



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 9, No. 1 2007

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## Executive Director's Column

While reading through the transcript of the Barry Patton interview, it suddenly occurred to me how many of us have influential bone players in our lives which caused us to begin playing the bones. Barry had Cecil Hyatt who was well known enough in Bluegrass circles to have his own recording released, with the help of Byron Berline, back in the 80's.

Percy Danforth influenced me to play, as well as many of our current members, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Spike Bones, Adam Klein just to name a few. Sport Murphy influenced a region of bone playing in Abbeyfeale, with Dave Murphy being his most notable pupil, and seeding the area with many bone players which led to the

creation of the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship.

Each one of these significant bones players are like a pebble tossed into a pond with corresponding ripples moving out across the pond. How many of these individual schools of bones playing exist, and what are their family tree of bone players?

For many of our members their playing started with their families, their father or grandfather, who played the bones and brought it into their homes from their childhood, perhaps influenced by another significant bone player. Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell's great style of bone

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## Barry Patton— Ambassador of Bones

If the Rhythm Bones Society awarded an 'Ambassador of Rhythm Bones' title, Barry Patton would receive one. He has performed all over and as far away as China. He has performed on television and in movies. He makes and sells rhythm bones and has an instructional video. He is a regular at the Walnut Valley Festival. He plays bones faster than anyone I've seen.

Barry Patton was born in Winfield, Kansas in 1960 and has lived there for most of his life. He runs a diesel truck repair shop and plays bones as often as he can. I asked Barry how he learned to play the bones.

"My grandfather, Lou Berline, was an old time fiddle player. He had a guitar and bones player whose name was Cecil Hiatt [for more on Cecil, see newsletter Vol. 5, No. 3.] This was going back in the 40s, 50s and 60s when they were all young men in the farming and cattle business. Cecil would come over to our farmhouse always with his bones in his pocket or in his guitar case.

"One day they were playing some fiddle tunes and he pulled out these cow ribs. I was about five years old, just up off the floor, you know, where I could watch. They had a snappy rhythm and just kind of intrigued me. I never gave a thought about playing them.

"My grandpa and Cecil played for years and years until my grandpa passed away in 1973. At

this time, I was 13 years old and Cecil had been diagnosed with cancer of the bladder.

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Barry "Bones" Patton. Photograph by Judy Regehr

## Editorial

The lead article in this issue is on Barry 'Bones' Patton. I recorded a telephone interview with Barry and liked his words, so most of the article is quotes from the interview.

Bones Fest XI is just around the corner and host, Dave Boyles, has given us a preview of the Fest. He has planned another exciting event. A Registration Form is included, and people are encouraged to send it in as soon as possible to help in the planning.

Membership is down about twenty percent this year, and I don't know the reason why. Some of our regulars have not renewed, though I expect that they will before Bones Fest XI. After each newsletter is mailed, I send out a notice with a list of newsletter contents and that always brings in a few more renewals. Members who have not renewed do not get the newsletter, so this is a plea to current members to help recruit new members.

## Letters to the Editor

Martha Cowett is engaged to marry fellow bones player and RBS member, Joe Cummings in June. All of the Cowetts are happy about this. *Everett Cowett*

I am looking for CDs to practice the bones with. Any suggestions? *Lee Formicola* leeformicola@bignet.net. [Members—help Lee and the rest of us out. What are your favorite CDs to practice rhythm bones with?]

The Grand Rapids Symphony has been nominated for a Grammy award for Deborah Henson-Conant's "Invention & Alchemy" CD. We made a CD/DVD with her and it's in the "classical crossover category". I play bones briefly on it, but they give me a nice close up on the DVD. I'm also featured on the encore playing a garbage can! Here's a link <http://hipharp.com>. I'll keep you posted...*Bill Vits* [I'm sending you a DVD so you can see it all. Please add it to the library and share it with our members. Enjoy!]

"Pipes, fiddles, men of no valour,

bone-players and pipe-players; a crowd hideous, noisy, profane, shriekers and shouters"-"The Fair of Carman" in *The Book of Leinster*, c. 1160 A.D. Found by *Steve Brown*

I thought you might like to know that I was able to get a DVD of the June 7, 1958 show of Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour when my father and I played the rhythm bones. The quality is excellent. What a keep-sake! Maybe someday I will be able to make it to a Bones Fest and show it to the assemblage. Best Wishes. *John Hall*

## YouTube - Website of the Quarter

YouTube is an online video service that allows anyone to view and share videos. There are at least two people playing rhythm bones on YouTube now.

70 year old Hoosier born Glen Delmont Johnson, a.k.a. "Hoss", has been rattlin' the Bones since the age of 5. He claims that he ended up with the Bones, because his dad got the Banjo, one brother got the Mandolin, the other brother got the Harmonica, and there weren't anymore instruments to go around.

Hoss' current set of Bones are made from the remains of a well enjoyed meal of Barbecued Beef Ribs. He cured them in the sun, and polished them with a piece of glass, and has been playing this set for more than 40 years.

Hoss now hails from Canon City, Colorado, where he and his wife Barbara make music with their band, "The Canon Creakers." Hoss' son Glen proudly made a YouTube page where you can see a video demonstration. Here's the link: <http://www.youtube.com/user/PaPaHoss>. When you get there select his bones playing entries.

Member Greg Burrows also has contributed his bones playing expertise to YouTube. Check him out at [www.youtube.com/profile?user=gregoryburrows](http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=gregoryburrows). In addition to Bones Solo and Bones Solo 2, he has some interesting percussion.

RBS members can use YouTube to

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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)

get rhythm bones some national exposure. Try it out at [youtube.com](http://youtube.com) and click 'upload videos.'

If you find other rhythm bones videos on YouTube, please let me know and I will share them in future newsletters. *Steve Wixson*

## Update on Special 'Reflections' Issue

Guest Editor, Sharon Mescher, has a first draft of the special issue of the newsletter titled *Reflections on 10 Years of Bones Fests*. This newsletter will highlight Bones Fests I through last year's BFX and is full of color photographs.

There is still time for additions and please contact with stories or photographs that you would like to be included. Her email address is [sjmescher@gmail.com](mailto:sjmescher@gmail.com).

(Executive Director Continued from page 1)

playing was developed by their father Albert Mescher.

You can't see a family any more influenced by the bones, I think, than the Cowetts, with all Everett's children playing bones and several of his grand children.

Our instrument clearly was a word of mouth instrument, handed down just the same way Cecil Hyatt did for Barry. There are few written documents, although there are a few, and little formal documentation of the instrument until a more modern era.

I think it's important to preserve our heritage and document those influential bone players. So what's your bone playing family tree? How many of these great folks can we identify and show how their influence on us has kept this great instrument alive and hopefully caused it to grow and flourish into the future? *Steve Brown*

## Bones Fest XI Preview

Mark your calendars for Bones Fest XI in Newburg, Wisconsin on August 17-19, 2007. Dave Boyles is our host and with Don Gilmore has organized another exciting Fest.

They scheduled the event to coincide with the Milwaukee Irish Fest, the biggest such fest in the world.

There are opportunities for Bones Fest attendees to participate in some Irish Fest events including some stage time on Sunday at 11:30 am.

Irish Fest is preceded by Irish Fest Summer School, a week of formal study where a variety of Irish music is taught by excellent instructors. See [www.irishfest.com](http://www.irishfest.com) for details.

The Bones Fest will be held at the Riveredge Nature Center, one-half hour north of Milwaukee.

Riveredge was one of the first and today is one of the largest nature centers in Southeastern Wisconsin. Riveredge sits on a 370 acre sanctuary consisting of prairies, forest, ponds and marshes along the Milwaukee River. The sanctuary serves to protect the local ecology, its plants and animal and their natural interactions.

It offers the opportunity for the

study and observation of nature while protecting it from disruption. Each year around 8,000 students from over 80 schools come to Riveredge to experience the wonder of nature through their hand on environmental education programs.

The facilities that will be used for Bones Fest XI include a 8,000 square foot visitor center with two classrooms, a renovated 1890's barn, both fully air-conditioned, and several other small building and observation platforms scattered throughout the sanctuary.

Riveredge is also close to historic towns with quaint shops and old time mid-west settings. See [www.riveredge.us](http://www.riveredge.us) or contact [riveredge@riveredge.us](mailto:riveredge@riveredge.us)

There will be workshops and individual performances and lots of time for jamming.

The registration fee is \$75 that covers Friday and Saturday lunch and dinner and Sunday breakfast as well as a tee-shirt and facility use.

A registration form and list of hotels is included in this newsletter.

For more information on the Fest contact Dave Boyles at [bones-boyles@wi.rr.com](mailto:bones-boyles@wi.rr.com) or 262-375-1276.

## Russ Myers' CD Still Available

At Russ Myers' funeral, his band, The Possum Ridge String Band, gave away copies of their CD titled *On the Road Again*. We asked them if this CD could be made available to RBS members and they graciously donated as many copies as we want with the only stipulation that each recipient give a donation that would be passed on to Wilma Myers. We've received a very generous response so far.

The donations will be used to make a small exhibit of Russ' bones memorabilia for the Madison County Historical Society. A future newsletter article will describe the exhibit.

For those who have not heard this CD, it contains tracks with Russ playing bones and tracks with Russ talking about rhythm bones in his unique, entertaining style. This is a keepsake for anyone who knew Russ or wants

to learn something about him.

Copies of Russ' CD are still available. Send a donation of any size to RBS, 1060 Lower Brow Road, Signal Mountain, TN 37377.

## Recorded Bones Music

### Kvasir's Blod—Viking Music

On the tracks 2, 6, and 12 you will find the combination of bones and three hole pipe (actually made of bone) played by one person. The idea to this I found on a Swedish fresco from c. 1460 and as a pipe and tabor player I had to develop this ancient playing style. On track 7 you will find ordinary one handed bones playing.

If the members go to <http://www.classicorecords.dk/> and search "Kvasirs blod" they should at once come to the page where they can order it.

Unfortunately I'm afraid that the information's, or sources, to the Swedish bones tradition are very few (maybe too few for a whole article), but I can try to get in touch with someone who maybe knows a little more than I do. In any case I will try and do some research. You know - we just gather the historical information that it did exist and then we have met a couple of old guys who played them as a child, etc. Our thing is merely to submerge in old traditions where they are known, but not necessarily still living, and then indulge in the variety of possibilities.

Thank you for a good webpage. I have been in e-mail contact with Jonathan Danforth. *Poul Høxbro* <[hox@mobilixnet.dk](mailto:hox@mobilixnet.dk)>

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XI.** August 17-19, 2007. Details in this newsletter.

**NTCMA Spoons and Bones Contest.** August 27 - September 2nd. The bones contest was scheduled for Sunday last year and not enough people showed up to have the contest. This year the contest will be on Saturday, September 1st.

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“The Walnut Valley Festival had opened in 1971, and we all went to this bluegrass festival because it was our kind of music. Everybody loved it.

“Also I had an uncle, Byron Berline, who was a very well known fiddle player all over the world, and was living in California at the time. He was one of the headliners at the Festival with a band called the Country Gazette. They all came over to our house. My grandpa was there, Cecil was there and I got interested in playing any instrument so I could join in.

“I was down watching Cecil play the bones in the jamming area. Like a lot of other people, we had a jam tent at the festival. Cecil got me in his car and said “I’ve got this cancer and I’m afraid I’m not going to live much longer. I’ve tried to get all my nephews and cousins to play these bones and nobody will play ‘em. You know somebody ought to pick these us because it’s a lost art.

“So he showed me a couple of licks, a forward roll as I call it, you know the back and forth motion, and the little figure eight lick that I do. Then he said you’ve got to get some music and play with it. Just try to do it and if you don’t, you don’t.” But Barry did and he still does.

One of the things that characterizes Barry’s playing is timing. I asked him how he developed it.

“The timing deal did come with a lot of practice and I literally wore out cassettes playing them back and forth and back and forth—using the same song to get every lick possible out of the music.

“I was a one handed bone player for a while because my right hand was more dominant. I was trying the left hand, but my timing was off and people realized that it wouldn’t keep up with the right hand.

“So I went back with Cecil, my teacher, who said I needed to get that left hand in there more. “Your playing right hand real good and you need that left hand.” So I picked up both left and right hand and of course, practice makes perfect they always say. Now my left hand is right up with my right hand.”

Barry had mentioned that his

rhythms are based on the melody in a song. I ask him to explain.

“I follow the melody of the music in my head. I listen to it. Let’s say you’re going to take a break on a song. Well I know how that song’s going to play.

“A lot of people say they can play to any song, and well you can. You can play any song to most any rhythm, but the melody is what I listen for. When it’s your turn to do a little solo, you got that melody in your head.

“Dan Curry, a great guitar player, a flat picker, said if you can’t play the melody in your head, you can’t really play it on a guitar or any instrument. So I learned early in life that I wanted to play the melody of the song. Even some of the great fiddle players and guitar players say the bones are rhythm, but when you play them you play the melody.

“One of the biggest ovations I ever got was playing by myself on a stage. I told them what song I was going to play. I got it in my head and started playing the song with the bones, no backup, no guitar, no nothing. Man when I got done it was like the crowd just went wild. And I’m just playing clicks. Everyone said it was the body English I put into it, but I was just standing up there having fun.”

I asked Barry whether he plays music other than bluegrass.

“I like other types. I like Irish music. It’s one of the better ones to follow. I play with country and western bands. Vince Gill gets us to come up and play and it’s all country. We’ll throw in some bluegrass.

“Going to Bones Fest IV gave me a wider variety of what music the people were playing. You had some kids that were 25 years old and they were playing to a rock and roll beat.

“I played on an album called Picken’ on Hendrix,” and it’s all about Jimmy Hendrix music. They pay you a flat fee to come and play on it, but I’m playing on a rock and roll album.”

I wondered if he played classical music. “I’ve played with classical fiddlers like Mark O’Connor when he does classical jazz. Bones go good with jazz. It doesn’t have the same rhythm as bluegrass or Irish music,

but most of the time you’ve use the same technique.”

I asked if he still looks for the rhythm in that music. “Yes, but at times they don’t want that. The only time they want that is when you are doing a solo or something. Most of the time you are doing rhythm backup.”

I asked if they give him music to play. “No, I didn’t have music in front of me. They sent a tape and I sat down and played it through. A lot of times when Mason Williams writes music for you, he lays it out—when you come in. The brass lays out, here comes the woodwinds, here come the fiddles, I mean violins.”

Tell me how you started playing with your uncle, Byron Berline. [For those who don’t know, fiddler Byron Berline is known for expanding bluegrass, adding elements of jazz, pop, blues, rock and traditional country to the genre. In addition to being a popular solo act, he performed as a session musician on a number of albums, including records by the Flying Burrito Brothers, Stephen Stills, the Dillards, Gram Parsons, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Emmylou Harris, Kris Kristofferson, and James Taylor.]

“I had just started to play—probably 15 or 16. My uncle had a buddy named Alan Wall that was playing guitar with him. We were doing a rehearsal in our front room and I was playing with them. Alan told Byron that he needed to get his nephew up on stage and play on a couple of these tunes. “He can really play those bones.” Byron said he would think about it. It’s one of those deals where you are playing with them at practice, but they never got you to play on stage.

“The next year I had improved and thought I was really good. I was playing with Royce Campbell who said I was going to get up and play with them. Well sure enough, I got up and played with them. You know how the crowd gets—they enjoyed it I guess.

My uncle called me from CA in less than ten days and said “I hear you’ve been playing the bones on stage in Winfield.” I said, yeh they got me up there. I didn’t know what I

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(Barry Patton—Continued from page 4)

was doing, but I enjoyed it. He said well maybe we'll play the next time. Lo and behold when he came back the next year, he got me up and I played. I was playing two handed by then and everything kind of clicked. I started playing with Byron about 1976 or 77. I started recording with him in 1986, professional recording in the studio.

Barry's career highlights include playing bones with Jana Jay on the TNN television show *Nashville Now*. Following that he met Chet Atkins and, with Jana on fiddle, got to play bones with Chet.

Jana was a classically trained violinist who played on the Hee-Haw television show. Barry was introduced to her by Byron who had taught her some country and bluegrass fiddle playing. Barry describes it this way.

"I watched her country jamboree show and later I got to talking with her. She asked if I played any instrument, and I said yes I play the bones. She said, "the next time you get around us, you bring those bones up here and play with us." I thought she was joking, you know. Jana Jay, I found out, was one of the nicest people. She wanted to get young people on the stage and get them doing something they've never done before.

"Sure enough, she got me up and I played the whole back half of her show. Later on, she got me to play a show with just her, a grand opening of a Wal-Mart store. Well after that, we started opening these Wal-Mart's together. "

The Tulsa Philharmonic was another one of his highlights because everyone there was from Oklahoma. Mason Williams was the production guy on it. Barry has played with the Louisville Philharmonic, Denver Philharmonic and Kansas City Philharmonic. Barry said, "these were all big shows, really big productions, playing in front of a hundred musicians with maybe 25 to 50 fiddlers. For people who have never seen that before it is fun to go to watch. We're going to play with the Bartlesville Symphony at a big festival soon."

I asked Barry about Mason Williams.

"Most people know him for his number one hit, Classical Gas, that he

also wrote. That put him on the map in 1968 and he was a millionaire overnight. Byron started playing with him right after that. I went to watch Byron and Mason play in Kansas City with the Philharmonic. Byron said, bring your bones along. I went up and sort of auditioned—we played Ragtime Annie. Mason said, you're playing with us tonight and I was like floored. I said, You mean tonight? You're playing on stage, and I'm going to have a microphone set up for you. I think that was the most stage fright that I ever had. I'm 17 years old, about that, and Mason got me up there. He put me up in front of the director. The spotlight was on me, and I did Ragtime Annie.

"Mason more or less took me under his wing. He would send me music—his music, and said I want you learn this because you're going to be playing at this symphony. He told me where I'd be sitting. He was perfectionist. Everything had to be rehearsed. He taught me a lot about rehearsing and getting everything right.

"Another highlight was playing before all the governors at the opening night of the revival of the Broadway musical, *Oklahoma*. We also performed on a national television morning show. That was one of my bigger highlights with Byron."

Barry played on the HBO series *Deadwood*. "When the producer heard us play he said we want you to be our music track. They used the bones and the fiddle for a wedding scene and a wedding party.

"We filmed it at Melody Ranch Studios in a little town near Santa Barbara. We basically went in and cut it live in 30 minutes. We thought we could do it better, but they wanted the old timey sound of our first take. The next day we got dressed up and went out on the set. We had to play to the recorded music for two days, I mean off and on, reenacting that same movement. It was really neat to be a part of it."

Earlier I mentioned that Barry has played bones in China. Here is how he described that trip.

"The trip was sponsored by the Chinese Government to bring US folk

(Continued on page 6)

# BONES FEST XI

**Riveredge  
Nature  
Center**

**Newburg,  
Wisconsin**

**August 17-19**

**Milwaukee  
Irish Fest  
Same weekend**

*Dave Boyles,*  
**Host**

For more  
information  
contact

**bonesboyles@wi.rr.com**  
Or

**262-375-1276**

music and bluegrass music to China. We spent about 1 ½ weeks over there and we toured several different towns from Beijing to Shanghai.

“Playing in China is totally different and we found out that people really liked us. It was a rhythm that they had never heard before. When I got off the stage, there would be lines of kids and older people waiting to get an autograph or a picture with me. Byron said I was the hit of the show. It was a great experience for me to play bones in China.”

Barry got to play on the nation wide Megan Mallaly television show.

“Well, I got a call asking if I would come out and play on the show. They treated me like royalty out there, I mean limo service, the whole bit. It was recorded in Hollywood on Sunset Blvd. We filmed it twice, and it turned out really good. They called me back about 30 days later, They liked it so much they wanted me to come out and shoot another show. I said “was there anything wrong with that show.” They said no—we’re going to air it too. We want another show and it’s a sequel

with you teaching Megan how to play the bones.”

His website is [barrybonespatton.com](http://barrybonespatton.com) and there he sells bones and an instructional video.

I asked him how he developed the design of his bones.

“Cecil Hiatt gave me a pair of oak bones that he had made. They were made out of staves from a chair or an oak barrel. They had the shape of the rib with a bow in it. I had previously made some bones for myself and other people. I’m not a woodworker, but I whittled them out, carved them out in kind of a crude fashion to where I had them sound similar to the bones I was playing. I showed them to this guy and he said he could make me some using the hard, dense Osage orange wood. He put this flat back on them so they would hold on the outside of your fingers better. I kind of liked it and said let’s make a few sets. Some of the people I showed them to liked them and that’s how I started making them. We make smaller sets for kids.

Barry plays a unique combination of bones on stage, Micarta, a synthetic

ivory, backed up with a regular cow rib. “I’ve had them for 25 years.”

Byron helped Barry make his bones instructional video. Part of Byron’s income is lesson videos. He’s got a camera room and he condenses lessons down so people can actually see what he’s doing. In Barry’s video, he played a real slow song and used one hand to show people how to play. He played a couple of tunes in the video so people can play along, as a practice. He shows how to hold them—how he was taught. He is ready to redo the video with a professional studio.

Here are a few closing comments from Barry..

“I’ve probably exposed more people to bone playing due to the Walnut Valley Festival here in Winfield. We are hosting ten to twenty thousand people a year now.

“I think bone playing is growing. If you’re going to play bones, you need to have a set of goals such as I’m going to really work on the left hand and then I’m going to the right hand. People just need to set goals and, what am I trying to say, then finish the goals.

*Steve Wixson*

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*Address Correction Requested*