



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 8, No. 2 2006

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Executive Director’s Column

In the April 24th edition of the News on the Abbeyfeale On Line Web site the headlines read, “World Championships For Abbeyfeale!”. In the brief article by Raymond Fennelly he asserts that Abbeyfeale is “actively being considered” to host the “World Bone Playing Championship” in 2007. he further suggests that the “Championship” has been held in the US and “is actively considering moving the event to Europe”. Aside from the World Bones and Spoons Championship held as part of the Missouri Valley Old Time Music Festival and Contests, I know of no other contest in the US, and I’m relatively certain that Missouri Valley is not moving to Ireland. I’m guessing that the idea of a World Championship might be in

response to the recent World Bodhran Championships held in Milltown, Co. Kerry in June. Actually Dan Murphy of Abbeyfeale, one of the main forces behind the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, mentioned to me a year ago of the possibility of holding such a contest in Abbeyfeale. In any event, many of us have felt for some time that the US needs a more legitimate bone playing contest. After all a contest which includes spoons and bones equally, and fails to use people such as Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell as judges, misses the mark, in my opinion, of producing a high quality contest that reflects the true art of bone

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Bones in the United States—Part 1

Chapter 1. **Bones.** [bone castanets]

Concussion idiophones, or clapper, of indefinite pitch. Originally made from animal rib bones, they now commonly consist of flat hardwood sticks, about 15 cm. Long and slightly curved. They are played in pairs, with one pair usually held in each hand: one bones is held between the first and second fingers, pressed to the base of the thumb; the other held between the second and third fingers, is struck against the first with a rapid flicking of the wrist. The bones produce a sound similar to that of castanets, and like them may be used to produce rhythms of great complexity (from The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, *Bones*, by Robert B. Winans.)

In the 1980’s, players of the folk rhythm instrument described above are rare in the U.S. Although these players are scattered across much of the U.S., one is most likely to hear a bones player at a folk festival where old time fiddle music is heard. The majority of these players are in the sixties or older; what knowledge they have of the bones was passed down to them by players older than themselves.

As is often the case when music is part of an oral tradition, little has been written about the bones by the players themselves. The bones have also escaped the notice of music historians. Although the bones and other similar instruments have appeared in many cultures at various time, the purpose of this study is to examine how the bones were brought to the U.S. and focus on the musical context in this country of both past and present that include the bones.

Scholars have suggested two possible routes through which the bones reached the U.S. The first is through the slave trade, the second is

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Photograph of Beth Lenz

Editorial

This issue contains the first part of a thesis written by Beth Lenz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Ethnomusicology) at the University of Michigan, 1989. After a search by both Ev Cowett and myself, a copy of the thesis was purchased for the Society. Beth has recently given us permission to reprint her thesis and share it with other bones players. Over the next year or so, you will see it broken into newsletter size pieces. The thesis is full of footnotes and references, most of which will not be included in the narrative. We owe Beth a hearty thanks for this significant contribution to rhythm bones literature. The thesis is copyrighted by Beth Lenz, 1989 and is used with permission.

Are you ready to perform with your local symphony. I certainly want to. Dave Boyles was ready and you will enjoy and relate to his story about playing bones with the Milwaukee Symphony. He is planning on attending BFX. I wonder—did he use wooden bones or his 'Black Bart' real rib bones?

After reading the letter from Dick Jacobs (below), I called the telephone number he provided and discovered the bones manufacturing company had been bought out. The only person left from the original was, coincidentally, another Steve Brown. He couldn't remember the name of the manufacturer of the bones, but they were in Philadelphia. He remembered the mold for the plastic bones was in bad shape.

I immediately called Joe Birl, who having designed the mold, knew the name of the company. We talked about the possibility of making another run of bones to give to kids or perhaps get the mold for our informal library. Joe called the company and they could not find the mold. He said they are very small nowadays, and had thrown a lot of stuff away. It was a good idea though.

This issue is late and I apologize. I need help with ideas for articles or better yet articles that you write. I thank the authors who contributed to

Letters to the Editor

I sang in a Gospel Quartet (The Jacobs Brothers) from Pennsylvania for many years until 1991. From 1986 to 1991 we included at least one bones song in our program. Many people, especially kids, wanted a pair of bones. We ordered them from a music company in New Jersey by the 100's. I believe they got them from a distributor in Alabama. We sold over 3,000 pairs during that time period. I only play them occasionally now, usually when we have a Reunion Concert. I learned to play in a butcher shop on real beef bones in 1959-60.

The wholesaler that we last ordered bones from was N.H.F. Musical Merchandise Corp., 9244 Commerce Highway, Pennsauken, NJ, 08110, 800-524-0441, FAX 1-609-663-0436. These were plastic bones that came in a sealed plastic package along with directions on how to play them. Our cost in the early 1990's was about \$1.00 each. *Dick Jacobs*

Good man, that Steve Brown - I still play and treasure the bones he made for me over 20 years ago! He and I have actually spoken a few times about the RBS gatherings and were it not for issues of travel, or a gig, or some other commitment, I would definitely have attended several. Besides Steve's enthusiastic reports, a few of my "Cindy's Super School of Bones Playing & Etiquette" graduates have attended Fests and returned simply waxing rhapsodic about their experiences! So you see, Steve (the other!) I *have* been interested in the RBS, I just haven't been fortunate enough to be a participant!

One of those graduates was Tim Reilly. Riley thinks I'm the hottest player to come down the alley - an illusion which I hope he continues to hold! Although I do understand where that comes from.

Years ago, when I first met Tim he was newly-hired at Mystic, a struggling, intense, young man trying to hold his own among the seasoned chantey crew. His sincerity and humble nature appealed to me, and when I heard he had been a drummer in high school, I suggested he learn to

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 8, No. 2
Second Quarter 2006
ISSN: 1545-1380

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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

play the bones - none of the other guys did at that time - and offered to teach him what I knew.

Of course, within 2 weeks the student had far surpassed the teacher - or rather, he blew me off the planet! But Tim was shy, and wouldn't play in front of people. So at the Sea Music Festival that June, after much encouragement and co-ersion, we got him up on the stage to play a tune with us during our concert. When the music "got into him", he just let loose with the most fantastic rhythms and poly-rhythms you could ever imagine. The crowd went wild! I can still see the joy on his face - he was overwhelmed to the point of tears. He'd found his niche, and his place in the chantey pack, and he loved how he felt when he played. I think he associates me with all these good feelings; I gave him the key to the door to self-expression, that is the basis of his adoration...not my playing. Yes, I showed him the basics, but more

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playing. Well, more power to Abbeyfeale for taking on this endeavor, and I think it might also influence us as an organization to think seriously about presenting an American contest which is at least a par with the All Ireland contest. Why have a bone playing contest at all? We as an organization have embraced bone playing and each other in a non-competition, truly inclusive way which is some ways is in direct contrast to a competition. However, I think a competition would offer both opportunity for our members, and bring attention to the general public about the art of bone playing. What do the membership think about this? Lets make this a topic of discussion for

Unknown Amateur Boyles—Featured Guest Performer with the Milwaukee Symphony

The Cedarburg/Grafton Rotary sponsors the Milwaukee Symphony each December. I have been talking to the symphony for two years about playing the bones with them. My point is that the bones are a very historical musical instrument and should be represented at the highest level.

Well, I got my opportunity December 16, 2005, to play with the 85 piece Milwaukee Symphony at their concert in Cedarburg's Performing Arts Center. There was a sell-out crowd and I was nervous and pumped.

But let me tell you about the rehearsal I had to put myself through. I was not going to do this if I was not comfortable with the orchestra or they were not comfortable with me.

There was only one melody I wanted to do—*Parade of the Wooden Soldier*. I wanted a more formal song – not Dixie or bluegrass, not Irish but something more formal to bring up the level of acceptance of the bones as a “bone-e-fide” musical instrument. Besides, it was a Christmas concert. *Parade of the Wooden Soldiers* was perfect. Also it's a march which works

well with the bones as most of you know.

Back to the rehearsal. No one knew what the bones were all about . . . including the conductor Andrew Massey. The business manager introduced me to him just before the rehearsal. I was prepared with a recording of the *Parade of the Wooden Soldier*. I asked conductor Massey to listen to the march in the lobby away from the rehearsal hall. I had a boom box I brought a long. I played along with the music so he would have an idea what I wanted to do. He watched his lengthy score as he listened to me. “Well, I think it will be quite fine,” he said in his British accent with a grin on his face.

I was told to sit in this straight-backed chair in front of the orchestra while the rehearsal was going on. I sat there for an hour getting very nervous. I about walked out. The intimidation factor was very high.

Finally, Mr. Massey gave me a pretty weak introduction. “This fellow is going to do something with the bones,” he said. I asked for a couple of minutes to explain myself and the bones. He said “seven seconds” with a smile. I got two minutes.

He struck up the orchestra. *Parade of the Wooden Soldier* does not start out as a march. There is no tempo until it finally breaks into a quiet march. I played one hand lightly (left, I'm left handed.) As the music broke into a full orchestra march, I brought up the right hand to fill out the tempo with both hands. While I played, I marched in place. As I got into it, I looked for a friendly face from these very up-scale professional musicians. Finally, way in the back, I saw the kettle drum player craning his neck with a puzzled look. Then he started to grin. I began feeling better – maybe acceptance from the percussionist. The rehearsal ended. They all tapped their instruments in recognition of my performance. Mr. Massey asked my opinion. I said “I think it works.” He said, “Then we'll see you in three weeks.” As I was walking past the cello section, a very nice senior lady said quietly “Bravo! Bravo!”

I was flying! As I walked out of the rehearsal hall, I got the idea that I

should be the wooden soldier. So I went to the oldest costume shop in Milwaukee; Millers. They probably have every costume there is since 1800. Well, I told this young gal with great enthusiasm that I'm a guest feature performer with the Milwaukee Symphony, and I want to perform looking like the wooden soldier. I ended up with this great bright red, old military coat with gold trim, gold trimmed black pants and a marching hat, boots, the whole thing. I didn't tell anyone except my wife and the orchestra business manager that I was wearing the costume.

The concert hall was full. In the front row were my friends, my kids, and my mother-in-law. I was hanging it out there to be good or bad in front of everyone.

Back stage I was standing in my nice black suit that everyone thought I was performing in, when the business manager said “Aren't you going to wear your costume because you are on after this next song?” They had changed the line up but had not told me. I ran down the hall to change into my costume I had hid in the band room. The stage manager came looking for me. He said, “Why aren't you in your dressing room?” I said with excitement, “I have a dressing room?” “Sure,” he said, “let's go.” On the door “David Boyles – dressing room B” The stage manager said, “Calm down. I'll help you get ready.” Now I'm really getting hyped, besides the fact that I have to hurry.

I ran back to the stage area with enough time to think about what I was about to do. Well, it was not as bad as the rehearsal, although I was wired.

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Websites of the Quarter

Here are some websites from Steve Brown that might interest you; an old bones article in Mother Earth, motherearthnews.com/DIY/1982_March_April/Playing_The_Bones, an article on bones player Ted Duckett, mustrad.org.uk/articles/duckett.htm and an encyclopedia article on bones as an instrument, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bones_\(instrument\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bones_(instrument))

Young Bones Player

March was a busy month for this bones player. Besides Saint Patrick's Day and my visit to the Massachusetts Music Educators Conference, on March 15, I conducted an after school bones workshop at the Martin Luther King Elementary School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I arrived and was surprised to find an "opening act." Four young string players, assembled on the auditorium stage, played a chamber piece for their peers. I asked them if they knew any fiddle tunes, and soon we were playing (I think it was *Arkansas Traveler*) together!

I played along to some pre-recorded Irish and ragtime music, then got into teaching taps: Over thirty elementary pupils accompanied me on the work song *Take This Hammer* while I played guitar. Rolls were less successful, but there were two outstanding girls.

We closed the hour by performing two renditions of *Elements of a Storm*, the first using only body percussion and voice to create a rain and lightening storm. Then we did it a second time using classroom percussion instruments and some bones.

Thanks to lead teacher Katherine Parks for inviting me and to Constance Cook for the loan of her battery of bones, some of which were made through the largess of the RBS.

Female wins All-Ireland Bones Competition

I landed in Shannon and headed to Ennis on Thursday night. Went to Brogan's where there was a great session going on. I listened for about an hour then asked if I could join in on the bones. "Yes and Welcome" was the reply so I played until they finished. I found out later it was Eoin O'Neill who said that and Quentin Cooper on fiddle and tenor banjo (I bought their CD). On to Galway City where there were lots of sessions but

lots of university student raucous drinking so I didn't have a good chance to play. Then to Inisheer, the smallest of the Aran Islands, where on Saturday night there were sessions at the hotel and at Tigh Neds.

I played at the hotel Saturday and Sunday night. On to Doolin where I played with two guys at McGann's on Monday night. They were very welcoming. Tuesday night I played at Connor's Pub. They weren't so welcoming, but said I could play. I got shushed once when I didn't realize the fiddle (Yvonne Casey) was taking a break.

I did my best to be sensitive and not overpower with the bones, but there was lots of crowd noise. When I got up to leave the audience shouted "Bravo" (Did they like my playing or were they that glad to see me go?).

I got to Abbeyfeale on Thursday night (the first night of the Fleadh by the Feale) and checked into Noreen Brown's B&B otherwise known as bones headquarters.

At the Winner's Circle Pub they had a gathering session of music and dance by local youth which was fabulous then music and polka by some adults. I introduced myself to Dan and Maureen Murphy and then met Noreen Murphy (mother of 2005 Bones Champion David Murphy.) She introduced me to David and the crowd asked me to play along with Dan Murphy and some others. Dan played a polka and then after a while kept turning up the speed to see just how fast I could go.

It was very funny and good craic. I played at almost every pub in Abbeyfeale for the rest of the 5 day festival. I usually tried to find a group with no bones players.

There was fabulous talent there (players from Crede and 4 Men and a Dog) in the Pubs as well as a lot of others whose names I don't know.

There was a great bones workshop on Saturday by Steve Brown and David Murphy with about 16 students attending.

I didn't plan to compete in the bones championship, but when I signed up for the workshop Maureen Murphy said "Oh, do it. It will give you a great buzz and you've come all

this way." So I signed up and paid my 10 euro entry fee. On Monday I got cold feet and called her back to withdraw but she said do it for the audience—they especially like it when people from other countries compete. So I said OK I'll do it. My name was drawn 7th out of 8 contestants. We each played two songs of different tempo. Ronnie McShane (formerly of the Chieftains) was the adjudicator.

I couldn't believe it when they read the results. 3rd place: Paddy O'donovan, 2nd place: Steve Brown, 1st place: Gail Brayden. (the first female to win the competition). I still wake up at night and start laughing when I think of it. It was a wonderful experience and of course I will be going back to Ireland next spring.
Gail Brayden



Photograph of 2006 All-Ireland Bones Competition winners, Gail Brayden, Steve Brown and Paddy Donovan. Photo by Debhla

Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the rhythmbones.com website. Our webmaster Jonathan Danforth posts a large number of events of interest to bones players. If you would like to be listed on the Calendar or know of events that should be listed contact Jonathan.

Bones Fest X. July 28-30, 2006. Hosted by Melissa and Jonathan Danforth.

NTCMA and Bones Contest. August 28-September 3, 2006. 31st Annual Festival and Contests. Bones Contest on Sunday of that week. For details

Tips and Techniques

How To Hold The Bones

Part 2 of 3

How to hold the bones will be demonstrated to the class and instructed one on one as needed until all have mastered the fundamentals. This article is to reinforce that instruction, and provide reminders to the techniques and methods used to achieve satisfactory play. Only by practice can one master the fundamentals in playing the bones.

Bones are not rattled together by a twitching movement of the hand, but are rather swung together like a bell and clapper. One bone is held firmly, the other held loose, while the hand, wrist, and arm describe an ellipse through the air, enabling the loose bone to strike against the firm one. The technique is rather like riding a bicycle; you can either do it, or you cannot. Once that first roll is achieved, the would-be-player never looks back.

Bones should be played two to each hand from the start. Double handed playing is the ultimate art, and the interrelationship between the hands increases the versatility and dimension of the sounds that can be produced. If the hands are trained together from the beginning, it will be easier than introducing the other hand later.

Bones are basically the same shape, whether they are wooden or rib bones. The shape is slightly curved along the length, and thicker at one end than the other. These features are important. The curve is for the reason that, when played with the curves opposite each other, only a small area of contact is made. The thicker end gives weight at the bottom, which helps the swing and deepens the sound.

Bones are held the same in either hand. Take two bones. Turn them so that the curves face each other (knock kneed). Place one bone, thin end up, between the index and middle finger (there are other grips that will be demonstrated) with the dome of the curve away from the thumb. This will be your "bell" bone. Set this bone firmly into the heel of your hand and

clamp it down with the tip of your middle finger on the crest of the bone edge. Place the second bone, thin end up between the middle and ring finger, with the dome of the curve toward your thumb. Place the tip of your ring finger lightly on the crest of this bone. This is your "clapper" bone. You will want it to move freely against the "bell" bone.

Now rotate the arm so that the "clapper" bone falls away from the "bell" bone by gravity. Now turn the arm again so that it falls back into the "bell" bone. You should hear a small click. It is this basic clapper action that produces the sound. As the speed of the arm is increased, centrifugal force will replace gravity and a rhythmical roll will ensue. It is essential to persevere with this action until the first double tap is achieved. Analyse the exact flick of the arm you used to produce this, and try to repeat it. It is easier to attempt a very fast roll than to do small ones, as these require greater control, which will come with practice.

The sound bones produce cannot be duplicated by any other method and are surely the most effective pocket percussion instrument ever conceived

More Letters to Editor

importantly I conveyed the advice and wisdom I'd been given by Percy Danforth: let the bones be an extension of your body and *dance!* Tim, as you know, rocks out!

Now I am back in southern RI, and New Bedford is less than an hour down the road. And, as of this date, I have no commitments scratched on my calendar for the dates of Bones Fest X - I am thinking that this just might be the year!

Thank you for reminding me of the RBS and for alerting me to the dates of the Fest! And please, do send me any information you can...I would be particularly interested in a Schedule of Events or Classes, or Invited Participants. *Thanks again! Cindy Peloquin cindy@seasons.net*

I just wanted to drop you a line to let you know that I meet with Roberta Perkins this afternoon. I had a most

enjoyable time. We exchanged stories as well as information on the bones. Roberta was quite interested in some of the different sets of bones I have acquired and made over the years.

I got her started on the basics and showed her some techniques for two hand playing. We have a lot of common interests in history and music.

Thanks for putting me in touch with her. Please feel free to call or email me at anytime.

The bones that I showed her that she really liked were several sets that I got from a friend whom I believe you also know; Tim Riley from Mystic Sea Port. Timmy and I have been friends and swapping stories and bones for a dozen or so years. I have been going to the Sea Music Festival since 1989. I volunteered for several of those years where I got to meet and play with many fine and talented musicians

Till next time, be well my friend and to you and yours; love and friendship, now and forever, Sarion (aka *Jim Fiore*) [Roberta called looking for bones information. I sorted our RBS Database on zip code and saw that Jim had the same zip code. I introduced them via email. *Steve Wixson*]

Well, that's a very interesting article [referring to the Abbeyfeale On Line article Steve Brown mentioned in his column]. As far as bones playing goes, does "a huge event" mean about 100 people?

The NTCMA is not sanctioned by anyone, mostly because we have been doing our [bones contest] for 31 years, and there wasn't anyone to sanction us because there wasn't anyone doing anything like this 31 years ago.

I wonder if they would be interested in our sanctioning them, since we host the official (as copyrighted) "World's Spoon & Bone Playing Championship." They're probably not interested in spoons, eh?

Sheila and I have traveled and performed in Ireland for about 20 years now, and I've never heard of this organization. Greta Elkin, who lives in Londonderry, will be at our festival this year, and I recommend you talk to her about it. See you in MoValley [for the NTCMA Festival and Contests]. Have lots of fun. *Bob Everhart*

Bones On Tour with “The President’s Own”

[In the Fall 2005, percussionist and resident bones player, GySgt Ken “KennyB” Wolin went on a seven week tour with “The President’s Own” U.S. Marine Band performing on bones and mallet (melodic) percussion in over forty concerts and cities across the country.

Kenny’s bones playing was featured during *Irish Songs*, by Chief Arranger, MSgt Stephen Bullah, written for “The President’s Own” vocalist, GySgt Kevin Bennier. After hearing Kenny perform *Far and Away* with John Williams during the band’s 205th anniversary concert at the Kennedy Center, MSgt Bullah wanted to incorporate Kenny’s bones playing in his wind-ensemble arrangement of familiar Irish songs.

On tour, Kenny used different combinations of bones determined by the performance space and instrumentation. For example, during the piccolo and bones soli, Kenny primarily used custom-made pairs of shin bone from bone shander guru, Tim Reilly. Whenever the snare drum parts were doubled, he used custom-made pairs of wood bones from craftsmen Steve Brown and Jeff Lefferts.]

Tour highlights included a stop in Louisville, Kentucky where I stumbled across an international bluegrass convention and had the opportunity to sit in on bones and spoons. In Kansas City, I had a great time playing spoons and bones during a local blues open-mike jam. The following night, I met up with Irish folk musician Jonathan Ramsey (jonathanramsey.com), accompanying him on bodhran and bones at Harling’s Upstairs Irish Pub.

The biggest highlight came in San Francisco where I met up with fellow bones-mate, Jeff Lefferts on the tall ship *Balcutha* for a late-night shantey sing. Jeff was at the marine band concert the next afternoon, so just prior to the performance I had fellow percussionist Steve Owen play some ragtime xylophone while I accompanied with my new *Leffert*

bones. Later that evening, an impromptu jam session broke out at the home of Lukas Hicks, an incredible banjo player and jaw-dropping spoons player (“thanks for the lessons!!”), along with fellow talented Tangles members Sarah (accordion), and Sinder (8 yr old bones player!) (the.tangles.com). The night was capped-off with an Irish session at An Bodhran on Haight Street where Jeff and I were forced to put down their Guinness’ and take a soli, to which a wise old fiddler commented to them, “oh, if you could only do that to music!”

The tour wrapped up near Phoenix, Arizona where I coached my bone-playing mom, Judy Wolin, who is currently manager of the group *Rhythm and Bones. Kenny Wolin*

Founded in 1798 by an Act of Congress, “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band is America’s oldest professional musical organization. Today, “The President’s Own” is celebrated for its role at the White House and its dynamic public performances. “The President’s Own” encompasses the United States Marine Band, Marine Chamber Orchestra, and Marine Chamber Ensembles, and performs regularly at the White House and for more than 500 public performances across the nation each year. For more information see marineband.usmc.mil.

Percussionist Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth Wolin joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in October 1997. GySgt Wolin began his musical training at age 8. Upon graduating in 1985 from Oak Park High School in Oak Park, Mich., he attended Oberlin Conservatory in Oberlin, Ohio, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in music. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where he earned a master’s degree in music. His percussion instructors were Michael Rosen of Oberlin Conservatory, Michael Udow of the University of Michigan, and Sam Tundo of the Detroit Symphony. Prior to joining “The President’s Own,” GySgt Wolin performed with the Rhode Island Philharmonic in Providence, the Boston Baroque, the

Sarasota Opera, and served as an extra with the Detroit and New Hampshire Symphonies. Additionally, he performed professionally throughout the state of Massachusetts as a marimba soloist. As a bones player, Kenny performs with the group, The Shebeens (theshebeens.com), and originated and taught the Advanced

(History of Bones —Continued from page 1)

through the immigration of people from the British Isles to the U.S. While one possibility need not exclude the other, the evidence more strongly supports the second theory over the more widely held notion that the bones are of African origin.

Slaves first reached America in 1619 when a Dutch ship brought native Africans to Jamestown, Virginia. Slave trade continued well into the nineteenth century, despite its prohibition by Congress in 1807.

Most slaves came from Africa’s western coast, although the central African interior also became a source for slaves. The European demand for slaves encourage fighting among African tribes in the interior, warring tribes often brought captives to the coast to sell to white slaves traders. Such activity took place as far into the interior as Lake Chad. Accounts differ slightly as to how far south the slave activity extended. Claims of slavery’s southern limit range from the equator to southern Angola.

There is no doubt that African instruments were brought to America along with slaves. Conditions in the slave quarters of slave ships were so cramped that slaves were often brought upon the deck to dance in hopes that exercise of this sort would keep them alive and healthy. A few African instruments were often carried on board to encourage this activity. This fact can be substantiated by contemporary accounts such as the following one written by George Pinckard in February, 1796, from Carlisle Bay, Jamaica.

A slave-ship, belonging to North America, and bound to Savanna in Georgia, had arrived from the coast of Guinea...and was lying very near to us, with a cargo of Negroes on board... [We] took off a boat...and went to visit the Guineaman....In the daytime they were not

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allowed to remain in the place where they had slept, but were kept most upon the open deck, where they were made to exercise, and encouraged, by the music of their beloved banjar, to dancing and cheerfulness.

We saw them dance, and heard them sing. In dancing they scarcely moved their feet, cut threw about their arms, and twisted and writhed their bodies...Their song was a wild yell, devoid of all softness and harmony, and loudly chanted in harsh monotony.

In addition to the banjo, other contemporary accounts also mention drums.

Although such accounts don't mention the bones, it is possible they were transported to America as were other African instruments. Another, perhaps more plausible explanation, is that some slaves knew how to make the bones and did so once they came to America. Charles Hamm suggest a similar explanation for the presence of the African balafo, a xylophone-like instrument, in America. The balafo is found in contemporary accounts of music in the South, yet no record exists of its transport from Africa.

African slaves brought to America often constructed musical instruments out of whatever materials were available to them. It is possible that slaves first fashioned and played the bones in America, along with other impromptu percussion instruments.

It has also been suggested that slaves first made bones after the use of drums was prohibited. Drums were associated with slaves uprisings, with drums no longer available, other percussion instruments like the bones may have been made to take their place.

While the above suppositions regarding the origins of the bones in America are possible, none of them can be firmly substantiated. In fact, while several scholars have identified the bones as an African instrument, even that claim remains questionable. Daily Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, in *Gentlemen Be Seated* refer to the African origin of the bones. In *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, Hans Nathan describes bones made by slaves on plantations as being similar to 'their African models.' Dana Epstein also refers to the African origins of the bones in *Sinful Tunes and Spiritual: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. In reference to

a sketch of a Negro dance by Lewis Miller of York, Pennsylvania, while on a trip to Virginia in 1953, Epstein identifies the fiddle in the sketch as European and the banjo and bones as African. But none of these scholars offer sufficient sources to establish the bones as African.

Possible evidence in support of the bone's African origin may be found in the work done by Percival Kirby in the 1930's. Kirby studied musical traditions among the peoples of southern Africa and found several instruments which closely resemble the bones. The *amatambo* played by the Zulu are made from the rib bones of animals. Cattle ribs are preferred since they are large and easy to handle. They are used to provide rhythmic accompaniment to singing. The Chwana *marapo* are also made from rib bones.

Kirby studied the area of Africa south of 22 degree latitude, which is approximately 250-300 miles south of the area where slave trading took place in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is reasonable to speculate that the bones he found in southern Africa were known among Africans several hundred miles to the north where slave trading was common.

However, the *amatambo* and *marapo* found by Kirby among the Zulu and Chwana respectively, are of uncertain origin. Kirby could not determine whether or not the *amatambo* had come from Europe. Kirby is more definite about the origins of the Chwana *marapo*:

The Chwana almost certainly did [get the bones from Europeans]; the Reverend A. Sandilands, who has been for years a missionary in Bechuanaland, assured me that the fact is admitted by the Chwana themselves.

There are further problems with the African origin theory of the bones. If the bones are of African origin, presumably they would have been mentioned in descriptions of slaves' music making. Such descriptions do exist, but date back no further than the mid-1800's when the minstrel show (which used the bones as a standard instrument) had already achieved popularity.

If the bones are of African origin, one would expect to find similar

instruments throughout a substantial portion of the continent. However, evidence uncovered in this study documents the existence of the bones only in southern Africa.

African slaves were brought to Central America and the Caribbean as well as the United States. If the bones are of African origin, one would expect to find the bones in these regions. Since minstrel troupes did not travel to these areas, if the bones did exist in these regions among the black population, one could assume that the bones were brought there by African slaves and were thus of African origin. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the bones were ever present in Central America or the Caribbean. [End of Part 1.] *Beth Lenz*.

Beth Lenz Biography

Beth Lena learned how to play the bones from Percy Danforth, whom she met while pursuing her degree in percussion performance at the University of Michigan. Her interest in the bones continued and the history and performing techniques became the topic of her thesis for a subsequent master's degree in ethnomusicology, also from the University of Michigan. Ms. Lenz currently resides in Seattle, Washington, where she works as a free-lance percussionist and private percussion teacher. Favorite gigs include two performances with Dave Brubeck, a recording session with Jackson Berkey of Mannheim Steamroller, and occasion feature

Reflections—A Special Issue of the Newsletter

As we celebrate ten years of Bones Fests, Mel Mercier suggested we publish a special issue of the newsletter to commemorate this landmark event. By now you may have received an email or letter inviting you to contribute to this issue titled *Reflections*. Please send in your thoughts and/or photographs for the Bones Fests you have attended. There will be lots of color photographs included. A keepsake for sure. Email or mail to Steve Wixson.



(Benoit BourquContinued from page 3)

You know what I mean. Now it was the time to actually show my stuff. I was excited to say the least. This may have been done before by some bonest, but not by me.

The conductor introduced me with a bit of his British flair. “Well ladies and gentlemen, this is a new experience for me, too.”

I marched out on the stage in front

of all 85 musicians with my bones in each hand swinging my arms stiffly. You know; like a marching wooden soldier. I did a military turn facing the audience, next the conductor who was positioned next to me on a stand. I could almost hear a low whispered groan from the audience, that “What is he doing?” kind of sound.

I kept my hands on my chest until the great march started. I hit the first note, first click exactly in time with the music... a quiet left hand building to the crescendo. Then I brought up my right hand. Both hands were balanced in perfect time with the music. The mike and sound system were perfect. As I played I marched in place with a sober wooden soldier expression on my face. “I am the wooden soldier!!”

As the music filled out, I am really flying. I hit every note perfectly, stopping at the last march note exactly on time – no over click. I can be my own critic and I know I was perfect.

The audience cheered and gave me a standing ovation. I did a military bow to the audience, to the conductor and to the orchestra. Then I marched off. What a trip!!

One needs approval from their



peers. I got great compliments from the conductor and from the musicians in the orchestra.

If you want to play to this, be sure to get the right song, *Parade of the Wooden Soldier* NOT *March of the Toys*. They are two different songs.

NOTE: There was a program stuffer explaining my background and the history of the bones. *Dave Boyles*. Cedarburg, Wisconsin

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested