



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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Executive Director's Column

BONES FEST VI at Guilford College can make a difference in the changing world around us. The College campus already has great energy and the sounds of bones rattling away can only improve upon it. Energy is everything! Bones and bones players have it. There is something about the sounds made by this ancient instrument that brings smiles to faces, tapping of toes and the desire to dance or just clap your hands. Bones players have been doing this for well over 5,000 years and 2002 is no exception.

A great weekend is in store for all attendees. Many old and new faces plan to attend and I hope to visit with each of you sometime during the weekend.

Many of you will receive this newsletter at Bones Fest VI as part of our surprise 100th

anniversary celebration of the birthday of Brother Bones, an important figure in the history of modern bones playing. One of his recordings, Sweet Georgia Brown, theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters, one of the most played recordings in history though many people do not realize he is playing bones. Brother Bones, that is Freeman Davis, was a contemporary of our Honorary member, Ted Goon, and both of these bones players made bones popular again during the late 1940's and early 1950's.

Our surprise birthday celebration at Bones Fest VI will include a short biography, listening to some of his recordings, watching a short segment from one of his movies, *Yes Sir, Mr. Bones*, and sharing a 100th anniversary birthday cake.

May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

BROTHER BONES' 100TH ANNIVERSARY

October 4, 2002 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Freeman Davis known to the world as Brother Bones. This little know fact was discovered by the Rhythm Bones Society, a group organized to preserve and promote bones playing, and they plan to honor his birthday at their upcoming Bones Fest.

Freeman was a recording artist during the late '40s and '50s and is most well known for his bones playing and whistling on *Sweet Georgia Brown*, a recording that became the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters.

Freeman was born on October 4, 1902 in Montgomery, Alabama, but came to Long Beach, California in 1918. He died June 14, 1974 at the age of 71 and was survived by his wife, Daisy, a daughter and two grandsons. His funeral was attended by movie stars, many of those African-American, and women sang the old songs, ones they had learned in church.

He recorded for Tempo Records and on the back of one of his Tempo releases it states that he was a carpenter. But a former neighbor, Ernie McBride, remembers him early on shining shoes. Both Freeman and Ernie had shoeshine stands in the vestibules of local



Brother Bones in high hat with four bones in each hand.
Photograph courtesy of the Harlem Globetrotters

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Editorial

I come from an university background and like research. I was sitting at my desk one day looking at the material I had collected about Brother Bones and it hit me. I had looked at his obituary many times, but there it was—a hundredth birthday. I emailed Ev Cowett immediately. Here was a possible way to tell many people about rhythm bones and maybe find some more bones players. So the article was written in hopes it would get picked up by major newspapers or the Associated Press. Only time will tell. Let's celebrate his birthday at Bones Fest VI in Greensboro this August.

Bracha Ben-Avraham is a bones player in Israel and writes a long letter to the Editor about bones playing in her country.

Adam Klein submitted an article on getting kids interested in playing the bones. We should all try to emulate what he has done. Contact him for more details.

Walt Watkins submitted an article based on a trip he took to a military fort where he saw Civil War rhythm bones that some at the National Park Service thought were shoehorns. Bill Rexroad submitted an article based on a trip he took to Egypt where he saw ancient rhythm bones. Later Bill saw what he thought were rhythm bones for sale that turned out to be

Letters to the Editor

Subject: Tips and Techniques—TheBasics Dr. Edmunds always made a point that the bones were the only percussion instrument played by striking the instrument in the "up" position rather than down as in drums, piano, xylophone, etc. Fred did exaggerate this when playing, but you will find that most players, while starting in the vertical position, play most of their first beats on the way up. In other words when they actually make their first strike the bones are horizontal. For what its worth. *Ev Cowett*

Dear Steve,

Boneologist--from the Treatise On Boneology by "Professor" William B. Everett, Salem, Mass. 1863. This pamphlet was of great interest to John Burrell when he came to visit. He wrote me a month before he died. Requested I make a copy for him. Had moved & couldn't find it to copy before I heard of his passing. Still can't find it. If anyone in the organization has any info on this item, I'd like to have a copy. Many thanx, *Hank Tenenbaum*, hankbones@earthlink.net

Subject: Bones Playing in Israel

Greetings fellow bones players!

It might seem rather strange that there is a bones player living in Israel (Western Galilee to be more specific) who plays Irish music, but that's the bare bones of it. A history of bones in a book that I purchased in Ireland several years ago says that bones were played in ancient Egypt and shows an Egyptian drawing of musicians holding a set of decorated rhythm bones. If this is true, then bones were around in this part of the world long before they were brought over to the United States.

