Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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Hello Good People!

This is probably my favorite time of year. It might help that my birthday happened recently. It's also a time of promise, a time of hope. The days have gotten to their longest point. We need to make sure that we take advantage from here on out, because they are only getting shorter now. Music is in the air. Keep your bones close at hand.

I had the good fortune to be able to return to Ireland this year. What strikes me is the incredible power of music to build connections. On my first visit to Abbeyfeale, a young bodhran player befriended Dean Robinson and myself. At the time he was 12 years old. Feidhlim Watters turned 17 shortly after the Fleadh, and is becoming a commanding presence of a man in his own right. His mother Siobhan Watters befriended my partner Mary Gunderson King, as nearly everyone does, on her first trip to Abbeyfeale. This year marked our third visit together (my 5th in total).

Feidhlim and Siobhan took us on a day trip. We got to drive past the house she grew up in - if we had stopped in, her father would have kept us all day, so we pressed on. We got to see the cemetery where her grandparents are buried - and likely their grandparents. That's family. That's an acceptance of Mary and I as family. Don't get me wrong, we hiked the cliffs of Kilkee, we visited Loop Head, we rode the Tarbert Ferry out and back, we ate ice cream, and we dipped our toes in the Atlantic. Perfect tourist destinations, along with perfect family connections. This was where she grew up. And she took us to see it. We were visitors, but we were family. Feidhlim is now old enough to have a girlfriend. It turns out (Continued on Page 2)

Acoustics of Rhythm Bones, Part 1

This article looks the acoustical properties of rhythm bones. There is almost no information on the subject other than emails that were posted to the internet in 2002 and what Scott Miller includes on tone in his Bone Dry Musical Instrument website (https://bonedrymusic.com/Find-Musical-Bones-by-Tone-s/315.htm). This article is not an academic treatment, but more of an overview.

Rhythm bones are classified as a 'Concussion Idiophone' where a pair of two similar, sonorous objects are clashed or struck together to produce sound, and other examples are claves, castanets, and spoons. The sound depends on the material they are made of, their shape, and how they are struck together.

A single rhythm bone could be called an Idiophone which puts it in a class with a Marimba bar which is something that has been extensively studied.

What Can We Learn From a Marimba Bar?

"A Marimba bar actually wiggles in 12 different ways when you hit it, each contributing (however minorly) to the overall sound of the bar. Most of these "modes" are too short lived to bother with though, so most Marimba makers only bother with the primary 3 modes.

The Fundamental mode (which is the musical note of the Marimba bar) is tuned by removing material at the very center of the arch. The 2nd mode (which is generally tuned to 2 octaves above the fundamental) is tuned by widening the arch, removing material from where the curve of the arch meets the flat section at the center. The 3rd mode is tuned by removing material from the very edges of the arch, and is generally tuned to 3 octaves and a major 3rd above the fundamental. When you put all of the above together, you get the distinctive arched shape of a Marimba bar, and when struck gives the Marimba that rich, full sound that characterizes the instrument" (Continued on Page 4)



Danforth Cherry Rhythm Bone with Nodes

Editorial

This is one of my all-time favorite issues of the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter (My favorite is Vol 6, No 1, with my article on Frank Brower, the first minstrel rhythm bones player at https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V6N1.pdf).

In 2002, I contacted Jim McCarthy who I found in an internet search. We exchanged emails discussing if marimba bar theory might apply to rhythm bones, and he posted them on the Percussion Clinic website with the title, The Acoustics of Rhythm Bones. (https://percussionclinic.com/art_rhythmbones.htm) [Note this Post has a link to a more detailed description of marimbas.] I am not sure why this was not turned into a newsletter article, but we were a new society with many subjects needing to be published.

Now, almost a quarter of a century later we return to the subject. This issue focuses on analyzing the sound produced by rhythm bones. It is a companion issue to last quarter's newsletter, Vol 28, No 1, on Technology and Rhythm Bones. It is not an academic study but more an overview of the subject.

This was intended to be a one issue subject, but it has turned out to need two issues with the next being Vol 28, No 4 (Issue Vol 28, No 3 will have Highlights from Bones Fest XXX.)

NOTE. There is time for the rhythm bones community to reeact and contribute to the 4th quarter issue.

