



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 1 2004

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## Executive Director's Column

Keep on clicking or perhaps get your old bones out again. Bones Fest VIII (BFVIII) is in the formative stage and Lake Anne Plaza in Reston, VA is waiting for us. See lakeanneplaza.com. Also plan a visit to our Nation's Capital while you are in the area.

We were introduced to many new (to us) but experienced bones players during the past year. I am looking forward to going to the DC area for Bones Fest VIII because there will be many new faces, but I will not overlook old friends with new 'licks.' Great examples of this over the years include Steve Wixson, Chattanooga TN; Mel Mercier, Cork Ireland; Bill Vits, Grand Rapids MI; Walt Watkins, Arlington TX; Spike Bones Missouri/Illinois and others too numerous to mention. I hope that each of you in

your own way will become a 'new you' as a bones player this year. I have taken mine out of the box, got a new can of rosin and plan to start the process. You can do it too with a little push and some practice.

For those of you who may have forgotten to renew your 2003-2004 membership, it is not too late. Since our fiscal year runs from October through October of the next year and you don't recall whether or not you have already renewed, just send a \$25 check payable to RBS to Steve Wixson and he will handle it. If you have already paid the renewal fee your check will be returned.

Have a great year and visit with my family and me in Reston, VA in 2004. May your bones be with you. *Ev Cowett*

## Frank Brower, First Minstrel Bones Player

Frank Brower was a circus performer for most of his career, but he is better known to us as the first minstrel rhythm bones player. There is not much written about Brower and even less about his bones playing. This article is the only article titled with his name other than his obituaries though there are likely stories I could not find buried in the newspapers and magazines of his time. This article contains large sections of material from three articles along with other material that is woven into a story. Some of it is quoted verbatim from the sources with minimal editing. The first is from a hand written manuscript by John A. Dingess.

"We present the name of Francis Marion Brower, better known as Frank Brower, who first saw the light in Baltimore, MD, November 30th, 1823, and made his first appearance on the stage, singing and dancing, at Richard Myers' Museum at the corner of 3rd and Chestnut streets, Philadelphia, PA, about 1838. Frank Brower's first engagement with an equestrian company was with Rogers, Shay and Meteer's Cincinnati Circus, which started from that city in the Spring of 1840. In this connection I must here introduce another

(Continued on page 6)



Frank Brower, courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia. From their Theatre Collection.

## Editorial

This issue has an historical article on the first minstrel bones player, Frank Brower. Founding member, Deborah Brower, thinks Frank is a distant relative of her husband.

Today, to many, Brower is politically incorrect, but in his day he was a respected performer. Mt. Vernon, Ohio, honors its hometown son, Dan Emmett, who with Brower founded the Virginia Minstrels. We, too, need to find a way to honor Francis Marion Brower.

A parallel article briefly tells the story of a few other early minstrel bones players.

Member Yirdy Machar traveled to Scotland and met an old minstrel bones player.

Member John Hill tells the story of his winning the Australia World Bones Championship. It turns out that his father was a minstrel bones performer.

Thanks to Bill Vits for his Tips and Techniques column on the quadruplet roll he performed at Bones Fest VII.

Congratulations to Board member Mel Mercier on being honored by his University College Cork in Ireland.

The last of the known bones instructional videos is reviewed in this issue. The next issue will have an article that compares all of the reviewed videos. There is a lot of good instructional material out there.

## Letters to the Editor

We've confirmed the use of Lake Anne Plaza in Reston, VA. (20 minutes from Dulles Airport) for Bones Fest VIII to be held August 20-22, 2004. Plan to attend from Friday afternoon through Sunday afternoon. See insert for preliminary details. *Sally and Terry Carroll.*

Thanks for the copies of the newsletter with Tim Reilly's article on Bones at Sea. I met him (and actually did some filming with him, as I now recall) at Mystic Seaport quite some time ago. It's really quite a thorough treatment of the subject, though as he says, there is probably much more to be uncovered in other archives. I,

myself, did a paper for Mystic on music at sea - specifically music in the short-lived Confederate Navy, which was surprisingly abundant. No references to bones per se, but several to ad hoc minstrel bands which must have included them.