I first encountered bones in Ireland while I was participating in a bodhran class in the South Sligo School of Irish Music and Dance in County Sligo. During the midmorning coffee break I met Cathy Jordan – the singer and bodhran and bones player of "Dervish." Cathy showed me how to hold bones and demonstrated her two handed techniques – including a flashy demonstration of four bones in each

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Bones Calendar

August 2-4, 2002. Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details in the last newsletter (Vol 4, No 2). Note date change!

August 31, 2002. 27th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher.

Websites of the Quarter

www.irish-cream.net/braha.html. Bracha wrote the Letter to the Editor in the column above. She is a member of the Rhythm Bones Society.

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
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Editor
Steve Wixson
wixson@chattanooga.net

Executive Director
Everett Cowett
evcow@aol.com

Web Site Coordinator
Martha Cowett
mccowett@mindspring.com

Board of Directors
Steve Brown
Sally Carroll
Everett Cowett, Executive Director
Mel Mercier
Jerry Mescher
Russ Myers, Assistant Director
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer

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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: rhythmbones.com

www2.nlc-bnc.ca/gramophone/src/m2-1041-e.htm. Old bones recordings.

Near the bottom of the page (below the group picture) it saysconsult the Virtual Gramophone database. Click on that. It then lists several pieces--several of which you can listen to. Great fun!
Sally Carroll

Recorded Bones Music

Yes Sir, Mr. Bones. Freeman Davis is one of many performers in this 1951 movie of a minstrel show. The movie is available on video.

Sweet Georgia Brown. This and several of Freeman Davis' bones recordings can be found by searching for Brother Bones on used record websites on the internet. One Tempo record (number unknown) is a collection of 12 of Freeman's hits including *Sweet Georgia Brown*. Do it now as the prices may go up when dealers learn that it's the 100th

Tips and Techniques Making Bones

This will be a short article, but one I suspect will generate comments from other cow rib bones makers.

Storyteller Bud Bartram is one of the few cowboy bones players in our database. At age 98, he still occasionally entertains at his assisted care facility. His son, Gary, recently told me how he made bones to accompany himself on his 'harp.'

He played cow ribs and did not like the sound of wood bones. Being a working cowboy, he would occasionally come upon a sun dried carcass. The only useable bones came from the upper back part of the rib cage next to the shoulder where the bones were thin. He would select only about two bones from a carcass. He would cut 14 inches of bone with a saw in the field and later trim them to the proper length (about 7 inches). He would then break the bottom of a coke bottle and use that to scrap the bones until he got the sound or pitch he wanted. This could take hours and hours. He still plays a set that he made 60 years ago. *Steve Wixson*

Interesting Find Among Civil War Memorabilia

Early in June 2001, I visited Fort Donelson, Tennessee near the Land Between the Lakes. In 1862 this was the CSA fort defending the Cumberland river against a Union invasion into Middle Tennessee. While there I noted a display of individual soldier's equipment the National Park Service representative said was typical for soldiers of both sides. Along with playing cards, jews harps, hard tack, stationery and the like was a beautiful pair of bones. I asked the representative what she thought they were for and she replied "they are shoe horns."

I picked them up and played a few rolls and noted that they were a great sounding pair of bones. I asked her to turn up the period music they were playing, and I played along. This drew a crowd and all were amazed,

including me. I had a ball. Needless to say those were no shoe horns. They resemble the bones you see in the painting "The Bone Player" done by William Sidney Mount in 1856 and on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (postcard copies were passed out at Bones Fests III & V). I wanted to know where they got those bones and they were willing to tell me, but their research has not turned up a single lead. The Park Service took the bones off the display as being too vulnerable to theft. I'll Say!!

I have since learned that they celebrated the 140th anniversary of Fort Donelson in February 2002, and had a big bash including reenactment. When I left Fort Donelson we visited several venues in the Land Between the Lakes area. We found mountain

Bill Rexroad Finds Bones in Egypt

When I give talks at schools about the bones, one of the things I tell the children is that it is one of man's oldest musical instruments. Bones were known to exist in ancient Egypt more than three thousand years ago, I tell them. Pictures of people playing the bones were depicted in hieroglyphs found in tombs there. I had read this and believed it, but had no proof of it. I had always told myself that if I ever had the opportunity to go to Egypt I would find out if this were true. In 1998 my wife and I went there.

We saw many temples and tombs, all of which were adorned with hieroglyphs. At first I looked closely at as many as I could, but quickly came to realize there was no way I would be able to scrutinize the thousands and thousands of hieroglyphs that exist there. I narrowed my search to those depicting scenes of celebration. There were plenty of those to look at too, but I never saw any that showed a person playing the bones. Not until we visited the temple of Amon at Karnak.

On the southwest wall of the magnificent hall of columns in the

Sanctuary of Amon is a large hieroglyphic mural picturing a parade being held to honor Ramses II. Among the musicians in the parade is seen a person holding a pair of objects in one hand that could be nothing other than bones. Eureka!

Later we visited the famous Cairo Museum. About fifty feet inside the main door of the museum is a glass display case containing a collection of fine, unusually rare items, so said the sign on the case. One such item was a pair of ivory bones or at least something like bones. They were rather short and somewhat oval in shape instead of being long and slender. There was a small hole at the end of each one, presumable for attaching a string to go over the finger. One might think of them as being like castanets, but they were not really that either. Perhaps they fell somewhere in between bones and castanets. They dated back five thousand years.

On another day we went to the old Cairo bazaar and walked its narrow streets, enjoying all the sights, sound, and smells. The walks are lined with shops, one of which sold items carved from bone. In the window of that shop I saw what appeared to be a set of bones. It turned out that they were really shoehorns, but I bought a pair anyway. They were close enough to the correct size, shape and weight that a little filing has resulted in a pair of hand-carved, Egyptian, camel-bone bones.

Bones Playing in Israel (Continued)

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hand. I was immediately fascinated and decided then and there that I had to learn how to do this. I purchased my first set of bones (real bone ones) in Galway, and then took a ferry out to Inis Mor, a small island in Galway Bay, where I walked up and down the beach for a day and a half and eventually got out my first triplet. The rest, I imagine, is similar to all the rest of you. I spent several years only playing jigs (6/8), and then suddenly the reels (4/4) fell into place.

A bit about the bones scene here in

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(*Bones in Israel continued from page 3*)

Israel – as far as I know, I am the only member of the Rhythm Bones Society in Israel, but I am not the only player. Uri Myles, an extremely versatile musician, who among other things plays flutes, accordion, Uilleann and Scottish bagpipes, tin whistles and bodhran with his band, *The Celtic Camel Project*, was the first bones player I have ever encountered here and I knew of no others at the time. I believe I became the second player, and Doron Raz who plays with an Irish band called the *Five Shamrocks*, took up the bones after receiving some instruction from me and became the third. The fourth player here – if that is indeed the total tally of all of us – is Abe Doron, the former percussion player of *Riverdance*, who settled in Jerusalem two years ago, and who is I am sure, by far the finest player of all of us. Abe plays percussion with a band called *Evergreen*.

I play, compose and perform Irish music with my band which is called *Irish Cream*. My main instrument in the band is the Irish bouzouki, but I haul out a pair of bones for a tune or two. We perform all over the country and, when things were more peaceful here, appeared in East Jerusalem where I brought bones across the border into the Palestinian Authority, which was, I'm willing to bet, their first appearance there.

Israelis are fascinated by bones, usually come up after the show, ask to pick them up and want to give them a try. I love the bones much more than metal or wooden spoons. I own several pairs – a couple of real bone ones that I bought from vendors in Ireland, a pair of hewn white bones and a pair of black ebony ones. I usually play jigs with bones in both hands, but reels I only tackle with one hand – I still find them much more complex.

I deeply regret not being able to attend the Bones Fest since I am sure I would learn a great deal. Unfortunately distance and expense prevent me from doing so. If the Fest, or one like it, is ever held in Ireland or anywhere closer, I would definitely make the effort to be there.

And if any of you are ever in this part of the world – well, please drop in, and bring your bones with you! All the best, (Ms) Bracha Ben-

Bones Movement at Mass. Elementary School Principal is Bones-Friendly

BROCKTON, MA- This reporter has witnessed something astounding at Louis F. Angelo Elementary School. Students from Grades 1 through 6 at this public school are learning to play bones, and buying them, and one can hear clacking and rattling on the bus lines and in the hallways.

This reporter must confess to a bit of responsibility for this phenomenon, it being the third consecutive year that he has given concerts and spent class time at Angelo, where his long-time acquaintance Ms Cook is the Music Specialist (the archaic term is Music Teacher). The concerts involve demonstrations of various traditional instruments: autoharp, banjo, bones, dulcimer, jaw harp, hammered dulcimer, mandolin, pennywhistle, and the like. Invariably the curiosity prize goes to the bones or the jaw harp, depending on the spectator's age-- but even among jaw harp enthusiasts, bones interest is stratospheric. So it was decided to make a set of Kidbones for use in the classroom. These are smaller than conventional bones to better fit children's hands. With a bag of these bones Ms Cook was able, after learning the rudiments herself, to teach bones technique in her friend's absence. Soon orders were being placed for personal pairs of these percussive pieces of pine and what not (some do have knots, actually). This reporter's stock was soon exhausted. Fortunately he can always make more.

Then this year interest in bones, like interest in curling, mushroomed, but for reasons other than media exposure. Ms Cook has come up with a more efficient teaching method and the success rate, even among children previously deemed developmentally too young, skyrocketed. Even among first-graders there were several triplet-rollers and down-snappers at the end of a mere 10 minute session. Another

factor in the decreased learning time is the enlistment of student helpers (older kids who are already masters) which increases the one-on-one time for each student.

Due to this increased achievement ratio, more sales occurred and by the time this reporter arrived for the yearly week of shows and classes, backorders had piled up. By mid-March these were filled and there are now over thirty bones players scuffing the linoleum at Angelo. Especially impressive is Kyle Vossos playing two-handed and enjoying a sense of power from playing very loud indeed. He is the ringleader of a group of sixth-graders who form spontaneous circles and hammer out the Bo Diddley beat (now known as the I Love Candy beat), and so well along that this composer as-well-as-reporter/bones maker/player included a bones part in an arrangement of the sea chanty *Rye-O Grand* to be performed this spring by the Angelo choir, accompanied by violin, tenor sax and two euphoniums acting as foghorns. Kyle will play the bones part, to the envy of Robert Gorman, who is stuck playing foghorn. This movement would not be possible without the support, or at least tolerance, of Principal McLaughlin who was presented with an Honorary Bones Pair as a gesture of thanks for her not banning bones playing on school grounds.

Bones turn out to have impressive qualities in the school environment: with proper teaching they are a fast way to get children personally involved in music; they teach muscle coordination; they enhance rhythmic ability; they foster self-confidence; they encourage children to play music together. These qualities and others will be included in an upcoming Masters dissertation in the field of Music Education. Who knows, someday bones may be an integral part of the music curriculum in your local school. If it still exists by then.

For information on the Cook-Klein bones teaching method, contact Adam Klein at aldaron@compuserve.com. (Ms Cook, being a school teacher, simply doesn't have time right now.)

Adam Klein

(*Brother Bones* continued from page 1)

barber shops. Freeman's stand was at Tenth Street and Atlantic Avenue.

As Ernie says, "When he shined shoes he would whistle and pop the shoeshine rag to some tune. He could whistle real loud and people driving by would stop and listen and the police would come along and get them moving again. He would whistle the old songs, like *Amazing Grace*." Ernie, whose stand was a block away said, "You could feel the music like it was an instrument playing." People called him *Whistling Sam*.

As Freeman told the Press Telegram newspaper in an October 1972 story, "I had the stand about four years. All the Poly and Wilson High kids would come there. Some customers came in as late as midnight to get their shoes shined on their way to Sebastian's Cotton Club in Culver City to hear Louis Armstrong.

"Coming to that stand was just like going to a vaudeville show. We had a victrola playing records and the shoe shine guys would snap their rags or pop their brushes or tap dance to the tunes.

"If one of the customers asked for a record and we didn't have it, one of the guys would drive downtown and get it and bring it back. One of my customers was the Police Chief."

Ernie tells this story. He and several others were driving to Los Angeles one night and it was almost always rough fog on the way. They were going real slow trying to find the white line down the middle of the road when this car passed them. Somebody said "who was that" and then someone else said "didn't you hear the whistle - it's *Whistling Sam*."

He would play his bones too, though many times it was kitchen knives. Freeman could click them together and whistle along at the same time. He perfected a style using four bones in each hand whereas most bones players used two bones in each hand.

This is how Freeman describes his bones in the Press Telegram article, "They are made of different material—I have some of ivory, rosewood and ebony. They are

curved pieces of wood, about eight inches long, an inch wide and three-sixteenths of an inch thick. Two to four are held between the fingers of each hand and they are clacked together—where they curve against each other—to make rhythm."

Again as the Press Tribune article tells it, it all started for Freeman when he was a youngster in Montgomery, Alabama. "My mother used to whistle all the time...she was just a happy person. I'd hear her and I'd also be listening to the mocking birds. Then I began to want to see if I could be as versatile as the mocking birds, and as entertaining. I didn't have anything in mind for the future. I just wanted to satisfy my curiosity.

"Then, just to see how many different ways I could whistle, I began to learn to whistle double and triple, and exhale and inhale the same note. It certainly wasn't done overnight.

"I'd been using bones all along, just two little straight pieces of wood. About that time, when I was 13 or 16, the stores used to sell them. I once even went to a slaughterhouse in Alabama, picked out some cow ribs, cut them to the length I wanted and played with them.

"But it wasn't until about 1918, back in Dallas, Texas, in Ella Moore's Theater, that I saw a professional bones player. I was so enthused I talked to the performer, told him how interested I was, and he gave me a set. I've been using bones all along since then."

His first professional job whistling or playing the bones was on *The Schoolkids* Program. That was back in 1929 on KFOX and he was known as Whistling Sam. In 1932 he played on the KGER *Mammy Ginny* show. In 1940 he was the doorman at the famous old Virginia Hotel and made music for free after hours.

According to Tempo Records, Freeman was discovered by their president while he was playing in a Chinese restaurant in downtown Los Angeles. Tempo Records first approached another bones player, Ted Goon known as Mr. Goon-Bones, but Ted had a conflict at the time. Before Ted got his conflict

resolved, Tempo discovered Freeman and his first record hit the airwaves. Ted, an Honorary member of the Rhythm Bones Society, lives in California a few miles from where Freeman lived and he can still play the bones. Unfortunately, Tempo Records treated Freeman badly and he and his family did not profit much from his recordings.

Freeman's musical career is noteworthy. He recorded a dozen or more songs and was in at least three movies; *Riding High* with Bing Crosby (see photograph), *Pot of Gold* with James Stewart and *Yes Sir, Mr. Bones*, a 1951 minstrel movie. He performed in New York's Carnegie Hall, with Ed Sullivan on television, and on stage with such musicians as Woody Herman, Teddy Buckner, Jimmy Lunsford and Russ Morgan. In Long Beach, he performed several times with the famous Municipal Band and donated time to hospitals, churches and the armed services.

The song, *Sweet Georgia Brown*, has been recorded by many people including Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong, The Beatles, Ella Fitzgerald, Mel Torme and others, but none have been as successful as the one by Brother Bones. This is due primarily to it being adopted in 1952 as the theme song for the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. The song is played during their pre-game warm-ups and several times during the game. A hundred million or more in America and around the world have heard it during their games and who knows how many people have heard it in their radio and television advertisements. It is probably in the top ten most listened to recordings in history. So important to the Harlem Globetrotters is *Sweet Georgia Brown* that it is their aural trademark like MGM's lion's roar. Later in his career, Freeman toured with the Globetrotters and performed during their games.

Joe Birl, who patented and manufactured black plastic bones, tells this story. Freeman was coming east to appear on the Ed Sullivan show for the third time and hit major cities to plug his records. Joe happened by the Paramount Record Shop in Philadelphia

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(*Brother Bones continued from page 5*) and saw a crowd. He went in only to discover Brother Bones was there. Joe got Freeman to try his bones and a photographer captured the event (see photograph). Freeman gave Joe an autograph, "To a real guy, Brother Bones, 4/5/49 (Freeman Davis)." Joe saved this and other Brother Bones memorabilia as well as most of Freeman's records.

The Rhythm Bones Society is a

new group formed to educate people about this unique musical instrument and help preserve rhythm bones for the next generation. Rhythm bones are one of the oldest of all musical instruments and were popular in such diverse places as China, Egypt, Rome and England. In America rhythm bones were used in minstrel shows and became extremely popular.

The Rhythm Bones Society hosts an annual Bones Fest and publishes a quarterly newsletter. This year's Fest

will be in Greensboro, NC, August 2, 3 & 4, 2002, hosted by Everett Cowett, Executive Director, who held the first Bones Fest which eventually led to forming the society. To learn more about the society and bones playing today, look up *rhythmbones.com* on the internet or call Ev at (336) 294-5332.

Material for this article was provided by the Long Beach Public Library, the Archivist for the Long Beach Independent/Press Telegram newspaper, The Harlem Globetrotters and Rhythm



Freeman Davis giving Bing Crosby some pointers during filming of the movie *Riding High*. Note three kitchen knives in his right hand and two in his left hand. Photograph courtesy of Joe Birl.



Freeman Davis and Rhythm Bones Society Member Joe Birl in a Philadelphia record store on April 5, 1949. Freeman has four of Joe's patented plastic bones in each hand. Photograph courtesy of Joe Birl.

Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

Address Correction Requested