



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 3, No. 1 2001

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## Executive Director's Column

I hope that all of you rhythm bones enthusiasts are spreading the word about this fine but almost forgotten musical instrument and thinking about Bones Fest V, August 3, 4, and 5, 2000 at the Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, Massachusetts, 50 miles west of Boston.

The Board of Directors approved the Frank Brower Meritorious Service Award last September. This award is the highest award given by the society and will be awarded to individuals making significant contributions to preservation, education and fostering the development of bones playing techniques and music and the Rhythm Bones Society. Everyone is encouraged to submit names of individuals who, you feel, deserve this recognition to our Secretary, Steve Wixson, and me. We will present the names to the Board of Directors for approval.

Since the September meeting, however, some board members have expressed concern about the name of the award and feel that we should revisit the subject name and present it to the RBS for their approval before any awards are made. In that light the following is a bio of Frank Brower summarized from RBS member Beth Lenz's M.A. Thesis, entitled

"The Bones in the U.S. History and Performance Practice," University of Michigan, 1989.

Brower was born in Baltimore, Maryland on November 20, 1823. His first appearance as a performer was at the Dick Myer Museum in Philadelphia where he did a song and dance routine. He was engaged by the Cincinnati Circus in 1840 and went on tour. During the summer of 1841 he introduced bones to the entertainment business performing at Lynchburg, Virginia during the week of the Fourth of July accompanying Dan Emmett in the new song "Old Tar River".

He later became the bones player for the Virginia Minstrels, one of the first minstrel troupes. Their first performance took place in New York at the Bowery Amphitheater on February 6, 1843. The Virginia Minstrels played in London, Dublin, Cork, Belfast, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Brower played in a variety of circuses both in the U.S. and abroad. On February 28, 1856, he opened with Sanford Minstrels in Philadelphia. His last stage appearance as a minstrel performer was with the Tunnison Minstrels in Philadelphia on November 2, 1867 at the Walnut St. Theatre in the sketch "The Lottery of Love." He was known for his acting ability as well as his musical skills.

## John 'Mr. Bones' Burrill

Mention the bones to anyone from Boston and one name always comes up, "Mr. Bones" aka John Alden Burrill. He will be forever remembered by the people of Boston as a Street musician and performer who was welcomed on any stage in Boston and many across the country. John played with many local and nationally known performers from The Band to Doc Watson. Known for his charm, wit and gentlemanly persona, he was also well liked beyond his musical ability.

He was born in the Boston area (and a descendant of passengers on the Mayflower). He first encountered the bones in a minstrel show he saw as a child, but it wasn't until high school that he attempted to play himself.

He always loved to dance and was



Photograph and other help from Jan Cornish

# Editorial

Steve Brown contributes an article on John 'Mr Bones' Burrill from the Boston area. We also welcome our 100th member, Tom Coyle.

This issue presents statistical data from the survey on the Membership Application Form. As you can see our typical bones player is male, age 55, plays wood bones with two hands, the stationary bone is between the 1st and 2nd finger, is an advanced/professional player, performs, was taught by a relative—most likely his father—and plays to Irish music.

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Steve,

I was born in Philly, and lived most all my life here. I've always been an appreciator of music. My grandfather (John J. Maguire, Sr.) called music the number one art. His nickname was "Fiddler Maguire" even though he played every instrument but the fiddle. Back in 1969 I was in The United States Marine Corps where I was exposed to lots of different types of music. I lived in Florida for a couple years back in the early 80's and developed an appreciation for country music. As a child, I took clarinet lessons for a short while, but I gave it up because I realized I was a musically challenged student (of course this broke my grandfathers heart). I've always liked folk music. In my adolescent years I taught myself to make some noise with harmonicas (Bob Dylan fan). I played badly enough to drive away my friends and loved ones and I was proud. More recently, I rather miraculously, got a job with the Philadelphia Fire Dept. where there's a band, the Philadelphia Police and Fire Pipes and Drums. They allow me to march around with them and beat upon the bass drum. I've learned a lot since becoming a member of this much esteemed organization (boom! boom! boom!). As a result, my interest in music has unmercifully risen again like "Ye Damned Whale" of Moby Dick fame. So much to the dismay of those closest to me, I have developed a

