



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 4, No. 1 2002

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Executive Director's Column

Planning for BONES FEST VI, set for the Guilford College campus in Greensboro, NC on Aug. 2-4, 2002, is well under way. If you would like for us to add something special there is still time to do it. Please contact me or any board member ASAP. This will be a highlight event for the Rhythm Bones Society.

As I write this column a 2 hour video of the evening program at BFV is being copied. It is a great tape and already a collector's item for bones players everywhere. The old timers that many of you have seen before such as Spike Bones, John Cahill, Jerry Barnett, Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, Russ Myers, Steve Wixson, Joe Birl, Steve Brown, Walt Watkins, Sally Carroll and others are at their best. There were many new performers at the Fest that many of us had never met before that we all learned a lot from. Gerard Arsenault, Shorty

Boulet, Nick Driver, Adam Klein, Ernie Duffy, Donny DeCamp and son Larry, Jim Nelson, Lisa Wilkins, Norm Conrad, Donald Lee Clair, Rod Rudin, Bonnie Dixon, Jam'in James Bones and Carlton Johnson were great. We are hopeful that these new faces and many of the absentees will be present in Greensboro for the time of our lives at Bones Fest VI.

The Reiner Family Fiddle Band provided the music. They did an outstanding job and it shows on the tape. Each bones performer has their name superimposed over their picture so you can meet them up-front and close. Whether you were present or not this video is a must for your collection of bones memorabilia. We ordered 60 copies for this printing and they are available on a first-ordered basis; therefore, get your order in now (see insert to order). May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

Vivian Cox—Performing Is In Her Bones

Vivian Cox has played the bones for more than 70 years. Real bones. Rib bones. Bones from a cow. Music.

By her own account, she is a "bones virtuoso," and entertains several times a week at the Boggstown Inn and Cabaret.

Cox, who lives in rural Shelbyville, claims she's the only [professional] female bones player in the world. She's never heard of another—and she should know. Over the years, she has attended "bones" conventions in California, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia and other locations. No one has ever refuted that claim.

Most weekends, Cox plays at the luncheon at the Boggstown Inn.

Russell Moss, co-owner of the cabaret, is very proud of his senior performer.

"Vivian is classy, unique and very professional," said Moss. "She's definitely a novelty, she loves people and she's an inspiration to our senior patrons."

Over the years, Cox has taken her "bones show" on the road and met many celebrity music artists and entertainers. In 1996 she performed at the Thunderbird Theater in

Branson, Mo.

"I met Arthur Duncan, the famous tap dancer from the Lawrence Welk Show, and he told me that he could learn some pointers from me," she laughs.

Edward Cox is supportive of his wife but somewhat bemused by her notoriety.

(Continued on page 3)



Vivian Cox playing her bones with the Boggstown Inn band.

Editorial

This issue marks the beginning of a new column titled 'Tips and Techniques.' It was suggested by Jennifer Cutting of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress (she receives a complimentary copy of the newsletter for their Bones file). I write the first one on Tuning Bones, but hopefully in the years ahead many of you will contribute your expertise.

The feature article is on Vivian Cox, and is reprinted from the Indianapolis Star newspaper. The article says that Vivian is the only female bones player, but our membership survey shows there are 15% female. However, to the best of our knowledge, she is one of a handful of regularly performing professional female bones players in the world. Vivian is a founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society. Congratulations, Vivian!

This issue reviews Percy Danforth's Bones Instructional Video. This video should have been the first video reviewed as it has taught more people to play the bones than any known video. In our membership survey, 20% of our members credit Percy in some

Letters to the Editor

Thanks to Bill Rexroad for the raw buffalo os he sent me gratis from Kansas. (In case you don't know the word 'os,' it means bones or bones material.) After contacting Bill, here came a box the size of 3 or 4 shoeboxes. I pulled out hunks of American Bison (the correct name) bone the size of Barry Bond's baseball bats! Some even with dry hunks of hide clinging. I haven't yet carved 'em down to playing bones, but my bone-saw is ready and my scrapers are sharp. So when I finish a pair o' authentic Kansas Prairie American Bison shin-bone (os) rhythm bones, then I'll let all y'all know how they sound. Love the newsletter. Long live the bones!

'Bones Forever by Jim Connor
Long live 'bones and may your tribe increase

May the rhythm of the 'bones bring you peace!
May your spouse or friend put up with you
As the music of the 'bones sees you thru.
Friends of the 'bones are everywhere
Some ride the road, some fly the air
And we all know when on earth we're thru
There'll be a set of heavenly bones waiting for
you

Jim Connor

Dear Editor,

This letter is to update you on a "speech" problem that I have. I work out at the gym 3 times a week, chop wood, work in my workshop and still see all the Falcon games. I have played over 40 gigs this year -- playing bones with Mr. Bones & Co.-- & a few gigs with other bands. I am writing you to make it VERY CLEAR that my BRAIN is still working fine - except that I have a difficult time speaking and I stutter and stammer. It is a condition called "progressive aphasia." It is totally frustrating for me but there is no medical cure for the problem. It is a "WORD FINDING" problem and I know what I want to say but can't find the words. If I am looking for a word like *watch*, for example, I can tell you "it is something that you wear that tells time" -- but that word (watch) totally escapes me at that moment.

Those of you who have seen me recently or talked by phone, I am sure you know of the problem but maybe not the details.

Keep up the great e-mail. If you call (or see me in person) - PLEASE have LOTS OF PATIENCE - and SPEAK SLOWLY. I will get the words out

Bones Calendar

March 21, 2002. Barry "Bones" Patton and the Byron Berline Band will be on stage for opening night of the Broadway revival of the musical Oklahoma.

April 19-21, 2002. New England Folk Festival, Natick High School, Natick, MA. Plans include a bones workshop and performance by Rhythm Bones Society members. For more information on bones activities contact Steve Brown (bones@crystal-mtn.com). For more information on New England Folk Festival visit their web site: www.neffa.org/~neffa. Ev Cowett says he's making every effort to come. Dave Reiner and the boys will be the musical

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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

back up.

August 2-4, 2002. Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details in this and future newsletters. Note date change!

August 31, 2002. 27th Annual Bones

Website of the Quarter

[Http://c.sinclair.tripod.com/bones02.htm](http://c.sinclair.tripod.com/bones02.htm). Chet Sinclair, the videographer for Bones Fest VI, presents highlights from his video of the event that is now available for purchase. See Executive Director's Column and newsletter insert for

Recorded Bones Music

Bones Fest V video. See Executive Director's column on page 1 for a description. See Website of the Quarter above for a preview. Order using newsletter insert.

Review of Percy Danforth Instructional

The video begins with a long solo demonstration of Percy Danforth playing the bones while the credits for the video are overlaid. Percy presents a history of the bones beginning with the possibility that pre-historic people played them around the cooking fire. He traces them through the Mediterranean, Middle Ages and to Ireland and England.

He then demonstrates the basics. How to hold the bones. How to make the tap. How to do the triplet. His descriptions are full of detail and demonstration. He then shows the roll. These are all done with one hand.

He then begins his two-handed bones instruction. First with both hands doing the same thing. Then with each hand doing something different including 2 beats against 3, rolls with accents, syncopation, roll in one hand against a tap in the other, roll against a triplet and tap, single triplets alternating between hands, 7 beat roll, 13 beat roll, rolls with syncopation beats and finally flam taps.

He describes how to keep bones from slipping out of your hands by rubbing the bones with a mix of beeswax and rosin.

He demonstrates how to tune the bones, how to quiet the bones, how to play with anvil bone between thumb and first finger and how to change pitch from that position.

Percy then gives a bit of his own personal history of learning how to play the bones. He learned from his dad after seeing school kids play with them. He remembers Afro-American men playing bones and sand dancing when he lived in Washington, DC.

He talks about the people he has taught and that he has sold and given away 17,000 pairs of bones. He shows a variety of different materials used to make bones.

The rest of the video is full of Percy playing the bones with different musical instruments and different styles of music including jigs, polka, country and many more.

(Vivian Cox continued from page 1)

"I knew she could play the bones when I married her, but I never gave it a second thought till I found out how much people liked it," he said. "She's very outgoing and loves to entertain. I suppose she'll be rattling those bones till either she can't drive over there anymore or her arms wear out."

Cox, 80, was born just across the border in Rush County but grew up near Waldron and graduated from high school there. She recently attended her 60th class reunion.

"It was great! There were only 50 of us in the entire class and 16 were able to attend," she said.

About a year after graduating she married Edward, who was a Marine. He is a retired well-driller and she is a retired retail clerk. The couple, who raised three boys and three girls, will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary next year.

When she was 8, Cox was introduced to playing the bones by her father.

"I saw my uncle play the bone and Dad knew I was fascinated," she said. "He made bones for me from the ribs of a butchered beef cow. Playing the bones may look easy, but it took me years of practice to get any good at it."

"I came in first place at an amateur talent contest when I was 14," she said proudly. "I won \$5, and I still have that five-dollar bill."

Cox explains that bones playing is percussion only. There are no musical notes involved, but a player must get the right "clacking" sound.

Not just any old bones will do. They must be the right length, width, thickness and shape. Some players use wood, but rib bones are the best because they're curved.

"That makes for easier holding," she said. "The sound resembles tap shoes on a wood floor."

According to Cox, bones playing was popular in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was common on Southern Plantations, street corners, dance halls, and in school yards.

It was primarily associated with

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Tips and Techniques Tuning Wood Bones

Most wood bones need to be tuned to make their best sound. What is the best sound is very subjective and no two people may agree on what is best. Tuning is not to be confused with changing the pitch while playing as demonstrated by Russ Myers and others. A better name might be harmonic tuning.

In general, if two people hold the same bones in the same identical position, the sound will not be the same. Tuning depends on many factors; size of fingers, type of bone material, shape of the bones, position of the stationary bone and probably other factors. I hold wood bones with the stationary bone between first and second fingers. I do not like the sound of my real bones in that position and hold that stationary bone between thumb and first finger.

The size (diameter) of the fingers and shape of the bones determines where on the bone contact is made. Place a pair of bones in your hand and notice where they touch. Separate the bones next to the fingers and note that the touch point moves down. That changes the sound.

Percy Danforth, in his video, talks about tuning Danforth bones. He starts with both bones a half inch or so above his fingers and moves the stationary bone up until he gets the sound he likes.

I tried this using my computer to record the sounds. I used the Cool Edit audio editing program and its frequency analysis plug-in. With the bones even with each other, a dull sound was heard and there was a weak dominant frequency on the computer curve. When the stationary bone was raised to produce the sound I liked, the frequency curve showed a dominant frequency or pitch suggesting a purer sound.

Ev Cowett would like to understand how the sound from bones is produced. While I cannot explain that, it would appear that tuning wood bones is similar to locating harmonics on a guitar. It would make sense that the underlying physics of sound production would apply to bones, but since their structure is complex, figuring out exactly how the sound is made will be

(Vivian Cox continued from page 3)

slave culture and black-face minstrel shows and played along with instruments such as piano and banjo.

“Bones playing requires technical skill and practice,” she said. “It takes a lot of energy. You ought to feel the muscles in my arms.”

“Bones playing also existed in Europe during the Middle Ages. “It was used by lepers who were obliged to sound them to warn frightened people of their approach,” Cox said.

“Percussion bones go back even further than that and were on Greek urns, Egyptian bas-reliefs and on markers of pre-historic grave sites,” said Cox.

“So you see, I have joined an ancient and proud fraternity that stretches all the way back to mankind's prehistoric beginnings.”

Cox's career at the Boggstown Inn started as a dare more than 14 years ago when she and her husband were the dinner guests of former owner Carlos Gray.

He put her on the spot by

challenging her to get up on stage and entertain.

“Carlos had no idea that I was going to play the bones,” laughs Cox. “The crowd loved it and everybody had fun. I've been there ever since.”

The Boggstown Inn and Cabaret, a dinner theater, features music mainly from the '20s, '30s and '40s.

Performers don authentic period costumes and stage full production shows that include lots of comedy, sing-alongs and vaudevillian skills.

For three years it has been owned and operated by Moss and Brad Zumwalt and is open year-round, except in January. It hosts more than 250 bus tour engagements annually. Reservations are required.

Cox is also a hostess at the Cabaret. She enjoys greeting and seating people but especially loves to entertain the crowds with music, jokes and storytelling.

“I get to wear dazzling, colorful outfits with beads, feathered boas and gaudy hats,” she said.

“I perform for luncheons, bus tours and dinner shows. This job never gets old because there's always somebody new to entertain.” *Ron*



Mark your
calender

Bones Fest
VI

Guilford College

Greensboro, No
rth Carolina

August 2, 3 & 4,
2002

Everett Cowett, Host

Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
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Address Correction Requested