



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 2, No. 1 2000

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## Executive Director's Column

Welcome to 2K and the second edition of the RHYTHM BONES PLAYER. Interest in bones and bones playing has increased phenomenally since Bones Fest III and the publication of our Newsletter. I have heard from folks all over the world, many of who will attend Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga in September. We can thank Steve Wixson, editor of a great Newsletter and Martha Cowett our Web mistress for this.

To continue with a quality newsletter and expand our web page we will need your support and guidance. Please join the Rhythm Bones Society and encourage your friends to do the same.

The production of videotape excerpts from Bones Fest III is now complete and copies are being made. They can be obtained at \$12 for members and \$20 for non-members. This includes shipping and handling. Send your check to the Rhythm Bones Society, 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mountain, TN 37377.

Planning for Bones Fest IV has just begun. I have asked Steve Wixson to serve as Program Chairman. Russ Myers and I will serve with him and we want your input. Send your suggestions to any of us as soon as you can. We want Bones Fest IV to be the best ever. *Ev Cowett*

## Tribute to Percy Danforth

When Steve asked me to write a tribute to Percy Danforth, I felt honored. Percy was the person who passed on the art of bones playing to me. I have great respect for his artistry and a deep appreciation of his friendship.

I met Percy when I was a graduate student in percussion at the University of Michigan in the early 1980's. He not only taught me how to play the bones and helped me become a better musician, but also turned over to me all information he had collected on the bones over the years. I chose the history and performance practice of the bones as the topic for my master's thesis. The information Percy passed on to me gave me a solid starting point for my research.

Percy grew up at a time when the bones were still a household item. His father taught him how to play—with one hand only. Percy didn't do much with the bones until many years later when his wife took a musicology class. The bones came up in class one day and no one knew what they were—with the exception of Percy's wife. She volunteered him to come demonstrate for the class. After deciding that playing with one hand wasn't impressive enough, he practiced until he could play with two hands. From then on, he was always a two-handed player.

Percy's classroom demonstration quickly led

to local performance opportunities as interest in the bones grew. Soon he was flying from coast to coast, attending folk festivals to give workshops on the bones and to perform with some of the top folk musicians of the day.

Percy's performances with great musicians were not limited to the folk arena; he played

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Photograph of Percy Danforth from his video 'How to Play the Bones,' by Lark in the Morning, www.larkinam.com, 1989.

## Editorial

As a new Society, we will struggle to find our *way*, and if there is a *way* for us the Society and this newsletter will be around for many years. I solicit your help by submitting articles for the newsletter, letters to the Editor and informal messages to me or Board members with suggestions and concerns (preferably in electronic form). This is your Society, so 'sound off' as to what it should be doing.

The membership application form includes an optional survey that will help the Board understand who and what are today's bones players. The information collected will not be distributed, and only statistical summaries will be printed in the newsletter. Please take time to fill out this survey.

I have been asked why is *age* on the survey. One of the goals of the SOCIETY is to preserve bones playing for future generations, and we will analyze age to see if bones players are mostly old or a healthy mix of young and old. If we discover that bones players are older then we should begin discussions on how to get young people interested in playing the bones (see *Getting Kids Started* by Bill Rexroad in this issue). Maybe we should do this anyway. Anyone have ideas or experience? *Steve Wixson*

## Letters to the Editor

### Dear Editor,

Rhythm Bones Society...RBS, pronounced "RiBS", eh? That's great! And so was the first newsletter. Enjoyed the report on Bones Fest III--sure wish I could have been there. Chattanooga's only a day's drive for me so here's to Bones Fest IV! My membership application & check are in the mail. Best regards and happy turn of the century! *Ellen Stern*

### Dear Editor,

Sign me up! I am 70 and have been playing bones since I was 8. Joe Birl sent me a copy of the Bones Fest III report. It was great - I really enjoyed it.

You may not know that since I could not make Bones Fest III, Ev Cowett suggested I contact Don DeCamp from Iowa who was playing at Six Flags Over Texas on 25 and 26 September. Well I did go over to meet him and ended up playing

bones with him for 2 days. It was all blue grass and about wore me out. We had a fest of our own, and I cannot remember when I have had more fun. DeCamp is one fine bones player.

I marked Bones Fest IV on my calendar and will be there for sure. *Walter Watkins, Arlington, Texas*

## Getting Kids Started

**A Prediction:** There will be an outbreak of bones playing in the central United States in about ten years, possibly sooner. Why? Because thousands of kids have been exposed to bones playing in recent years, kids who had never heard of them before, let alone see or hear them. Their excitement upon hearing the bones makes me believe that some of them will take up bones playing as they grow older. It happened to me. The memory of seeing someone play the bones when I was a kid was what got me started later on.

For the past ten years I've been doing a program for kids called Mr. Bill Show. It is a program of songs and stories that I perform at schools, libraries, and festivals. The highlight of the program, the part that people always exclaim about, is when I play the bones. Kids always come up afterward to ask questions about the bones, and to ask to hold them. Their parents do too. To make a more lasting impression of the bones, I make a whole little program of that part of the show. It goes like this:

I hold up the bones and ask if anyone knows what they are. Usually no one does. They guess that they are Popsicle sticks, or chopsticks, or tongue depressors. Then I rattle the bones a little and someone will say they are clackers, or some kind of musical instrument. That is when I tell them they are bones. We have a short discussion of where bones come from (from animals), and this serve as the lead-in to a poem I tell them about the bones and how I came to play them. The first part is true.

One time when I was just a boy,  
I saw a man who played  
A funny looking instrument.  
'Twas something that he'd made.

He called them "bones." They had no tone,  
But he made music with them.  
He shook them to a band nearby  
And brought out all the rhythm.

The story goes on to tell about how I

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## Rhythm Bones Player

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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 Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
<http://mccowett.home.mindspring.com/>

## Bones Calendar

August 28-September 3, 2000. National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests including 25th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest on September 2nd and a Bones Workshop the following day, Avoca, Iowa. Contact Jerry Mescher (smescher@netins.net) or the RBS at the address on Page 4.

September 22 & 23, 2000. Bones Fest IV. Chattanooga, TN. Contact Ev Cowett (evcow@aol.com) or the RBS.

## David Letterman's Video Collection

David Letterman, during a Late Night television show in December showed a small portion of Percy Danforth's *How to Play the*

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*Bones* instructional video during his Video Collection segment. This is quite a coincidence since an article on Percy was planned for this issue last November. How in the world could he find such an obscure video?

## Bones Websites

The internet is not rich with bones playing information, but sites like those below will be listed each quarter. Check out these:

<http://www.geocities.com/Nashville/1856/walkaround.html>. Start here and follow the links to learn about Minstrel music of today and yesteryear. In addition, Norm Conrad is a one-man minstrel show and John Cahill played bones in Dr. Horsehair's Old Time Minstrel Band. <http://baymoo.sfsu.edu:4242/15120>. The Percy Owen Danforth Memorial Garden website is dedicated to the memory of bones player Percy Danforth.

## Recorded Bones Music

Reviews of recorded bones music will be printed in each issue. Submit reviews of favorite bones recordings.

Did you hear bones in the movie *Titanic*? Aaron Plunkett played them in the background music as Kate and Leonardo made their way to the car love scene. See [www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/palladium/7205](http://www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/palladium/7205) for information about Aaron.

Percy Danforth played the bones on *The Early Minstrel Show*, New World Records, 80338-2, [newworldrecords@erols.com](mailto:newworldrecords@erols.com). Hear bones virtuoso Danforth in authentic rendering of minstrel music. Extensive liner notes by producer Robert Winans.

## Bare Bones

Nick Driver, renowned English bones player from a bones playing family, donated a copy of his album *Bare Bones* and gave permission to distribute copies to RBS members. The bones playing is great as are the liner notes. Send a request to Steve Wixson ([wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net)) or the RBS to receive a copy.

## Bernie Worrell wins Avoca Bones Contest

Bernie Worrell won the 24th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at the National Traditional Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa on September 4, 1999. This is the longest running contest of its kind in modern times. In earlier years there were separate Bones and Spoons contests, but with a declining number of players of each type, the two contests were combined resulting in a secondary contest to see which is better—bones or spoons. The spoons won in 1998.

The Festival is a spectacular celebration earning commendation as being the number one festival most representative of traditional values, entertainment and education by the National Geographic Society. It is full of fun and excitement, and what our forbears gave to this generation is passed on through this festival.

The National Traditional Country Music Association which sponsors the festival is a non-profit group dedicated to the preservation of America's great musical heritage. In addition to the festival, they publish the *Traditions* magazine, and sponsor the *Pioneer Music Instrument Museum* and the *Old Time Fiddler's Hall of Fame*. Bob Everhart is the Director since its founding in 1976. For more information write to NTCMA, P.O. Box 492, Anita, IA 50020, 712-762-4363, email: [bobeverhart@yahoo.com](mailto:bobeverhart@yahoo.com)

The festival is a seven day event. There are ten stages, over 600 performers, over 100 stage shows, over 30 contests including guitar, singers, dulcimer, storytelling and harmonica to name a few. Previous Bones winners include Jerry Mescher, RBS Board member and brother of Bernie Worrell herself now a RBS member, Jerry Barnett and Donnie DeCamp. There are also over 60 workshops, and Jerry Mescher has conducted the bones workshop for the past few years. Steve Wixson attended last year and made a video for RBS.

Bernie carries on a family legacy of bones playing. Bernie's dad was 10 years old when he saw someone playing what he later learned were the

bones. Mr. Mescher had to figure out by himself how to play the bones. He used bones purchased out of the Sears catalog and the family's player piano for accompaniment. Bernie never learned to play the bones while her father was alive, but one day in 1970 she sensed her dad's presence, and picked up the bones getting something out of them for the first time. Bernie got serious about bone playing after she found an old player piano and while pumping it and playing the bones she felt like she was reliving another era. Bernie likes ragtime piano, Dixie Land, polkas and bluegrass music. *Jerry Mescher*

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went to the zoo and asked some of the animals to give me a bone. They did, and I took them home, got their shape "just right" and practiced until I could play them. It ends this way:

So now I'm going to play the bones  
Especially for you,

And maybe someday down the road  
You'll want to play them, too.

Then I turn on a tape of old-time music and play for them.

Another way I introduce the bones to kids is to present school programs just about bones. This is usually for a music class in elementary school. I explain where the bones came from, how ancient they are, and how they got to this country centuries ago. I show them bones made of different materials (wood, plastic, bone) and demonstrate how the sound differs from one material to another. Finally, I turn on the tape and play them.

Kids are fascinated by all of this. It is new to them, and it is exciting to them. And they remember it! Parents have come up to me at festivals to tell me that their kids still talk about seeing me play the bones years later. That is why I believe there will be an outbreak of bones players in the not-to-distant future. As I tell them in the poem:

Nowadays I take them everywhere  
And play them all the time.  
But I never have forgotten  
How it started, in my prime.

Every time I play these bones,  
I think about that man  
Who played them years ago for me,  
And made me think, "I can."

*Wm. D. Rexroad, Storyteller of the Plains*

This is your last complimentary Issue.

The Rhythm Bones Society sent the first two issues of the newsletter to everyone known to be a bones player (about 285 people). To continue receiving the newsletter please join with us by becoming a member. A Membership Application form is inside the newsletter.

*(Continued from page 1 - Percy Danforth)*

with well-known classical musicians as well. These included numerous performances with the professional percussion ensemble, Nexus, and with Joan Morris and William Bolcom, including performances at Lincoln Center.

Percy was constantly experimenting with new musical contexts in which to use the bones. He performed with symphony orchestras, classical chamber ensembles, a rock

band, and worked several times with dancers.

While the nation-wide resurgence of interest in the bones was due largely to Percy's travels and his willingness to share his craft, he also made technical contributions to the art. While it was common for players in the 19th-century minstrel shows to play with two hands, most players Percy met in his travels in the '70's and '80's played with only one hand and were what Percy referred to as bone 'rattlers' as opposed to bones players. He was instrumental in getting people to play the bones with two hands again, and also brought a higher standard of playing to the art.

Percy was a consummate musician. He played with other musicians in a way that supported and enhanced a performance. He listened carefully to what the other musicians were doing, choosing rhythmic patterns, accents, dynamics and timbres appropriate to the situation. He had a particular gift for placing rhythmic patterns and accents in just the right spot to bring a piece to life and let it sparkle.

Percy's playing reflected his greatest human qualities—his warmth, in-

Mark your  
calendar  
Bones Fest IV  
Chattanooga, Tennessee  
September 22 and  
23, 2000  
First Anniversary of  
Rhythm Bones Society

telligence, and generous nature. He radiated so much joy when he played that it was impossible not to smile when you watched him. We owe him a great deal for evolving his craft to such a high level and generously sharing his knowledge and love of the bones with so many people. *Beth Lenz* (Percy died on June 10, 1992, at the age of 92)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*