middle aged interest in Celtic music, and if lack of talent dictates and I never become the musician my grandfather would have been proud of, well I'll just click them spoons, I'll just clack them bones, I'll beat that bodhran, I'll boom boom on that base drum, and nobody has to listen. YEAH! RIGHT! God bless all you music lovers. *Tom Coyle*

## Ted Goon is first Honorary Member

With its first email vote, the RBS Board adopted the membership category of Honorary Member. There are no requirements, but three-fourths of the Board must vote for a candidate. It is envisioned this category is for senior persons who have made significant contributions to bones playing and/or the Rhythm Bones Society. Honorary Members pay no dues.

The Board awarded the first Honorary Membership to Ted Goon (Mr. Goon Bones). There was an article on Ted in the Rhythm Bones Player, Vol 2, No 3. Thanks, Ted, for your

## Website of the Quarter

**Www.itma.ie.** The Irish Traditional Music Archive is a multi-media reference archive and resource center for the traditional song, music and dance of Ireland. It is a public not-for-profit facility which promotes public education in Irish traditional music through its own activities and its support for the activities of others.

## Bones Calendar

**April 21, 2001,** New England Folk Festival, Bones Workshop at 11 am by Steve Brown, bones@crystal-mtn.com. He will have a booth.

**August 3,4, and 5, 2001.** Bones Fest V, at the Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, MA. See Page 4 for more

## Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society  
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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 and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site:  
rhythmbones.com/

details.

**September 1, 2001.** 26th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry

## Recorded Bones Music

Newmarket Duets Ryan Thomson and Friends. CD with RBS member Steve Brown on bones. 4 Elm Court, New Market NH 03857 or [www.captainfiddle.com](http://www.captainfiddle.com) (has Arkansas Traveler/Soldier's Joy tract).

Alfred Montmarquette. Masters of French Canadian Music. Vol 2. Smithsonian/Folkways Series 00111. CD or Cassette. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 750 9th St. NW, Suite 4100, Wash. D.C. 20560-0953, U.S.A. Telephone 800-853-9511 or [www.si.edu/folkways](http://www.si.edu/folkways) (a must if you like old French Canadian music).

*(Continued from page 1 - John Mr Bones Burrill)*  
considered the "best jitterbugger in my high school class" and felt rhythm strongly. He remembers seeing the bones played during an impromptu jam session while in high school and felt it was a way he could play music and be included. A friend gave him some bones as a present and he learned to play, that was 1939.

After high school he put the bones away and joined the service. While in the service he contracted a severe form of spinal arthritis which would cause him to be stooped over the rest of his life. After the service he moved back to Boston, and played the bones on rare occasions. He married, had two daughters, and settled down to provide for his family.

It wasn't until 1975 when the bones began to enter his life again. While traveling to work through Harvard Square in Cambridge one July evening, he spotted two street musicians playing Dixieland music in the square. He was so impressed, when he got home he dug out the bones and the next day joined in. He began playing regularly around the square.

In 1976 at the Nameless Coffee House he was spotted in the audience by local folk singer and organizer Stephen Baird and invited up on stage. This was his first performance on stage and it bit him pretty hard. Soon he was a regular in bars and coffee houses around Boston.

I first met John in 1978 as a fledgling bones player. He welcomed me into his home, and played numerous tapes he had made on the street and in bars. "Do you like cabaret music?" he asked, and played a tape of a woman singing, "Those were the days" while his bones clicked away in the back ground. It wasn't long after that I joined him on the street for an evening of music and merriment. When I found him, he was playing with several musicians and surrounded by a large crowd. One of them turned to me and said, "This is the most money we've ever made." Due in no small part, to John; the crowd loved him.

I was amazed that John seemed to play everywhere, and with

everybody. At the time there was a new kind of rock and roll popping up everywhere, Punk Rock. John loved going to the punk rock clubs. He played regularly at The Rathskellar, nicknamed "the rat", and also The Space. He was a frequent player with a Boston Punk Rock band, The Infliktors, and once called me to tell me they were opening for Aerosmith at Boston Garden. I remember Mr. Goon Bones challenge to the members of the Bones Preservation Society to make the bones relevant to modern music and John accomplished this to an extent.

Although he played with everyone, Spider John Koerner was his main gig. Koerner was a Rochester, New York born folk/blues singer, song writer, and guitarist who was part of the folk revival of the late fifties, early sixties. His second home became Cambridge in the early sixties. John developed a relationship with him in the mid-seventies, and began doing local gigs. Gradually he became a regular. They toured England in the early eighties, and he made two records with him, Nobody knows the trouble I've been (1986), and Raised by Humans (1992), both on Red House Records.

Although he began playing with wooden bones, he loved the set of polished cow bones he got from Nick Driver in the late 70's. Later he got a set of laminated plastic bones from Len Davies, The Bonesman of England, and loved them, too. John's bones playing style was intricate and subtle. He valued the music over all, and was the consummate accompanist. I think this is the reason he played with so many musicians and was dearly loved. I remember his lamenting that he wasn't as ambidextrous a player as Percy Danforth. He felt he couldn't lead with his left hand as he could with his right, but it was this subtleness that added to his appeal.

Both John and Percy had heard of each other, but had never connected. In 1985 I was part of a group of people who helped to bring Percy to the New England Folk Festival for several workshops. I invited several bones players to be part of one of the workshops, and naturally called John.

Percy and I were setting up his bones booth when he spotted John coming down the hall. They didn't say a thing, but walked up and gave each other a big hug. It was amazing! They didn't stay in touch much, but became good friends.

John gained much respect and acknowledgment both locally and around the country in the late eighties and early nineties. He was a perennial winner of the Boston Music Awards' Outstanding Street Performer category. He was also a guest on several national television programs, including: Evening Magazine, The Today Show, and The Good Day Show. Each spring he traveled to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival where he was treated like a visiting dignitary, provided with his own golf cart for transportation to play at any stage he wished. He was sought out one late evening to teach Ringo Stars Band all about the bones and had them all jamming in no time. Mickey Hart sought him out for his knowledge on the bones, and later invited him to play with the Grateful Dead, though it never worked out due to Jerry Garcias' health.

John was plagued by poor health throughout his life, although he never let it get in the way of work or music. He contracted brain cancer and finally died in March of 1993. His obituary was published in the Boston Globe, Sing Out Magazine and many other

## Tom Coyle is 100th Member

Tom Coyle is the 100th member of the Rhythm Bones Society. This growth was accomplished in just over one year, and one-third of the bones players on our mailing list have joined.

Tom was exposed to the bones by his musical family, but only recently got a Percy Danforth tape which has rekindled his interest. He plays two-handed, and likes traditional Celtic and American music and rock and roll. He says he is a beginner, but has already done some performing. He found out about the Society while "rooting through bodhran sites on the internet." Welcome Tom, and we hope to meet you at Bones Fest V.

## What is a Bones Player?

Here is a summary of the responses to the survey attached to the membership application form. Of our 100 members 86 completed the survey, but not everyone gave complete responses.

Sex: Male 73, Female 13.

Age: Youngest 20, Oldest 85, Average 55.4, Median 54.

How taught: Father or grandfather 22, Other relative 4, Self-taught 15, Percy Danforth 15.

Level of Play: Beginner 9, Intermediate 19, Advanced 24. Professional 29.

Bones style: One-handed 19, Two-handed 60, Both ways 5.

Stationary bone: 1st and 2nd 52, Thumb and 1st 7, Both ways 19, Other 2.

Perform: Yes 71

Teach: Yes 42

Sell: Yes 20

Kind of bones: Real 43, Wood 54, Ivory 3, Plastic 7, Other 5.

Obtain bones: Make 21, Store 9, Mail order 12, Ireland 5, From an individual 17, Other 8.

Styles of music: Irish 25, Bluegrass 17, Dance music 16, Anything 16, Rock&Roll 13, Old time 13, Ragtime 11, Dixieland 10, Country 8, Celtic 7, Folk 7, Other 49.

## Bones Fest V

August 3, 4 and 5, 2000

in the barn at the  
Red Apple Farm

Phillipston, Massachusetts  
(about 50 miles west of Boston on Highway 2)

Host: Steve Brown

**bones@crystal-mtn.com**  
**978-297-1104**

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*

## Playlist for John 'Mr Bones' Burrill

...and Mr. Bones played on... Below are listed performers he played with at least once.

David Amram-Nationally known Jazz/Latin French horn player the Back Beat Boys-Boston Dixieland  
Stephen Baird-Boston Folk Singer, organizer and street singer  
Marcia Ball- Nationally known New Orleans style piano player  
The Band-Nationally known rock band  
Beausoliel-Nationally known Louisiana based Cajun band  
Byron Berline-Nationally known bluegrass musician  
Spencer Bohren-Louisiana based singer, guitarist, songwriter  
Boogaloo Swami's-Boston based Cajun/zydeco band  
Boozoo Chavis-Louisiana based Zydeco band  
The Brattle Street Players-Boston based Irish band  
Buddy Guy and Junior Wells- Nationally known Chicago blues musicians  
Bunker Mountain Fiddlers-Boston based bluegrass band  
The Cambridge harmonica Orchestra-30 member Boston based band  
Cj Chenier-Louisiana based Zydeco performer  
Clifton Chenier and his red hot Louisiana band-King of Zydeco music  
Dan Crary-Nationally known bluegrass musician  
Dirty Dozen Brass Band-Louisiana based New Orleans style brass band  
Snooks Eaglin-Louisiana based singer and guitarist  
The Fabulous Billygoons-Boston based Punk rock band  
Paul Geremia- Boston based blues/folk musician  
The Hackberry Ramblers- nationally known bluegrass musician  
John Hammond- Nationally known blues singer/guitarist  
Harmony River-Boston based Irish band  
John Hartford-Nationally known song writer and musician  
John Hickman- Nationally known blue grass musician  
Heidi and the Secret Admirers- Boston based rock band  
The Infliktors-Boston based Punk Rock band  
Queen Ida-Nationally known Louisiana based Zydeco performer  
Peter Kairo-Boston based performer  
Spider John Koerner-Nationally known singer and guitar player  
Patty Larkin-Boston based singer song writer  
Rod McDonald-New York based singer song writer  
James Montgomery-Boston based blues singer  
John Mooney-New Orleans based slide guitarist  
Nathan and the Zydeco Cha Cha's- Nationally known Zydeco band  
Kenny Neal-Louisiana based blues guitar player  
Charmaine Neville-Nationally known Louisiana based performer  
New Birth Jazz Band- New Orleans style brass band  
Bonnie Rait-Nationally known singer and song writer  
Zachery Richard-Louisiana Cajun performer  
Paul Rishell-Boston based blues singer  
Roomful of Blues-Boston based blues band  
Peter Rowan-nationally known singer and song writer  
Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee-Nationally known blues singers and musicians  
Tiny Tim-National known ukulele player and singer  
Marc and Ann Savoy-Nationally known Louisiana based Cajun musicians  
Michael Sullivan and Neti Vaandrager-Boston based street musicians  
Michelle Shocked-Nationally known Singer songwriter  
Ringos All Stars-Internationally known rock band  
Leon Redbone-Nationally known singer/guitarist  
Riders in the Sky-Nationally known Texas swing musicians  
Doc Watson-Nationally known guitarist/singer  
Robert Ward- electric blues