



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 2, No. 3 2000

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It is time to get excited about BONES FEST IV to be held in Chattanooga, TN on Sept. 22-24, 2000. Membership continues to grow as well as enthusiasm. I ask each member for their help in three ways. 1) Send in your registration for the Fest by August 31 to help us ensure adequate food, facilities and transportation. 2) Volunteer to appear on the special evening program after dinner on Saturday Sept. 23. We need a few more volunteers to complete the evening event. It's going to be great. Be on the program. 3) Send in some items to Steve for the Newsletter. Don't be concerned about how significant you think they may be. Steve will select the most appropriate ones for the Newsletter.

Since our last meeting Board Director Sally Carroll appeared on CNN and other National TV stations (without her bones) as a sailor on the Tall Ships. I am sure she will be happy to talk about this at our September meeting.

During the summer I had the opportunity to play the bones with the lady Francis Fisher Dubai who introduced me to the bones in 1944 and have dinner with Elaine Conner, the lady who got me a TV spot playing bones in North Carolina which led me to Dr Fred Edmunds which led the way to our present Rhythm Bones Society. A great bones playing year for me.

For the September meeting I ask each of you to be thinking about the following items which will be determined at the business meeting:

- 1) Slate of officers and Board of Directors.
- 2) Location for Bones Fest V.
- 3) Date for Bones Fest V (we are not tied into a fall meeting).
- 4) How often the Newsletter should be published (this is a significant expense).
- 5) Any changes in the web page.

Please help us make bones activities the best ever. *Ev Cowett*

PADDY 'SPORT' MURPHY

Paddy 'Sport' Murphy lives a mile or so outside of the town of Abbeyfeale on the Limerick/Kerry border. He is a well known musician in the area: known to many as a local 'character', and regarded as the senior bones player in the region. Paddy won the inaugural All-Ireland Bones-Playing Competition in 1997 which is held as part of the Abbeyfeale annual traditional music festival. He returned two years later to win the prize for the second time, and again in 2000. I met Paddy for the first time when I adjudicated the competition in 1997. It was difficult not to award him first prize: his performance was compelling and his musicianship obvious. That he was also the local favourite did not go unnoticed by me!

Paddy's commanding performance was not the only remarkable thing I witnessed that day. The competition was held outdoors on the back of a truck as the sun was setting on the town square. One by one the bones-players mounted the temporary stage to perform with a single tune-player, more often than not a local box player such as Donal



Editorial

This issue features an article on Paddy 'Sport' Murphy by Board Member Mel Mercier. We are fortunate to have Mel as a member as he gives us a perspective on the important segment of Irish bones playing. Mel is currently working on his PhD with a thesis on bones playing.

This issue reviews Aaron Plunkett's bones instructional video as the second of a series that will attempt to review all of the currently available bones instructional videos. These videos will be available for viewing at the upcoming Bones Fest IV.

There were no Letters to the Editor

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 & 24, 2000.

Bones Fest IV. Chattanooga, TN.

Recorded Bones Music

Bob Flesher's Old-Time Minstrel Banjo. Download a sample of this tape (No. 403) and others at www.drhorsehair.com. Bob plays an old-time clawhammer banjo and RBS member John Cahill plays bones.

Bones Website

doublestop.com/barrybones.htm. Barry 'Bones' Patten's website invites you to meet Barry and learn about his bones and his instructional video (that will be reviewed in a future issue). The website is part of his uncle Byron Berline's Double Stop Fiddle Shop website and you may want to visit it to learn about this great fiddle player and The Byron Berline Band. Barry and the band have played all over the country and he has appeared on TNN television. Barry is a RBS member.

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Murphy. The crowd grew steadily as the evening progressed. There were about ten competitors in all, and not one of them a 'chancer': each and everyone of them could play. I had never seen so many bones players (all male) in one place at one time: in fact I had never seen so many bones-players, period! As each one was introduced it became clear that even though the event was billed as the All-Ireland Bone-Playing Competition most of the players were from within a ten-mile radius of Abbeyfeale. Rumour had it that for the previous couple of days the rattle of the bones could be heard in fields in the townlands surrounding Abbeyfeale. And for hours before the competition began bones players could be found warming up in all of the several music sessions taking place in the bars of the town.

When the adjudication formalities were completed and the prizes presented, all of the competitors returned to the stage for one last set of tunes: one box player and ten or eleven bones players including myself. Paddy Murphy was obviously delighted, as were his large number of fans, and as we parted he put his hand into his inside pocket and produced a pair of bones which he gave to me.