I also attached the autobiographical piece I send out with the rib bones I make for Lark In The Morning. I never found wooden bones of particular interest, though I've been playing rib bones for over two decades. Even solid ivory doesn't thrill me, even the ones in the Smithsonian once owned by a famous minstrel player from the 19th century the curator once let me play. I actually made a set of ironwood (*lignum vitae*) bones back in the late '80s which were laminated in such a way that the matching insides of the laminates were hollowed out to give the final product the deep sound of rib bones. Sounded quite nice, but still not as rich as the real thing.

Another unusual set of 'bones' I once picked up on the beach in Washington State, near La Push. Some of the black, flat, sea-rounded stones there are seriously thin and oblong, 5-6" and put out an astonishingly loud sound. Unfortunately, overenthusiastic playing results in them suddenly spontaneously smashing to pieces.

Cheers,  
*John Townley (DrJack811@aol.com)*

Kay and John, How can I ever thank you for all your help with the bones. Music Camp is in full gear and they are all having a ball. The older kids are learning about and how to play the bones. For bones they used yard sticks cut into 6 inch pieces. Ev Cowett is teaching the older kids at camp to play them. Our grandson, Joey (12 yrs) has learned to play them pretty well. He can do both hands and has learned how to make them snap and roll.

Ev Cowett is called Dr. E. at camp. Besides the bones, they are learning about the psaltery, the tumbrel, the shofar and the pipe--all ancient instruments. Every year they have a different format for the camp and teach different instruments. *Marty Mitchell*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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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](http://rhythmbones.com)

Marty is Kay's cousin and attended the Saturday night of Bones Fest VI in Greensboro. He asked us to help with Music Camp and since we were too

## Bones Calendar

Webmaster Jonathan Danforth keeps an up-to-date calendar at [rhythmbones.com/calendar.html](http://rhythmbones.com/calendar.html). Check it out often.

**April 24.** New England Folk Festival. Steve Brown's annual bones workshop featuring several of our bones players. Contact Steve Brown at [bones@crystal-mtn.com](mailto:bones@crystal-mtn.com)

**May 3.** All Ireland Bone Playing Competition. Contact Steve Brown.

**August 20-22.** Bones Fest VIII at Lake Anne Plaza, Reston, VA hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll. See insert.

**August 30-September 5.** Old Time Country Contest & Festival. On September 4th, the 29th Annual Bones and Spoon Contest. See back of insert. Contact [www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com).

## Tips and Techniques Bill Vits Shares his Quadruplet Roll

After performing at Bones Fest VII, Steve Wixson informed me I was playing a quadruplet roll. I hadn't really thought about it, but had a bit of time to share it with my bone brothers at the Hibben's Sunday brunch. After a few months reflection, I will try and explain playing groups of four notes, 16th notes, with each hand.

I've been a percussionist for most of my life and approach the bones with many traditional drumming patterns. I first learned from Percy Danforth in 1978, but it took many years for me to develop my own style. To master rudimentary drum patterns one must control the single, double and triple taps with a drum stick. I use the same technique in my bones playing.

Try playing three quick taps in a gallop rhythm. Keep the thumb facing up and play da da da using arm motion in front of your body. This is very similar to a fast jazz ride pattern you would play with a stick on a cymbal. At slow tempos it would swing, but at fast temps it becomes three even notes.

Once this gets comfortable, you get the fourth note when you pull the arm quickly back towards the chest. You must relax so you get the fourth sympathetic note from the quick pull back. The arm spends three-fourths of its time going out from the chest and a quarter of the time coming back.

I don't feel I've mastered this lick because it's tough to control at different dynamics and tempos. When it feels right, however, it's like a perpetual motion of 16th notes. This pattern works well in bluegrass and fast sambas.

Another familiar drum pattern is the paradiddle. Try saying par-a-did-dle as you play the bones; right, left, right, right, left, right, left, left. This is a good alternating exercise. It's especially effective with two different pairs of bones. You can even add a flam, a grace note, to the beginning of each paradiddle for the advanced lesson. *Bill Vits* Percussionist, Grand

## Yirdy Machar Finds a Minstrel Bones Player

I recently visited Scotland to meet a fabulous character called Fergie MacDonald. He owns a hotel on the most westerly peninsula on the mainland of Scotland. He is a button-accordion player, probably the best known in Scotland, having recorded 23 albums of Scottish dance music. ([www.fergiemacdonald.co.uk](http://www.fergiemacdonald.co.uk)).

While visiting him a coach-load of English tourists arrived for afternoon tea. Fergie asked me to play bones along with him to entertain his guests. When we finished playing, and the coach-party was leaving, a sweet old man came up to me and thanked me for 'making' his holiday. He told me that he used to play the bones 60 years ago in a Minstrel Band from Worthing, Sussex, in the south of England, and had not played since. He is now 90 years old and lives in Chester in Northwest England.

I was curious to know if he could still play and handed him a pair of bones. Although he said he could not play anymore, he immediately started to play with one pair in a style where he rolled both hands around one another. To me it was obvious that he played two-handed so I gave him a pair for his empty hand and he amazed me with his double-handed style as if he had been playing all his life. I wish I had a video camera with me; it really was great. I did manage to get a photograph. His name is George Southey.

I have had some wonderful playing experiences recently with the Dubliners, from Ireland, Ally Bain the great fiddle player from the Shetland Islands, and Phil Cunningham, accordion virtuoso from Scotland. It really has been a busy year and I am still trying to get my web-sites up and running. Hopefully, in about two months I should have the main bones one finished (macbones?)

I have a guitar and mandolin maker, Victor Smith, Flatbush Stringed Instruments, also from the Shetlands, making some bones for me in different types of wood. The first batch should be ready for me next week as I am



George Southey in a Pub in Scotland. Note the bones which are played curved sides facing the same and not opposed as most of us play.

doing a bones workshop at a Festival in Norway, *The Sailors Wake*, at a place called Farsund ([www.nordsjofestivalen.no](http://www.nordsjofestivalen.no).) He also made me a terrific pair of spoons from Brazilian Rosewood which I have just used in recording a CD. I hope all is well with you and yours and will maybe see you next year, at the Bones

## Website of the Quarter

[www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/wrapping/](http://www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/wrapping/)  
and [www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/gallery/](http://www.tohu-bohu.com/bones/gallery/)

I'm Jeff Lefferts and here's a story about my leather-wrapped bones. The leather quiets the bones down quite a bit, but it also gives them a fuller, richer sound...more of a 'clop' than a 'click.' It sounds great with slower, darker songs (I play everything from old-time to Eastern European to Klezmer to Persian to Irish to waltzes on the bones). When played quietly, you mostly get the more subdued sound of leather-on-leather. But when you play them more sharply, the wood beneath begins to resonate, and you get a bit of "crack" to the sound.

You can hear each set of bones being played by clicking on the picture. The leather is held on by friction only (no glue or anything). If you have trouble finding suitable leather, I can send you some from around here. Look at a fabric store, near where they sell twine, elastic, and the like. *Jeff Lefferts*, 188 N. Sunnyvale Ave, Sunnyvale, CA

## Review of Chris Caswell's Bodhran and Bones Video

This 50-minute instructional video covers bodhran (38 minutes), bones (4 1/2 minutes), spoons (3 1/2 minutes) and the Scottish Highland drum (4 minutes). The video begins with a bodhran and tin whistle duet with Phineas Og Mac Boilermaker.

In the bodhran section, Chris starts with the basic rhythms, those divisible by 2 and those by 3. He describes the use of box bottoms and attaché cases as beginning drums for students.

He describes how to use the hand (Chris is left-handed) and the stick to strike the drum surface and then how to hold the drum. He demonstrates the two basic rhythms with variations and how to perform up-accented for jigs. He demonstrates the difference in center and edge strikes and how to use the hand inside the bodhran for dampening and tuning

After another demonstration, he adds rim strikes and double sticking. He talks about how to play to a melody and demonstrates polkas and strathspey rhythms. He also talks about when to play and when not to play; he believes in the 'less is more' philosophy. He concludes this section with another bodhran and tin whistle duet.

In the bones section, Chris begins by noting that the bodhran rhythms apply to the bones and that the bones naturally produce the equivalent of double sticking. He shows how to hold the bones with the stationary bone between the thumb and first finger and the moving bone between the first and second fingers (he plays one-handed.) He demonstrates taps, double taps and triplets and how to change tone by varying how you hold the bones. He demonstrates several different types of bones and for what kind of music each is best suited. He demonstrates playing slow triplets needed for jigs. He concludes with playing three and then four bones in his hand.

The video is available from Lark in the Morning, [www.larkinam.com](http://www.larkinam.com).  
Steve Wixson

## Brief Summary of Early Minstrel Bones Players

Many of the early minstrel bones players were documented by Edward Rice in his book *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date*. Here are some quotes.

"George Christy was with Christy's Minstrels in New York from February 15, 1847, until October 29, 1853, during which period he played every conceivable part, and he was a great endman and as a bones player ranked with the very best.

"William B. Donaldson was the inventor of the jawbone used as a musical instrument by black-face performers several years before the first minstrel performance was given.

"Bob Edwards (Dean) was one of the earliest bones players, and in his youth was known as "Master" Edwards. In 1841-42 he was a member of the famous Ethiopian Serenaders. Subsequently he withdrew from that company, and joined Sanford's Minstrels in Philadelphia, where he remained for a long time.

"George Winship was one of the pioneers of minstrelsy. As early as 1849 he occupied the bone end with the New York Serenaders, a famous minstrel company of that day.

"E. Freeman Dixey was one of minstrelsy's greatest bones players, and was a household word in Philadelphia, where he spent practically his whole professional career and the major portion of his life.

"His first engagement was in Boston, at the age of eighteen; subsequently he went to Philadelphia, and opened there at Cartee's Lyceum, the present site of the 11th Street Opera House, with the Julien Serenaders, December 4, 1854.

"On April 23, 1855, the house was opened as Sanford's Opera House, by Sam Sanford, and Mr. Dixey was a member of the company, and continued with Sanford. He was born in Marblehead, MA, July 29, 1833; he died in Philadelphia, March 2, 1904."

## Recorded Bones Music

**Mr. Bones** by Sandor Slomovits. This CD is a compilation of twelve tunes he has recorded over the years, with his brother Laszlo, as the duo, Gemini. The brothers have played music for children and families for the past three decades and Sandor has been playing the bones almost that long. He met Percy Danforth in 1976 and learned to play the bones from him. Sandor lives in Ann Arbor, MI and the two struck up a deep friendship over the years. Percy and Sandor played in concerts together many times until Percy's death in 1992. Percy used to call him "my prime protégé." At Bones Fest VII, Jonathan Danforth, Percy's grandson, told Sandor, "You look just like my grandfather when you play the bones."

The CD includes a wide range of music; an Appalachian style fiddle tune, *Fid Ban Bone*, written by Sandor's brother for fiddle, banjo and bones, traditional songs like *Mary Mack* and *Dry Bones* (perfectly suited to the bones,) a traditional African game song, a wacky bluegrass version of the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* and a unique version of *I Got Rhythm*, for piano, pennywhistle, voice and bones. (Some may remember Sandor's a cappella version at Bones Fest VII.) The title song is a tribute Sandor's brother wrote for Percy Danforth on the occasion of Percy's 80th birthday and tells the story of how Percy learned the bones in Washington, DC around the turn of the 20th century. That cut is a live recording (though most of the rest of the CD was done in the studio) and you can really hear the audience's excitement and enthusiasm for Sandor's bones solo. There is even a tune for bones, *I can Feel It In My Bones*, accompanied by a full symphony orchestra!

To order copies of the CD, send a check for \$18 to Sandor Slomovits, 2021 Penncraft Ct, Ann Arbor, MI 48103. Sandor also works with Ray Schairer, the man who has been making all the Danforth bones since 1976. You can order bones from Sandor in a variety of woods, most of them for \$10. Email [Slomovits@hotmail.com](mailto:Slomovits@hotmail.com) or call 734-

## John Hill Tells His World Bones Championship Story

Being retired, I was planning to drive up north one cold winter to visit some lifelong friends. Consequently, I entered into this event as a bit of fun.

It was the first one of its type that the 'Variety Club of Queensland' had tried. The Club is involved throughout Australia, running all types of events, including car rallies, to raise funds for underprivileged children.

I arrived in time to enter into the fifth heat and was asked to return for the semi-final and for the Grand Final; these were about a fortnight apart.

The 'World Title' as far as I know is not connected to any other competition, but probably used to attract attention. A chap by the name of Tommy Champion was the organizer and very easy to get along with. I have tried but have not been able to contact him to see if he intends to run one this year.

The heats were attended by approximately 200 to 300 people and the Grand Final by maybe 500 odd.

It was truly a variety show held on Sunday afternoons. Variety was in the form of harmonica, spoons, birdcallers, yodeller, comb & tissue paper, penny whistle, kazoo, Jewsharp, tea-chest whistler (bass), musical saw, gum leaf player, lagerphone, and of course, bones players. All of this was interspersed with professional singers and performers from the 'Gold Coast' (a holiday retirees' playground near Brisbane in Queensland.)

The Grand Final was a great event that had the right atmosphere right from the start, helped along by the compere and comedian Ken Bennett. Having such a variety of entrants, it was necessary to divide it into sections as you couldn't compare a 'birdcaller' to a bones player.

There were three bones players in the Grand Final. One was a very good two-handed player and the other, Lem Bann, was single-handed.

The backing music was optional—either live or in most cases we used a track from a CD – one number only.



John 'Hillbilly Bones' Hill playing his whale or Ivory Bones. From 'The Border Watch,' a newspaper of Mt Gambier, South Australia. Used with permission.

It took a while to hand out the various trophies to the place getters and toward the end I was overwhelmed to receive the 'Bones Championship.' As well as this; they had a trophy for 'Most Outstanding Artist' that really topped my day off. It was my first competition that I've been in and was thrilled to feel the lift in my personal profile both in Queensland and when arriving home.

They call me 'Hillbilly Bones' and this tradition was handed down by my dad. When I was a little tucker he was in Blackface Minstrel Shows--banjo, bones, mandolin, top hats and bow ties. At the age of ten when I picked them up, I just rattled them. Then I got a job and the music unfortunately just floated away. In recent years I picked the instruments back up and still use the bones that I got from my father.

I am very proud, underneath it all, to be continuing in my father's footsteps on bones playing. I play what I think are whale bones (but they could be ivory) along with two bullock bones that replaced two of the bones that I lost years ago.

I am so pleased to find the Rhythm Bones Society and to be a member of our unique group. *John Hill* (Note: check out these websites: John at [www.abc.net.au/southeastsa/stories/s942940.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/southeastsa/stories/s942940.htm) and Lem Bann at [www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s916160.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s916160.htm). John lives in Mt Gambier, South Australia, half-way between Adelaide and Melbourne. He

## Mel Mercier Honored

Mel Mercier, Lecturer in Music at UCC, was on Friday 5 December 2003 presented with the 2003 UCC Alumni Achievement Award as the nominee of the faculties of Arts and Celtic Studies, in recognition of his achievements in the fields of composition and performance. "I am proud to be associated with the tradition of excellence for which UCC is renowned," he said.

The annual UCC Alumni Achievement Awards honour graduates who have obtained extraordinary distinction and success in their chosen fields and whose achievements have brought recognition to UCC. This year there were seven awards, representing the various faculties in UCC. Presenting the awards, the president of UCC, Professor Gerard Wrixon, said "It gives me great pleasure to present an Alumni Achievement Award to these graduates whose outstanding accomplishments have brought great honour to their *alma mater*."

Originally from Dublin, Mel comes from a family steeped in traditional music; his father, Peadar Mercier, a member of the Chieftains until 1976, was one of his teachers. Mel graduated from UCC in 1989 with a degree in music and was subsequently awarded a Masters in Fine Arts by the Californian Institute of the Arts in 1991. He has achieved outstanding success, in both national and international arenas, as a composer and performer of bodhrán and bones. Mel has performed with renowned Irish ensembles including De Danann, Stockton's Wing and Altan and has collaborated and toured extensively with Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin. He has composed and performed for theatre and contemporary dance productions at theatres in Dublin, London, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Broadway and Paris.

Mel was recently nominated for one of American theatre's most prestigious awards, the Drama Desk Award, for the sound design for *Medea*, a production directed by Deborah Warner and starring another UCC graduate, Fiona Shaw. Fittingly, he

(Frank Brower—Continued from page 1)

performer, in the person of Daniel Decatur Emmett, the author and artist, who was a member of the band, and while the company was traveling in Western Virginia, found a banjo player by the name of Ferguson. Emmett wanted to engage him, but the management objected to an increase in expenses, though, they were finally induced to do so, and when the company reached Lexington, KY, in the fall during the races, Ferguson was the greatest card in the show and Brower and Ferguson were the talk of the town. In the meantime Dan Emmett had learned to play the banjo and at the end of the traveling season Ferguson went south where he died of cholera.

“The following spring Dan Emmett, after considerable persuasion, agreed to play in the orchestra and assist Brower in the ring with the banjo. This was the beginning of that popularity which continued so many years and made Frank Brower and Dan Emmett famous. At Lynchburg, VA, during the Fourth of July week, 1841, Frank Brower first introduced ‘bones playing’ before an audience, accompanying Emmett in the new song of ‘Old Tar River.’ [Bob Carlin says the bit about his first playing the bones in Lynchburg is incorrect. He has broadsides describing his bones playing at the beginning of the 1841 season in the spring.] Therefore, I presume no person will dispute the right to the title of ‘The Original [Minstrel] Bones Player’ to Francis Marion Brower.

“For many years Mr. Brower confined his professional career to circuses, and, as a clown, was one of the most popular that ever donned the motley. He was a versatile performer and possessed undoubted dramatic genius. His Gumbo Cuff, in ‘Oh Hush!’, and his act of ‘Happy Uncle Tom’ were as artistic pieces of acting as were ever witnessed on any stage, and in all his impersonations his personal identity was thoroughly concealed. He possessed a fund of dry humor, free from any taint of vulgarity, which greatly amused his auditors.

“Mr. Brower married the celebrated

equestrienne Madam Louisa Howard, formerly Louisa Banks, who was one of the most graceful and daring female riders of her day. She was an immense favorite in New York and Philadelphia and appeared with all the leading circuses throughout the country.

“In private life Frank Brower was a genial companion, engaging in his manners, and his conversation bristled with instinctive intellect. He possessed a large store of anecdotes which he retailed in his inimitable manner. He died at his residence in Philadelphia, June 4, 1874.” *John A. Dingess, 1829-1901, Manuscript, p. 99-100, Harry Hertzberg Collection.*

The story of how the first minstrel group was formed has been told in almost every article written about minstrelsy. It seems appropriate in an article about Brower to include something from his perspective and the following is from his obituary as it appeared in the *New York Clipper*, June 13, 1874.

“[Frank Brower] came to New York and performed his Negro specialties at the Franklin Theatre and the Bowery Amphitheatre. While performing at the latter place, in December, 1842, the first idea of a minstrel company was put in motion by the following persons: Dan Emmett, Frank Brower, Billy Whitlock and Dick Pelham, who all went through a thorough course of rehearsals at the boarding house of Emmett, No. 37 Catherine Street, kept by one Mrs. Brooks. They were all diligent and it did not take long to acquire the scanty versatility necessary in those days for a Negro minstrel to delight his patrons.

“The idea was original; but censure might be deserved by crediting the origin of it to any one of the number, and therefore the honor may be distributed among the party.

“The object of their organization was simply to make up a combination of Negro performances for one night only, for the benefit of Dick Pelham, who was then dancing between the pieces at the Chatham Theatre. Their rehearsals were sufficiently encouraged to satisfy the party that they had indeed found a novelty. They styled themselves the Virginia Minstrels and made their debut at the

## Bones Fest VIII

August 20-22, 2004

Lake Anne Plaza

Reston, VA

(20 minutes from Dulles Airport)

*Hosted by  
Sally and Terry Carroll*

See insert for  
preliminary details

Chatham Theatre for Dick Pelham’s benefit, early in February, 1843, and were received with deafening plaudits.

“During the same week they performed one night for the benefit of John Tryon, then manager of the Bowery Amphitheatre. Their performances met with such astounding success that they were at once engaged by Welch & Rockwell, then managers of the Park Theatre, where they performed for two weeks in conjunction with John Diamond, a celebrated dancer.

“After this they went to Boston, Mass., where they played six weeks with wonderful success.

“They then returned to this city (NY) and performed three nights for Manager Simpson at the Park Theatre.

“Having fairly introduced their novelty, and expecting every day to meet with opposition, they determined upon a trip to England, where rivalry was out of the question, for a time at least. With George B. Wooldridge at their head, they sailed for Europe and, on arriving at Liverpool, gave two concerts there, and went thence to the Adelphi Theatre, London, where they played six weeks in conjunction with (the late) Professor Anderson, the ‘Wizard of the North.’

“After this engagement, owing to some misunderstanding, Richard Pelham left the company, and the rest reorganized in connection with Joe Sweeney, who had then just arrived in that country; and they then traveled through Ireland and Scotland for six

(Continued on page 7)

(Frank Brower—Continued from page 6)

months, meeting with success. The company then disbanded. Such is the history of Negro minstrelsy.”

Hans Nathan’s book, which, by the way, has more to say about Frank Brower than any source that I found, offers another version of the story

“The story is told by Whitlock himself: “One day I asked Old Dan Emmett, who was in New York at the time, to practice the fiddle and banjo with me at his boarding house on Catherine Street. We went down there, and when we had practiced two or three tunes, Frank Brower called in (by accident). He listened to our music, charmed to the soul. I told him to join us with the bones, which he did. Presently Dick Pelham came in (also by accident), and looked amazed. I asked him to procure a tambourine and make one of the party, and he went and got one. After practicing for a while, we went to the old resort of the circus crowd - the ‘Branch,’ in the Bowery - with our instruments, and in Bartlett’s Billiard-room performed for the first time as the Virginia Minstrels.”

While versions of the story have differing details, they agree that something happened that was not expected. At one time or another, all of the original ‘big four’ took credit for organizing this first minstrel troupe. One article and two obituaries for Brower claimed he was the organizer. He was eight years older and appears to have been the senior partner when he and Dan Emmett played bones and banjo duets together in the circus. Dan Emmett outlived all of the others and gets the most credit. Emmett also wrote several songs, including the well known Dixie, that made him famous.

The Virginia Minstrels, as the new blackface troupe was called, honed their act in a number of New York performances before premiering their first full-scale “Ethiopian Concert” at the Masonic Temple in Boston on March 7, 1843.

Almost from the start, the Virginia Minstrels were a smash hit -- but their run would be short lived. After performing to capacity crowds on Broadway, they toured England in the

spring of 1843. There, the reception was mixed, although London crowds showed some enthusiasm. By the end of July, the Virginia Minstrels had disbanded. The group reorganized for a short time with Joe Sweeney playing the banjo.

Brower broke his leg and had to retire from performing. He owned a saloon in Philadelphia until his death.

As a bones player, I wanted to know something about his bones playing and thanks to Bob Carlin, here is an article from the *Liverpool Mail*, May 27, 1843.

“But what shall [we] say of the castanet player? It is almost in vain to describe the manner in which Mr. Brower makes this [supply *sic*] the place of every other instrument necessary to complete a full band. Every limb, muscle, feature, and nerve is brought into operation while he is performing—sitting, lolling, standing, throwing out the arms, legs, head, and tongue, alternately, drawing up the extremities, tossing the arms about in every direction, at one time giving his neighbor's head a rapid succession of imaginary fatal [lumps/bumps], now commencing a serious attack upon his own breast, with an apparent view of quickening the flow of blood through the arteries, at another time measuring himself, with extraordinary determination and celerity, for a coat of unknown magnitude, and repeating similar movements over the head, under the legs, behind his back, and below the soles of his feet. While indulging in these fierce performances, the castanets, or rather a couple of rib bones, inserted between the fingers, sustain a continuous rattle in correct time with the melody.” To me that sounds a little like Spike Bones (Darryl Muhrer) dancing and playing bones at Bones Fest VII; though to be fair to Brower dancing was a major part of his act.

Nathan says, “When Brower ‘trucked’ around a bit, the clicks of his bones would mingle with the heavy thud of his boots. He and Pelham sometimes burst into breakdowns, usually without ceasing to keep their instruments in motion.”

Brower’s bones were sawed-off horse ribs that clattered like castanets.

The length mentioned was 12 inches. Later bones players used other materials and later groups had more bones players - as many as six performing together at a time.

People performed minstrel style music before the birth of the Virginia Minstrels, yet it seems a surety that the addition of Frank Brower and his bones defined the early format for the minstrel movement and contributed to its enormous popularity.

Other authors credit their success to the following: they were great musicians, dancers and performers, they called their performance a concert, the economic times were ripe for an inexpensive venue, they were shrewd managers, and as strange as it sounds today, “[they were] entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas.” (Note that many people writing today about the minstrel movement do not mention bones playing.)

As a bones player, I maybe naturally, want to give the bones more credit since it was the new instrument in the group. It also developed into the heyday period for the bones with thousands and thousands of people around the world having a set of bones. They were inexpensive and you could buy them out of the Sears Catalog or you could make them yourself from last night’s rib roast. While most of these people probably were not good bones players, I bet all of them could make clicks.

It is clear that the Virginia Minstrels found a novelty most likely by accident. Good bones player who have played before an audience that has never before heard bones know the excited response they receive from people hearing this unique instrument for the first time. If the hula-hoop novelty can create a short term industry, maybe the bones did that for the early minstrel movement. I must note, however, that Brower and Emmett played bones and banjo duets as an earlier circus act and that did not seem to catch on. So, while it was an important part of the minstrel format, it must not have been the critical item.

(Continued on page 8)



FRANK BROWER

(Brower—Continued from page 7)

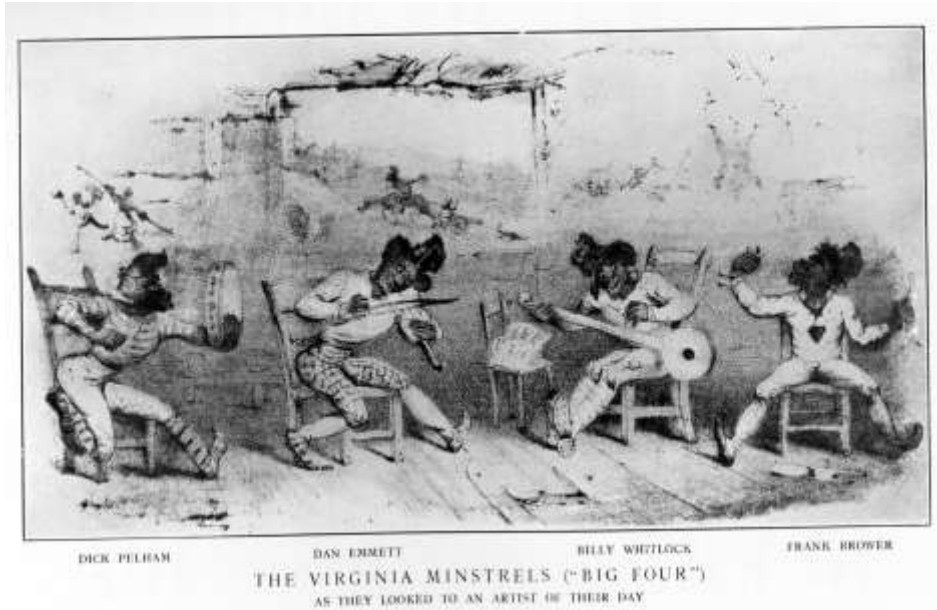
There are other interesting questions for us. What was the state of bones playing during Brower's time? Dana Epstein, in her book *Sinful Tunes*, writes that bones existed during that time in the black community. Did Brower learn to play bones from this community for his Ethiopian routines?

Member Russ Myers tells us about a visiting German who gave a bones concert in New York City in 1740. Brower which comes from Brouwer (meaning brewer) is a Dutch/German

name. Could there be a connection?

So when and how did Brower learn to play the bones? And when was the first time he actually played the bones in public? Intriguing questions and answers may lie in Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore newspapers which are not indexed and will require time-consuming searching.

I received help on this article from the Baltimore and Philadelphia libraries, Mt. Vernon Library (Emmett's home town,) Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Popular Music, Circus World Museum and Bob Carlin who has written a book about Joe Sweeney and early minstrelsy that is being



Frank Brower, on the right above. From the Minstrel Poster collection of the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro., Tennessee

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*