Mardeen Gordon contributes an article based on her Virtual Workshop at Bones Fest XXIV titled Exploring Tone on Rhythm Bones. There is a review of the late Russ Myers' demonstration of how he could change tone with a simple finger move. Young's Modulus is a measure of stiffness which in part determines the pitch of the bone, and there is a table with a sampling of materials.

On a different note is Steve Brown's story about the Abbeyfeale 2026 All Ireland Bones Competition where he served an adjudicator. Skeffington Flynn, our Executive Director, who came in third in the 2026 competition, describes that experience in his Editorial.

Letters To The Editor

I read with fascination the several articles on making rhythm bones from a variety of sources in the last issue, what an amazing collection it is!

In regard to making rhythm bones from animal bone, and in particular the leg of the cow, although the tibia or shinbone is used most frequently, and was the source for Driver rhythm bones for the most part, there are other bones in the leg that can be used.

Just for the record, there are three bones in a cow leg, the femur or hip bone, the tibia or shin bone, and the metatarsal or ankle bone. I have used all three, although it's easier to get tibia.

The availability of getting bones is becoming increasingly difficult. Sourcing them from Brazil and India can be expensive. I'm continuing to look for a reasonable source here in the US. *Steve Brown*

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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.org

(Executive Director From Page 1)
that Abbigail O'Connor is a mighty tenor banjo player. She also has an interest in the bones. I was asked if I could bring some bones for her. Obviously, if Feidhlim needed a set of bones for his girlfriend, I was going to supply them. No doubt. We arrived in Ireland on a Friday. The Fleadh by the Feale was underway and Friday normally features the busking competition. The young ones set up at various intervals along the main drag and play tunes (school children grouped mostly by age). Onlookers come by and toss coins, or sometimes paper, into their instrument cases, or other vessels, to show their appreciation. Judges come by to listen and make their determinations by some unknown formula.

This was the backdrop for Mary and I to meet Abbigail. The whole O'Connor family was there. I presented 2 pairs of bones and said, "take the weekend and determine which one you like." In the process of doing this, I talked to her father Peter. I talked to her two sisters. I talked to her little brother, who largely communicated through a system of guttural grunts, and growls as young boys are known to do. I sat in. I played with Feidhlim, with Abbigail, and the older of her sisters. It was joyful.

The day of the All Ireland Bones Competition Mary and I went to Dave Murphy's house. Dave has won the competition enough times that he has long decided to let other folks have a chance. But then he taught a whole generation of bones players. His kids, his nieces, and nephews, their cousins, etc.. Now they tend to win. Because they're really good. They learned from Dave, but they're all skilled in their own right. He and his wife have been gracious enough to host not only his family and friends but also the visiting bones players, every year that I have gone to Abbeyfeale. I have wondered at times whether this was a strategic move. They are very generous with the adult beverages. I am 99% sure that this is just hospitality and that there are no ulterior motives. It's a joy to go to Dave's house and to eat, and to laugh, with his extended family. To be able to do it in consecutive years is a wonder.

Junior Davey was on hand with two students. To me this is the man, the myth,

the legend - and also my friend. He asked if I could meet up with them before the competition to give them any tips. We met in the courtyard of the Leens Hotel, just off the main Square in Abbeyfeale. The first student was Amber Macdonald, whom I judged to be Number 1 in the All Ireland Junior Bones Competition in 2023. This would be the Junior Champion's first time competing in the Senior Bones Competition. The other was Aisling Gibling, whom I was meeting for the first time, and who was participating in the Junior Bones Competition. I don't think the individual advice that I offered is important to share. What is important is that Junior asked me to listen to them. They were seen. They were heard. They are both excellent players. I was honored to be able to offer them counsel.

At this point in my personal journey, the competition is mostly an excuse to go to Ireland. Feidhlim said to me in either my first or second visit, "it's just a bit of fun. If you take it too seriously you'll spoil the instrument." I remember thinking at the time, "How old are you?" And yet it took a few years before this really sunk in.

I normally try to prepare with the accompanists before the competition. I choose the tunes. I practice the tunes. This year I met with the accompanists in a pub about 10 minutes before they were going to cross the street and start playing for the Junior Competition. I knew they had a time crunch. My conversation with them went something like this ... "I know you have to go so I won't ask you to play anything. Do you know this jig? No? What about this other one? Yes? Great. Do you know this slide? Awesome! You can surprise me for the reels." Then a few minutes later they walked across the street and the competition began.

My friends Dean Robinson and James Yoshizawa were in much the same boat. I was lucky to get time with them both. I've gotten to know them primarily in Abbeyfeale. In fact the only time I have gotten to spend with James in real life has been in Abbeyfeale. This year I got to meet his partner Angelica Montoya. It should come as no surprise that such a kind and friendly man would pair up with a kind and friendly woman. Dean is on the RBS board and we've gotten together at a few Bones Fests. Dean, Mary and I got to take our breakfasts each morning with Steve and Jennifer Brown. Our friend Kerry Kay Osborne came over from Ennis to cheer us on. What a treat.

Steve was the adjudicator this year and it's a position I do not envy. Aisling took the stop spot in the Junior Bones Competition. Her playing is precise, steady, and brilliant. Amber was one of the first up in the Senior Competition. She had a minor hiccup to start that seemed to rattle her (pun intended). She recovered nicely and the rest of her tunes were expertly executed. Amber is a rising force to be reckoned with. The top two spots of the Senior Bones Competition went to Dave Murphy's kids: Jackie and Dave Jr. They deserved it. Jackie really reminds me of her father when she plays and I don't think I've ever seen her play better.

And yet I won. I know I just said that Jackie and Dave Jr. took the top spots, but I won. OK, technically I took third. Abbigail's sister Katie made a sign for me. Striking detail. "Go Skeff", with a hand holding the bones in perfect position. I was determined to have fun. I did. I saw Katie and her sign before I started, and again after I played my jig and my reels. I found her in the crowd. I motioned for her to raise the sign. She did. I won (see photograph in Page 8).

First and foremost I have Mary. I have Feidhlim and Siobhan. I have Junior, Amber, and Aisling. I have Katie and the O'Connor family. I have the Murphy's. I have my RBS friends. There are so many more.

Music builds connection. We use the most basic of materials for our instrument. It's amazing what we can create. Keep on.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

In 2006, Jonathan and Melissa Danforth, inspired by other Bones Fests, hosted Bones Fest X in New Bedford MA. On a hot summer weekend, we traipsed down the cobblestone streets, saw whale skeletons, and raised a joyful racket. As stressful and as exhausting as hosting a Bones Fest was, we were sure we'd do it again someday. Little did we know that it would take another twenty years!



Mel Mercier with Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell

Along with our friend Dean Robinson of Bristol, RI, we are proud to welcome you again to the Southcoast of Massachusetts for the Rhythm Bones Society's 30th Annual Event

BONES FEST XXX
Westport MA
August 6-9, 2026



Three pairs of bones enjoying a sunny morning at Westports Knubble Beach

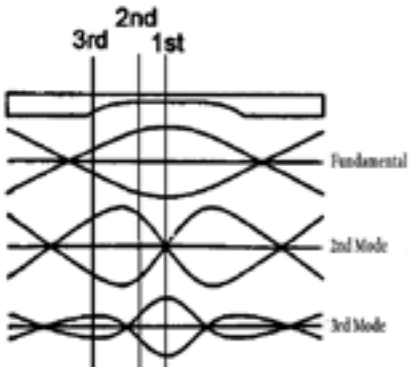
Our Fests have grown to include a number of favorite traditions, like workshops, jamming, performances, reuniting with old friends, and meeting new ones. We'll have all of this, and more. Westport's coastal farm setting lends itself well to the family reunion vibe that has made Bones Fests so special. We really hope you can make it this summer and we look forward to seeing you.

(Acoustics From Page 1)

[Author's Comment. "Pretty much everything I know about tuning Marimbas came from LaFavre's website (https://www.lafavre.us/tuning-marimba.htm) *Austinp-woodworking* on Reddit.com]

When a Marimba bar vibrates at its Fundamental frequency as shown in the figure below, it flexes as a single wave with the greatest movement occurring in the exact center, known as the anti-node. At the same time, it remains completely stationary at two points located roughly one-quarter of the way in from each end, known as the nodes. This movement is too small to see, but if you touch the bar with a needle and move it around the bar you will find the nodes when you come to them. I used a soft striker to make the bar vibrate and moved it over the bar until I found a spot that did not make it vibrate which was its fundamental node.

The three numbers on the figure show where to strike to find the three biggest nodes. Note when you strike at the 1st position you also get some of the 3rd mode.



The figure was derived by Jeff La Favre from illustrations by Bork, 1995

Tests on a Single Bone

Rhythm bones are played with two bones; the stationary bone placed either between the first and ring fingers or between the thumb and first finger with the movable bone between the ring and fourth fingers. To simplify the analysis, a single bone was first tested leaving the combination of two bones for later study. The nodal points for the fundamental mode of different types of rhythm bones were studied.

Test Equipment

1. Rectangular carrier with rubber bands to support test objects (see photograph), 2. Clear plastic air filled square packing balloon with 7 inch sides (see photograph), 3. Bakelite ball attached to a bone size piece of wood to use as a hard striker, 4. Yarn covered marimba mallet to use as a soft striker, cut to 7 inches, 5. Pencil with a Pentel Eraser Tip used as a soft striker, 5. Sony ECM-21 microphone, 6. Behringer USB Audio Interface for the microphone, and 7. Adobe Audition App for recording and analysis

Marimba Bar

A marimba bar was tested because a lot is known about its properties. This 14 inch bar was placed on the carrier supported near the ends by two rubber bands as shown in the photograph. Table salt was lightly sprinkled where the expected node point is. The bar is gently struck multiple times with the marimba mallet and the salt migrated to its nodal point.



You might expect the nodal point to be perpendicular to the bar, but as shown it is diagonal because the bar is not uniform as can be seen by the grain on the surface. Marimba makers take advantage of that by drilling holes slightly diagonally as shown by the wood rod placed in the hole. When hung by strings in a Marimba, there is a longer bar to the left and a shorter bar to the right resulting in holes that line up.

Parker Waite's Aluminum Bones

These bones are made from 1/8 by 1inches stock aluminum cut to 6 inches in length, and engraved with Parker's name. They are straight making the modal points easy to find with salt, and being a uniform material the nodes are perpendicular to the edge. They are 5.9 inches long and the nodes are about 1.3 inches or 22% from the end of the bone.

Danforth Bones.

Danforth rhythm bones are a standard shape that is used by rhythm bones makers. These rhythm bones are sawed into a curved shape so the wood fibers are not parallel, and they are also curved side to side so the nodes could not be found with salt.

The solution came in a package with air filled plastic square bubble packing shown with a Maple bone freely supported and a pencil with a knife-like edge eraser used as a soft striker.



The test bone is struck starting at the center and moved toward its edge until no fundamental sound is heard which happens at the nodal point. Danforth rhythm bones are 7.5 inches long and the nodes are at 1.5 inches or 21.4% from the end of the bar. Pine, Oak and Rosewood bones were tested with similar results.

Adam Klein's Camel Bones

Adam designed bones with different harmonics which he described in the last quarters' issue, Vol 28, No 1 (https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V28N1.pdf), and included a photograph of the very unique Camel Bone.

Hans Weehuizen's Steam Bent Bones

These bones are made straight and later bent into a curve resulting in wood grain that is more parallel. 7.8 inches long node at 1.8 inches or 23% from the end of the bone

Cocobola Rosewood

These rhythm bones are 6.5 inches long and 1 inch wide. Each bone is 0.25 inch thick at the top gradually increasing to about 0.45 inch near the bottom before coming together at a point at the end. When they were new they would occasionally ring. The nodal point at the

top was at 1.3 inches and at the bottom maybe 1.4 inches but hard to locate.

Chris Green's Plastic Bones

These were described in the last quarters' issue, Vol 28, No 1 with a photograph. They look identical and are 7.1 inches by 1 inch. The nodal points for both are at 1.4 inches on one end and 1.7 inches at the other end, Chris noted that they have some interior hollow space inside that might explain the discrepancy.

Cow Rib Bone

Animal rib bones have irregular shapes and filled with dry marrow, and the nodes are more difficult to find. Tested two and the nodes were a bit closer to the end on the wide end than the narrow end.

Summary

This study concentrated on the Fundamental mode of vibration. Spectral analysis will include more modes.

The approximate location of Fundamental nodes is fairly easy to find.

I assume nodal point is perpendicular to the side for most rhythm bones.

The Fundamental mode is also excited by striking the bar on its end.

When a bone is between two fingers when holding the bone at its nodal point, the finger bone and skin are wider than the nodal point causing some damping.

I built a knife-like bridge out of some triangular weather stripping stuck to my skin and some work gloves between the first and second fingers to get a purer tone and it sort of worked, but will take analysis to see if it works well.

Preview of Acoustics of Rhythm Bones, Part 2, in Vol 28, No 4 issue.

Part 2 will record and analyze rhythm bones tones, and answer questions raised in Part 1 of this study some of which follow.

1.Repeat the nodal point tests using the microphone for more accurate results.

2. Study higher modes and how to excite them.

3. Which bone has the loudest tone, stationary or moving?

4. How can we study the sound produced by the combination of the stationary and movable bones.

6. Compare steam bent bones to saw cut curved bones.

6. What holding position produces the best (there is no best) sound.

A Case to Study

Skeff Flynn, Executive Director, and Mardeen Gordon hold rhythm bones in a way that this study might recommend.



The stationary bone is held with the thumb at the anti-node which should dampen the Fundamental.

The movable bone is held close to its nodal point and is struck close to its center, and should have a strong fundamental. Should be an interesting study.

Let's Make a Marimba Bone

Joe Birl's wood rhythm bones have a notch at the top end to keep the bone from falling out of the hand. If we move the notch to the center of the bone it should act more like a Marimba bar. Something to try.

Leffert's Leather Wrapped Bones



Here is what Jeff says, "The leather quiets the bones down quite a bit, but it also gives them a fuller, richer sound...more of a 'clop' than a 'click.' " Something to study.

What Can You Do To Help

It will be six months before Part 2 of this study is released. If you have expertise in this area of study or other contributions or questions, Email me using our 'Contact Us' page. We might come up with something useful. *Steve Wixson*

Young's Modulus of Various Woods

The stiffness value of wood is highly dependent on density, grain orientation (parallel), and moisture content (12%). The majority of wood rhythm bones are cut in a curve shape meaning the grain is not parallel, and I would also expect that rhythm bones are dryer due to aging making them stiffer. Young's Modulus values below with 12% moisture content are in GPa units. The Fundamental frequency of a bar directly correlates with its Young's Modulus.

Balsa.....3
Cedar.....7
Cherry.....10
Ebony.....14-26
Hickory.....15
Maple.....12
Oak.....11
Pine.....9-13
Rosewood..... 11-16
Rosewood, Cocobolo..... 19
Walnut.....11

For comparison, here are cow values.

Cow rib.....20-30
Cow shin bone.....10-27

Also for the plastic

Chris Green.....10-11
Joe Birl 10-14

Hans steam bent.....?
Aluminum.....70

Analysis of Russ Myers' Pitch Change

At Bones Fest I, Russ Myers demonstrated a way to change the pitch of rhythm bones without moving the bones in your hand while playing them, and it can be viewed in the Russ Myers' Tribute Video at https://rhythmbones.org/video/Tribute-MyersRuss.mp4 starting at time of 5:35. Here is his description.

"To the best of my knowledge I don't know if you can do this with wooden bones, maybe you can, but you do need to hold them with two fingers in between like the Scotsmen do, stationary bone between the thumb and first finger, movable bone between the third and ring fingers.

The way you change pitch is to slide this finger [first] up and take it off then bing it back and slide it down. All you are doing is changing the density of the bone, and when you change the density, you change the pitch. [He demonstrates] That's all there is to it. Down here [First finger] for bass, here [slightly up] for the next highest, and off for the highest. Like every thing else in the world, it's simple."

The Analysis. The result is clearly separate notes, but his analysis is wrong. He mentioned that a next highest pitch can be made by moving the first finger up but still in contact with the bone, however that does not change the density of the bone. So it must be something else like dampening the harmonics.

Exploring Tone on Rhythm Bones

One of the things that fascinates me about playing rhythm bones is how much tonal variation you can produce with one pair of bones. Every pair—whether made of wood, bone, plastic, or another material—has a surprisingly wide range of sounds available. Much of that range comes from the position of the stationary bone and the size of the sound chamber between the two bones.

The Position of the Stationary Bone

The most basic way to change the tone is by adjusting the height of the stationary bone. When both bones are held with the top about an inch above your knuckles, the sound tends to be brighter, sharper, and higher in pitch. As you move the stationary bone upward, the tone becomes deeper, flatter, and more muted. Usually the deepest tone is achieved when the bottom of the stationary bone is about level with the bottom of your palm. However, it is difficult to move the stationary bone's position in the middle of a tune.





One way around this is to use different materials or different holds in each hand. I use twenty five different types of wood when making Shooting Star Bones, because each wood has a slightly different sound. If you play with two hands, you can choose pairs that have slightly different tonal characteristics, or hold one with the stationary bone in a higher position. Switching between them while playing allows you to play two different tones without changing your hold.

Changing Tone While You Play

Several techniques allow you to vary the tone while playing.

At one of our gatherings, Kenny Wolin demonstrated how quickly either the stationary or the moving bone can be lifted away from the palm in a scissors motion to produce a different sound. This also moves the contact point upward and changes the shape of the sound chamber, which raises the tone slightly. With a little practice, you can change the tone while playing by flipping one bone into a different position.



That technique provides a useful tonal contrast, but there are other approaches that offer even greater flexibility.

Discovering the Irish Hold

Years ago, while I was teaching bones at the Strawberry Music Festival, an Irish musician walked up and showed me how he held rhythm bones. It was the first time I had seen what I like to call the Irish hold.



Instead of placing just the middle finger between the bones, the Irish hold places two fingers between them, holding the stationary bone between the thumb and first finger.

This does two important things.

First, it opens the sound chamber between the bones, creating a deeper and more resonant tone. Second, by raising and lowering the middle finger, you can open or close the sound chamber, resulting in a higher or lower note. If you move the stationary bone upward to produce its deepest natural tone, and tune the pair in your other hand with a slightly higher low note, when you raise the middle finger you will get a total of four notes with two hands. With practice, you can raise and lower those fingers while playing and create a base line melody with rhythm.



If you raise the finger only partway, it can create intermediate tones, giving you even more range of colors while playing. The result is a much more expressive instrument than most people realize when they first pick up a pair of bones.



An Unexpected Discovery: The "Spones"

One final experiment has become one of my favorite discoveries.

I cut the handles off a large pair of wooden spoons and use the bowl, or cup, of the spoon as the stationary bone. The curved cup creates a much larger resonance chamber than a conventional flat bone. The result is a noticeably deeper tone with increased resonance. I have switched to playing with a spoon and bone all the time, because I love the deeper tone and wider range that it allows. I call this combination "the spones."



It's a simple modification, but it demonstrates an important principle: the size and shape of the sound chamber have a tremendous impact on the voice of the instrument. Even a small change in the geometry of the stationary bone can produce a dramatic change in the music.

The more I experiment with bone position, sound chamber size, finger placement, and even the shape of the instrument itself, the more I realize that rhythm bones are capable of far greater tonal expression than most players imagine. I have been playing them for more than forty years, and I continue to discover new rhythms and ways to alter the tone. Like any musical instrument, the possibilities will expand the more you explore. *Mardeen Gordon*

On the Road to Abbeyfeale: Here Comes the Judge

The Market town of Abbeyfeale sits in the far west corner of County Limerick, Republic of Ireland. The area is steeped in Traditional music and has a long history of keeping that music and the traditions of the country people alive. There has been a long tradition of keeping the Wren boys celebrations on St. Stephens Day and other times of the year alive, for example. Percussion instruments, especially the bodhran, have long standing traditions in Abbeyfeale, and the surrounding area, long before the drum came into the public conciousness in the late 50's through Sean O'Riada, and later by John B.Keane.

And then there's rhythm bones. This is the one area of Ireland whose residents are very familiar with our little instrument, where they have been played regularly at sessions, parties, and dances for many years. So much so that in the 90's when planning a "Fleadh" or Festival, it was proposed that they include a rhythm bone playing contest, and call it "The All Ireland Bone Playing Championship".