I didn't see Paddy again until I went to visit him and interview him at his home in Ballaugh, Abbeyfeale in October 1999. I would have leave several hours later with another set of bones, this time made on the spot by Paddy from a single, long rib-bone that he found in a drawer in the kitchen. The following then is largely my representation of Paddy 'Sport' Murphy's story as he related it to me that day.

Abbeyfeale lies on the northern extremities of the Sliabh Luachra region, an area famous for its musicians, box and fiddle players predominantly, and for its music, especially the polka and the slide. Many of the names of the towns in the region, such as Knocknagree, Ballydesmond, Gneevgullia, Castleisland, and Scartaglin, also refer to tunes synonymous with the local repertoire, and they evoke for many the image of a vibrant, rich culture of dance and music. Legendary musicians such as the late Pdraig O Keefe, Dennis

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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 and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:
www.rhythmbones.com/

Murphy and Julia Clifford, and the still dynamic Johnny O Leary are amongst the icons of what many consider to be one of the few remaining, identifiable regional styles of music and the dance in Ireland.

Paddy Murphy comes from a well known, local, musical family. Michael Murphy, Paddy's father was given the nickname 'Sport' on account of his being a good ste-dancer. He also played fiddle and was a contemporary and friend of the reknowned fiddle master, Pdraig O Keefe at a Feis in Abbeyfeale. Pdraig won and was presented with a cup while Michael was placed and received five shillings. Paddy takes up the story:

"So my father got five shillings anyway and Pdraig got a cup, a small cup and they went into the pub anyway. Pdraig was a great man for the pint. He says "Sport is there any chance you'd give me the five bob and I'll give you

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the cup. That is true. That's the way the times were that time. Five shillings was a lot. You'd get drunk nearly a week on it. Tuppence a pint, tuppence halfpenny that time."

Paddy's uncle Ned was a well known dancer and the family home, in which Paddy still lives with his wife, was a regular venue for music and dance parties. Paddy danced also, as did his brother and sister. He was about eight when he got his first set of bones. His father had heard somebody play them, a man called *Wingle* from around Newcastle West. From him Michael Murphy learnt how to make a set for his son. Here's how Paddy tells the story:

"My father was playing in Athea. My brother was playing with him. There were a ceili band. That time it was polka and set and *Seige of Ennis* and waltz. You hadn't any of the modern stuff that's there. And this old man used to come in and he would sit down on the stage...and he used to take out these bones. He used to have an old overcoat on him. God help us he was old, over seventy years and according to my father he said he never heard anything like him. And he was asking him about the bones and he told him that he should boil them first. File them down to your own liking, and there'd have to be a bend in the bones."

Michael brought some raw bones home and following instructions he boiled them and made a set for Paddy who was able to get a sound out of them after a week. Paddy makes his own bones now and says the best in terms of size and sound come from a two-year-old heifer. He told me about making the pair he plays now:

"I put them down above in a saucepan. There was a lot of meat on them and, I don't know is it two mugs of broth was had out of them. I brought them in and put them up near the fire. I didn't let them heat too much now, just to dry them out 'cos if you heat them too much a thinny sound comes out. If you boil the marrow too much you get a hard sound off them."

He spoke later about sensitivity to instrumental timbre with the group setting:

"If you have a keyboard there and you're on the wrong side of the key-

board the keyboard is louder than you. Or if you've a concert flute there with a high pitch, that's a way louder than you. And [it] depends then if you have a good set of bones that's soft. You can tune them down the same as you tune the strings of a fiddle. You can tune them up or tune them down the way you want, and you will drown nobody.

He acknowledges that not all bones players display this sensitivity:

"Some people don't respect players at all. They're off like a jet. They're gone and they don't care about sound or noise. They're belting away and [that] upsets players. You have to be balanced, [to] know the instruments you are playing with."

His own children, Ted and Mikey are musicians and with Paddy's brother, Maurice they had their own ceili band which played for dances and weddings. Maurice and Ted now both make violins. Paddy also played drums for twelve years with Julia, John and Billy Clifford, Denis Murphy, Pats, Liam and Bidy Moroney, and Noreen O Connell in the Start of Munster Ceili band. The instrumentation included fiddles, accordion, flute and saxophone. Paddy didn't limit himself to the drums however:

"I used play in the band, with the kettle drum. I'd have the bones in one hand and the stick [in the other]. I'd play the first part of the music on the kettle drum and I'd play the second part on the bones."

While Paddy never learnt to play a melody instrument he did pick up a lot of tunes which he can 'jig' or 'lilt'. He cites this ability as an advantage in his bones playing. He spoke in this regard about the bones-players obligation to *follow* the tune carefully:

"I know every tune. I have the music. I'd it all learnt from years back. I had to do it when I was younger."

When I asked him what he would be looking for in a good player he answered:

"Time! I'd be looking for time and to be putting in every beat, every triplet and long note that the player would play for you. You want a good player that knows his job. A greenhorn is no good as you know yourself. It's great

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Review of Aaron Plunkett's Bones Instructional Video

The video begins and ends with a very professional music video of Aaron playing bones on a large sailboat. He demonstrates how to hold the bones (Aaron prefers real bones) with the stationary bone between the thumb and first finger and then how to play a tap. The video has beginning, intermediate and advanced lessons based on Irish music though his techniques he says work with many kinds of music.

The beginning lessons begin with tap exercises with individual, alternating and both hands with both down and up beats. He then introduces the triplet again with exercises for individual, alternating and both hands. The section ends with review exercises and listening to similar sounds made by woodpeckers in the wild.

Intermediate lessons begin independent hand training with each hand playing different patterns. He begins with tap exercises to demonstrate the patterns working up to one hand playing continuous triplets while the other hand plays accents. He demonstrates how to use these patterns with single, double and slip jigs both with and without music. The section ends with listening to similar patterns made by horses.

Advanced lessons begin by applying these patterns to basic reels and related rhythms. More complex rhythms are introduced with a fast triplet hooked to a slow triplet with variations. There are more variations with hornpipe and jig rhythms. He contrasts playing the same rhythms with one hand and both hands. He demonstrates the polka rhythm, and cross cultural rhythms including African, flamenco, Cuban, Balkan and Indian, and advanced poly-rhythms. He concludes with an Irish dance piece.

His demonstrations are clear and the exercises well thought out. He uses words and phrases to help convey basic and complex rhythm patterns. This is a good video for a beginner or advanced bones player. *Steve Wixson, reviewer.* For information contact *Plunkett Productions, 818/569-5465, email pplk@aol.com*

(Paddy Murphy - Continued from page 3)

to have a good solid player bringing out every note and you have to put in that note with him (*Paddy clicks his bones*). That note has to go in and when he puts in the triplets in the fiddle or the [ac]ordion or flute you have to put in them aswell...and a lot of them there's two notes going in from the bar and they didn't put them in at all." Paddy when on the illustrate this point by lirting a jig for me.

One of the first things to strike me about Paddy's playing was his flamboyance. He says this come from being totally involved in the performance of the music:

"You are so much interested in your job. It's like you'd be going out dancing. You're so much interested in the music and the time and the players with you are interested in you aswell, and when you play with a person so long they know everything about you. They're spot on with you aswell: you can't go wrong."

He likened this total involvement in the performance to a kind of madness, something that was long ago referred to as St Vituse's dance:

"When a fella would be half mad. It's the same thing with the music. When I heard good music every bit of me shakes. I could find it going down like I'd be drinking whiskey or something, the tension would be so much."

Even when playing with several other instruments the bones draw attention to themselves. The instrument, the sound, and the gestures of the bones-player attract the ears and eyes of the audience.

The second year I adjudicated the competition in Abbeyfeale several children demonstrated their skill on the instrument before the competition proper began. Many of them are nieces, nephews and grandchildren of Paddy's. While he has formally taught some adults, these children have learnt by simply watching him play, often in Brown's bar in Abbeyfeale where he plays with friends in a session every Saturday night. Unlike many North American performers on the instrument he plays in the one-handed style, preferably while seated. His style is fluid and inventive, his timing 'spot on'. When the tune playing is charged and Paddy is in its grip, his free hand often swoops up to dance with his playing hand in a gesture that embodies

the 'lift' of the moment. No wonder then that Paddy is the inspiration for bones players, both young and old, throughout the region. Of his young acolytes he says:

"They picked it up themselves. They come in when I'm playing in the pub and they're standing there with their mouths open looking...go on grandad, go on grandad!" *Mel Mercier*

Mark your
calender
Bones Fest IV
Chattanooga, Tennessee
September 22, 23
and 24, 2000
First Anniversary of
Rhythm Bones Society

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested