former Board Member, Mel Mercier, challenged us to look at the 19th century rhythm bones playing to help us find our future.

Our future is hazy. Newsletter stories are harder to find and membership is down though attendance at Bones Fest is stable possibly showing attendees want a venue where they can learn and perform.

My initial title for the story is 'The Minstrel Era: Why bones?' Was it by chance? Was it because rhythm bones are an up front instrument and not in the back like a drum kit? Was it because they captivate audiences? Was it, as Jonathan Danforth points out, the only clapper whose basic rudiment is the triplet making it natural for playing 3/4 and 6/8 songs. Or as Dom Flemons said about the importance of this instrument, "I have also found that rhythm bones have single-handedly changed the way that I approach any other instrument that I play." We could speculate, but to be somewhat scholarly we can research the subject.

At Bones Fest XIII, Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer posted a Timeline covering the 1800s and concluding with the birth of legend Percy Danforth in 1900 (visit <https://rhythmbones.com/percy-danforth-exhibit>). There were only a few rhythm bones entries, but it was a new idea to me.

I think the first project is to build a Rhythm Bones Timeline from their first appearance in the US to the present. This would give us a perspective for the Minstrel Era article.

What do we already know? The oldest evidence maybe found in the archaeological site of Mezin (Ukraine): a set of mammoth bones (scapula, femur) painted with red ochre and a reindeer antler hammer, with signs of repetitive surface damage on all of them. They are dated to 24,000 years ago. The trail of non-prehistoric artifacts starts 5000 years ago in China, Mesopotamia and Egypt. They found their way to Greece, Rome, across Europe to England, and Shake-

speare mentioned them in his play, *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*. Immigrants brought them to America where they had their greatest success in the Minstrel Era that carried them around the world to mostly English speaking counties but also to Africa where many assume it was where they originated.

Beth Lenz, a student at the University of Michigan, wrote her Master's Thesis titled, *The History of Bones in the US* (visit <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/BethLenzThesis.pdf>). Beth had access to the resources of legend Percy Danforth, and she documents that rhythm bones came to the US from Europe. She also includes biographies of a few players and a large bibliography.

Abner Jay (visit <https://rhythmbones.com/player-profiles/jay-abner>) was an itinerant musician who claimed rhythm bones were played by slaves soon after they arrived in the US about 1620. This claim is completely without documentation other than through oral history from his grandfather who was born in 1821 and played rhythm bones. If this is to be believed, then the rhythm bones arrival date must have been much earlier than previously known. Something to research.

Russ Myers, a legend himself, went to the Library of Congress and his rhythm bones style recorded in a folk music preservation project. While there he was shown a Broadside advertising a German rhythm bones player performing at The Bronx Theater in 1740. We need to get a copy of that Broadside.

There is documentation that rhythm bones were played in the circus by Frank Brower, the first minstrel rhythm bones player (visit <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V6N1.pdf>), who later in 1843 as part of the Virginia Minstrels started the Minstrel Era. Another area to research.

Then came the heyday for rhythm bones; The Minstrel Era that lasted professionally into the early 1900s and continued in amateur performances until the 1950s. Rhythm Bones were one of the four foundations instruments of a minstrel show, and some have said it wasn't a minstrel show if you did not have rhythm bones and banjo. The other two instruments were violin and tambourine.

We know a lot about the minstrel rhythm bones players from books like, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, by Big Daddy Rice, and *Tambo and Bones* by Carl Wittke, who listed performers, their organizations, and players with great skill who had won in competitions. This needs research.

Starting at the end of minstrelsy in the 1950s, there were players of note like Sammy Davis Jr, Freeman Davis (visit <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V4N3.pdf>), known as Brother Bones, making many record albums and TV appearances, Ted 'Mr Goon-Bones' Goon (visit <https://rhythmbones.com/goon-bones-exhibit>), also making many records, Percy Danforth whose performance skills and instructional materials revived rhythm bones playing in the latter part of the 20th Century (visit <https://rhythmbones.com/percy-danforth-exhibit/>), and the several Irish players who also contributed to the rise in interest in rhythm bones playing.

In 1999 on my way to Bones Fest III and the formal organization of the Rhythm Bones Society, I stopped at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress and started a relationship with them (their Director at that time played rhythm bones). At the Center was a filing cabinet with rhythm bones information that I could review.

I was also able to search the LOC's Recorded Music Database using several rhythm bones search terms. From that search I discovered 200 rhythm bones recordings from 1950 to 1999, and one recording from 1912 though there are many early recordings from other sources.

I was new at searching the Internet, but found about 100 pages of rhythm bones information which I summarized in a 1999 document (visit <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/InternetResearch1999.pdf>). Nowadays when you search the Internet you find over 20,000 pages searching with just 'rhythm bones.'

In 1999 on Russ and Wilma Myers' back deck, the Rhythm Bones Society was organized. There was a website created by Martha Cowett as a gift to her father (visit <https://rhythmbones.org>). A quarterly newsletter was authorized (visit <https://rhythmbones.com/newsletters/>),

and Bones Fests have been held ever since (visit <https://rhythmbones.com/bones-fests/>). Now in 2025, our 26th Anniversary, there are Fests, newsletters and a website with the largest collection of rhythm bones information in the world including hundreds of stories about current and historical rhythm bones players.

In my case, I learned from my father in 1945 when I was about eight years old. He learned from a sailor who I presume was Irish as I learned to play one-handed as do they. My father was the only player I knew though I remember seeing someone play at halftime at televised Harlem Globetrotters basketball games (I know now it was Brother Bones). My father was a butcher and made me my first set of rhythm bones of which I have one left.

We know a lot, but not enough about the early years. The Rhythm Bones Society can make significant contributions to the history of rhythm bones with this and follow on projects, and if we don't do it, who will?

It will take a lot of work researching and finding pertinent documents, and fortunately scanning technology and the Internet now give us access to documents that were previously unavailable.

Our results will be published on our website and in the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter which is housed and cataloged in the Library of Congress making it available to future researchers.

While research is a lot of work, it is fun and rewarding particularly when you find a gem of information. For example, when I wrote about the rhythm bones mentioned in Shakespeare's play, I decided to look it up on the Internet and found it was published in 1600. Immigrants from England arrived as early as 1615, and rhythm bones being a pocket instrument could have been carried to America. Slaves began arriving in 1619, it could be that Abner Jay's oral history is correct.

Did I find a new connection! Maybe, but I also realize that publication or copyright dates for old songs that mention rhythm bones might lead us to items to add to the Timeline.

Come along, do some work, and find something exciting. So far I have only one volunteer, so if you are interested, contact me using our 'Contact Us' Page.
Steve Wixson

BONES FEST XXIX

August 7, 8, 9, and 10, 2025

Bones Fest will be based in Natick, Massachusetts, at the Common St Spiritual Center. The Fest Hotel is the Courtyard by Marriott Boston/Natick Hotel 342 Speen St., Natick MA, 3 miles from the Common St Spiritual Center. The center has a stage and many other rooms for rhythm bones workshops. Natick is about 14 miles west of the historic city of Boston, the birthplace of America's fight for freedom. Boston is also the home of the painting by William Sidney Mount, "The Bone Player." Looking forward to this special event. Your hosts, *Bruno "Old Bones" Giles and Stephen Brown.*

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Aug. 7 - Thursday – 3:00 pm Registration begins. 7:00 PM, Visiting, jamming to Jug Nuts Band.

Aug. 8 – Friday – 7:30 – 9:00 AM, coffee, donuts and bagels. 9:00 AM, Bones Marketplace, jamming, and breakout sessions, Pizza dinner.

Aug. 9 – Saturday – 7:30 – 9:00 AM, coffee, donuts and bagels. Bones Marketplace, jamming, and breakout sessions, rehearsal for public show, Tennessee BBQ dinner. 7:00 PM, Public Show at Common Street Spiritual Center.

Aug 10 – Sunday – 7:30 – 10:00, Good-byes



ROOM RESERVATIONS

Hotel special group rate: Courtyard Boston Natick for 159.00 USD per night - Last Day to Book: Tuesday, July 08, 2025

Online: Click [HERE](#) to book your group rate for Rhythm Bones Society
Or Call: 508-655-6100 (Ask for Rhythm Bones Society Group Rate)

TRANSPORTATION

Fly to Boston Logan Airport. At the airport, take the Framingham Logan Express Bus to the Framingham Bus Depot which is 1 mile from the hotel. Bruno will be available to pick up attendees and take them to the hotel. There is of course Uber and Lyft, which should be no more than \$5 or \$6 dollars.

REGISTRATION

Bones Fest XXIX Registration Fee is \$80. Click [HERE](#) to Register online. Click [HERE](#) to Register by mail.