It would've been 23 years ago almost of the day that I first came to Abbeyfeale to compete in the all Ireland Bone Playing Championship. Now I returned to judge the Senior and Junior Competition. Although I had previously judged the competition, it has been now 10 years since I was in Abbeyfeale. I was thrilled to be given this opportunity and very excited to return to this welcoming town in West Limerick.

But the prospect of judging was somewhat anxiety provoking. After all, not only do I know most of the Irish competitors, there are also three American competitors, all of whom I considered to be good friends. How does one keep in a totally objective mind in a competition where you know so many of the participants? As I began to prepare for the experience, one thought began to enter my mind, and became my mantra, what happens on this stage, nothing else.

My personal experience in Abbeyfeale included competing five times and judging multiple junior competitions and one senior competition. In addition to that I have been exposed to a wide variety of rhythm bone playing, not only in America, but throughout Ireland.The rhythm bone player Ronnie McShane, who played extensively with Sean O'Riada's group, Ceoltori Cullanan,was a big influence on my early playing, and a good friend later in life. Tommy Hayes, Mel Mercier, and Johnny Ringo McDonnagh whose rhythm bone playing strongly shaped rhythm bone playing over the years, I consider good friends and also strongly effected my playing.

Beyond the aspect of the contest, returning now to Abbeyfeale was very emmotional for me. I've made many friends over the years in the town, and the prospect of returning was really exciting. I had many great experiences there along with a few bumps in the road, but always interesting, and so true to the traditions of the area. However, I had a job to do, one that I needed to keep a clear head, and to take seriously, if for no other reason, in fairness to the competitors.

Over the years I have known a number of the previous judges of the contest, including Mel Mercier, Tommy Hayes, Gino Lupari, Ronnie McShane, Junior Davey, Cathy Jordan, and Johnny McDonnagh. I haven't had the opportunity to discuss judging extensively with them, but have seen and participated enough to get a sense about how they have gone about the task. For my own part, I developed a point system, encompassing major categories, and averaging points to get to a conclusion. But the most important aspect of coming to a decision was my inner gut feeling of what was best, and in the end I think it served me best.

My intent on playing rhythm bones in traditional Irish music focuses on the melody, while keeping to the basics, being in time. Rhythm bone playing must enhance the melody, while not over whelming it. It should make the music better, raise the level of enjoyment of the music, while showing a mastery of the skills involved, but with respect to the music. Respecting the music and the tradition is at the very heart of it.

The Junior competition was a joy. With three competitors all under the age of 18 it was ensured that all three would place. Their skill level was impressive, as was their joy in playing the music. One player stood out above the other two, demonstrating a high degree of skill. In first place, Ailing Giblon from Sligo, second placeChloe Drummond Dalton from Abbeyfeale, and in third place Tessa Marie O'Donnell.

All of the competitors played well, and showed a deep connection to the music. But three players stood above the other competitors, and embodied what I was looking for. Jackie Murphy from Abbeyfeale I judged to be first. Her playing I found to be electric, enhancing the melody, and showing why Irish rhythm bone playing is a marriage of the bones to the music. Her brother, David, I found to be in second place, with lively spirit, and respect for the tunes. Our own Skeffington Flynn I found to be in third place, integrating the two hands to the melody, and injecting true spirit.

All and all I think I accomplished my objective of focusing on not what I knew of the players, but what went on on that stage, the rhythm bones and how they related to the music. Abbeyfeale has meant a lot to me over the years, both the music and the people. My hope is that I stayed true to those things that meant the most.

If you get the urge to go to Abbeyfeale, go for the experience, the people, and the music, and to help keep alive the only rhythm bone playing contest we have in the world right now. And remember to have fun because that's what counts!
Steve Brown [More photos on Page 8.]



From the left, Chloe Quille Drummond, 2nd Place, Steve Brown, Aisling Giblon, 1st Place, Tessa Marie O'Donnell, 3rd Place.





Images From Abbeyfeale

Upper photograph, Steve Brown in red with all competitors and to the left, Steve Brown with the Senior winners, David Murphy, Jr, Steve Brown, Jackie Murphy and Skeffington Flynn. These photographs plus the one on Page 7 are courtesy of Paul Ward Photography.

Image for Executive Director's Column

To the right, Skeffington Flynn, Katie O'Connor, Feidhlim Watters, an Peter O'Connor. Photo courtesy of Mary Gunderson King.



Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested