



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 3, No. 2 2001

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Executive Director's Column

In the barn on RED APPLE FARM - that's where it's going to happen - BONES FEST V that is, on Aug. 3, 4 and 5. Located in the middle of a typical New England apple orchard, our noise will not be a problem. Atypical, however, is a 30-year-old apple tree with 108 varieties of apples on it and much more. A pick your own apple, small fruit and vegetable operation which Bill and Susan Rose, proprietors, call home will have peaches, blueberries and apples ready to pick.

The farm also has a .75 mile-hiking trail leading to a beaver pond with working beaver and a fruit stand. Located in rural Phillipston, MA (pop. 1485) that the town Fathers plan to maintain as it has been for the last 250 years. It's antique New England and you will love it. If you are flying in consider Worcester

airport as well as Boston as landing sites.

Steve Brown, our host, plans a reception in the barn on Friday evening, an all-day program on Sat. followed by a Bar-B-Q and an evening program open to the public. On Sunday morning a light goodbye breakfast is planned. All included in your registration fee.

If your schedule permits, spend a day or more in nearby Boston. See the Old North Church and "every Middlesex village and farm". Take a walk on Freedom Trail and enjoy a Duck tour of the city. Fun and educational. Dinner at Durgan Park is always different and seafood at the Legal, either eat in or take out, is great. And don't pass up the coast. Although the water is cold, the lighthouses have great scenic views. I hope to see most of you at the Fest. May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

Nicholas Driver

Nicholas Driver comes from three generations of rhythm bones players. He was born in London in 1946. He was taught by his father, Aubrey Driver, from the age of about eight years old, and Aubrey passed on many of his decorations and techniques. Aubrey Driver, born in 1907, represents a direct link with the period when bones playing was at its peak in Britain. It could be seen among the Irish community, in the hands of the East End of London Buskers, and on the stages of Music Halls in Britain brought by minstrel bands from the States. Even children played them in the streets in England using 'roofing slate' bones, and in this atmosphere the art was developed by many performers.

As to if his great-grandfather played the bones there is some doubt but according to his father it is likely. What is certain is that his grandfather was a serious player and indeed married into an Irish family. Nick's grandmother came from County Mayo. His grandfather died young before Nick was born.

Certainly his grandfather and father made both bodhrans and bones. Recently an old lady sent Nick a set that his father had made for her long ago. However there was no serious

production of either instrument until Nick, in his early thirties, decided to promote both to a wider audience.

Nick knows very little about his grandfather's playing, except that he was very good and

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From *Bare Bones* album cover, left to right, Liam Molan, Nicholas Driver and Charlie Harris

Editorial

An interesting thing happened on St. Paddy's Day—I became a professional musician. RBS member Ann Coulter told the local event organizer about me and I was asked to perform. I played, presented a brief history and demonstrated how to play the bones. I recommend it to you amateur players (just trying to be humorous).

The feature article is on RBS member Nicholas 'Nick' Driver from the UK. It was prepared in part from email correspondence from Nick and I changed first person references to third person. The article mentions his album titled '*Bare Bones*' which he donated to the RBS informal library and gave permission to make copies for RBS members. CD copies will be available at Bones Fest V.

I recently met Walter Maioli who is an Italian researching ancient Roman musical instruments. Most written histories of bones playing note that bones were a Roman instrument, and Walter confirms this in a book he has written. He gave me a copy of his CD of music from these ancient instruments (primarily wind instruments), two tracks of which were in the movie *Gladiator*. He also gave me a recording of an Indian playing the kartal (a type of bones)

Letters to the Editor

I have received the Vol 3, No 1 newsletter andwow!. (*Editor's note: The newsletter announced Ted as our first Honorary Member.*)

At age 89 3/4, I no longer have the concentration to write the depth of my feelings, but I can say that I can't remember when I've experienced such satisfaction and pleasure. I feel certain that you all are on your way to making musical history, and I am flattered to be considered part of it. I feel certain that you will be able to come up with a musical application of the bones that will be far broader than I was able to do in the relatively short time that I researched and worked with them.

My best personal regards to all who are carrying the load. *Ted Goon*

Reference: Obituary for Len Davies, the Bones Man, in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol 2, No. 4.

Len was a member of my band, TRUNKLES, from early in 1983, for about 1 year. I first saw Len playing at a Festival in the West Country and was impressed by his visual/physical impact and energy and realised the potential of him performing on stage, adding an extra dimension to the percussion side of the band.

His 'Electric Bones' idea was that he had small pick-up style microphones on his wrists which linked back through the sound system to a strobe light machine, giving him a slo-mo action on stage, while the rest of the band were hit by static lights with colour changes, giving an incredible overall visual impact. Len was a bit of a drifter who traveled around in a small live-in van. He was a great handy-man and a help to me between gigs, and we worked on restoring a wooden yacht I owned at that time. Regards, *John Goodluck*

Websites of the Quarter

Here are two of many metronome programs available on the Internet for those who want to develop 'spot on' timing. Please send a Letter to the Editor if you find one you like better. www.familyeducation.com/download/0,1747,47-17939.00.html This one is free. www.vko.com/mundosoft.htm This one has more complex rhythms and you can try it free for 14 days.

Bones Calendar

August 3, 4, and 5, 2001. Bones Fest V. Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, Massachusetts. Host is Steve Brown, email address, bones @crystal-mtn.com. See newsletter insert for more details.

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

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 3, No. 2
Second Quarter 2001

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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/

Recorded Bones Music

Whenever I need a little pick-me-up, which seems like allot lately, I go down in my cellar and put on the Spider John Koerner record "*Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Been.*" Not only is it just great all around good time music, it features bones player John "Mr.Bones" Burrill who was written up in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol. 3, No. 1. You really can't find many records that feature bones at all, never mind 13 out of the 15 tracks. The artists include Willie Murphy on bass, Tony Glover on harmonica, Peter Ostrousko on mandolin, Butch Thompson on piano, both of "Lake Wobegon" fame, and Chip Taylor Smith on the fiddle. RHR CD 12, Red House Records, P.O.Box 4044, St.Paul, MN 55104. *Steve Brown.*

(Continued from page 1 - Nicholas Driver)

played with both hands. A whale bone set his father played were from him and then passed to Nick when his hands were strong enough to hold them at about eight years old.

Nick's father was a great player, in his time a really entertaining player. He loved the musical humour of bones playing that came from 'Mr. Bones' of the minstrel bands. There were stacks of little groups in England usually on the end of piers, lots of banjo, etc., much like the kind of playing you get in 'mountain music' in the States, plenty of slow waltzes. In fact in his youth there was very little fast playing, they played to the old tunes of the day, Dixie, traditional jazz, etc. A lot of jazz was a slow rhythm, tunes like 'Home in Pasadena.' Nick says "a tune like that gives a lot of opportunity for very stylish playing, it stops and starts and has breaks of tempo."

His father played with the fixed bone between finger and thumb and the other in the middle fingers, he would role the thumb bone around to change the sound all the time even playing with it on its edge. Percy Danforth played a lot like Nick's father, so it must have been the old style of class players both were around the same age, though Percy was a little younger.

This style of holding made it possible for him to throw bones in the air while playing and catch them again at the correct beat and go on playing. They would go up to the ceiling and he would put a spin on the bone so it spun in the air very impressively.

At first Nick learnt everything from him and played in his style, up to four bones in a hand, done by adding bones with the other hand as you play, then taking them out again or eight bones with lots of tricks. He played from quite young, about 14, in traditional jazz bands, and for a while with a 'jug' band, the 'Hubbly Bubbly Jug Band.' He also played with the new skiffle groups. He practiced at home to the old 78 records like 'In a Persian Garden' and of course to tunes on the radio.

Slow playing, with both hands and

often eight bones is still the great art, to the very slow but rhythmic songs and tunes that were around then and still are alive in places such as North Carolina, especially autoharp with vocals. Nick used to know an old blues bones player in the states, but can't remember his name. He also loved to play with original Cajun music.

His early days were all traditional, often very slow playing, lots of decoration and art. When he settled in Suffolk, a very backward place at that time, there were a lot of Irish musicians around and Suffolk, as an old county of England, had a long tradition of button accordion playing and hammered dulcimers, so there was a lot of local old folk music and musicians. He played with a lot of very gifted Irish musicians and they formed bands doing everything from TV to pubs. The two musicians he played with the most were Charlie Harris from Limerick and Liam Molan, both brilliant and very taxing. Charlie went off to the States in the end and Liam died before he was 50. Since they have gone he has never felt like playing with anyone else, so he just picks up a set and put on a record from time to time.

Playing with them was very demanding, and they played often four nights per week such that his fingers used to swell up from the bones and his wrist needed a bandage to strap it up for the bodhran. It was during this time and the demands of the fast Irish music that he switched to playing with two bones between the middle fingers of each hand. With this kind of music there is no scope for being decorative; what matters is just perfect unison with the instrumental. Nick played a lot in Ireland with many musicians and did some recording of some rare names. Nick's other main instrument was Anglo concertina.

Nick is fascinated and delighted that the bones have become an interest again for young people. Forty years ago it was nearly dead. It is a reward for the work that Percy and Nick did. They were both evangelical. Percy toured the campuses of the States giving demonstrations and even gave a talk and demo at Cambridge University in the UK. What mattered was that both of them made and sold the

instrument so that people could get their hands on and learn that way. They both made a bit of money, but they loved to see the interest grow again and be taken seriously. Nick even did BBC World Services short-wave radio once!

Nick says there was a time when he was very good, but he just doesn't practice much now. What you loose are the muscles, their training, their lightening speed of reaction to perfection. What you don't loose is the instinct that is vital to playing, the sensitivity. Percussion requires great sensitivity, you must feed off the instrumental, back and forth, like *tabla* playing in India. A bones player is only as good as the person or group they play with. When you play with one or two musicians all the time you become instinctive as to their little ways and the result is wonderful.

Nick says there is today far too much discussion on style and technique, far too much fussing about technical matters. A good player changes to suit the music and the style of the instrumental, the decorations used and the tempo set. You don't think about it or analyse; it must be instinctive, from the heart, from the love of the music, it all flows. The bones are so much part of or an extension of your body, your arms, your hands that unlike any other instrument the connection is one pure flow. Trying to break this all down into technical analysis is impossible and a waste of time. He found this when trying to write a tutor!

Nick says the ultimate material for bones must be whalebone, though not now politically correct, as it combines the hardness of bone with the easily worked qualities of wood, its special hollow membrane giving an unique sound. For serious playing today, hardwood or shaped bones from cow's shin are idea, animal ribs (probably the oldest type of instrument) proving too uncomfortable between the fingers for sustained playing. Nick makes and sells about 500 cow shin bone sets a year, and several RBS members own them.

Nick has made other contributions to rhythm bones playing. His recording "Bare Bones: The Traditional Art of Bones Playing" is special as every track has bones playing. One reviewer said "This album illustrates the amazing variety of uses of bones as an

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accompanying instrument. They can travel from waltzes to *The Rollicking Boys around Tandarages* and sound quite at home.” He is joined on this album by his friends Charlie Harris and Liam Molan, and a photograph of the three of them taken from the cover of their album is on Page 1. Nick has also contributed articles on bones playing for magazines and has a *Bodhrán & Bones Tutor* that is published by Hobgoblin Music. This 26-page book covers the basics of bodhrán and bones playing with brief histories and maintenance instruction for each instrument.

Nick says “This is without a doubt the foundation musical instrument of mankind and was first seen in the cradle of mankind in North Africa. How far back it goes we cannot tell, but certainly beyond the skin drum. People still fail to appreciate the scope and versatility of the bones, surely the most effective pocket percussion instrument conceived by man.”

Bones lived in the wilderness after the second world war. Nick can remember when you could count on the fingers of one hand the number of players who could play with both hands. He wishes that his father were alive to see the rebirth of interest.

The saddest thing to Nick is that his own son shows no interest and can't play the bones. Nick is a grandfather and has a grandson. He says “I have to live long enough to teach him so I can pass on the

Bones Fest V

August 3, 4 and 5, 2001

in the barn at the
Red Apple Farm

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

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