

# Playing the Bones

Story by Rich Bailey  
Photography courtesy of  
Rhythm Bones Society

A staccato clicking fills the room, reminiscent of the sound of castanets. Steve Wixson is playing his rhythm bones, a modern incarnation of what might be the world's first musical instrument.

"Rhythm bones are probably one of mankind's oldest rhythm instruments. Most of us figure it must be prehistoric. We have met bones players that have learned on their own without any instruction. So that strengthens the hypothesis that they very well could

have been prehistoric instruments."

Steve's "bones" are actually carved from wood to resemble the animal rib bones whose musical properties might have been discovered around a prehistoric fire pit where their former owner had just been cooked up for dinner. They're pretty lively for such a musical senior citizen. And once you know where to look—or listen—they show up in a lot of places.

"In the theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters, 'Sweet Georgia Brown,' Freeman Davis is playing the bones," says Wixson, "if you hear sounds like clapping, that's the bones." "It's probably one of the most played songs in the world, but nobody knows that's the bones. He taught Bing Crosby how to play for the movie *Riding High*. In the movie, they were playing kitchen instruments—knives and forks—but they were playing them in bones style."

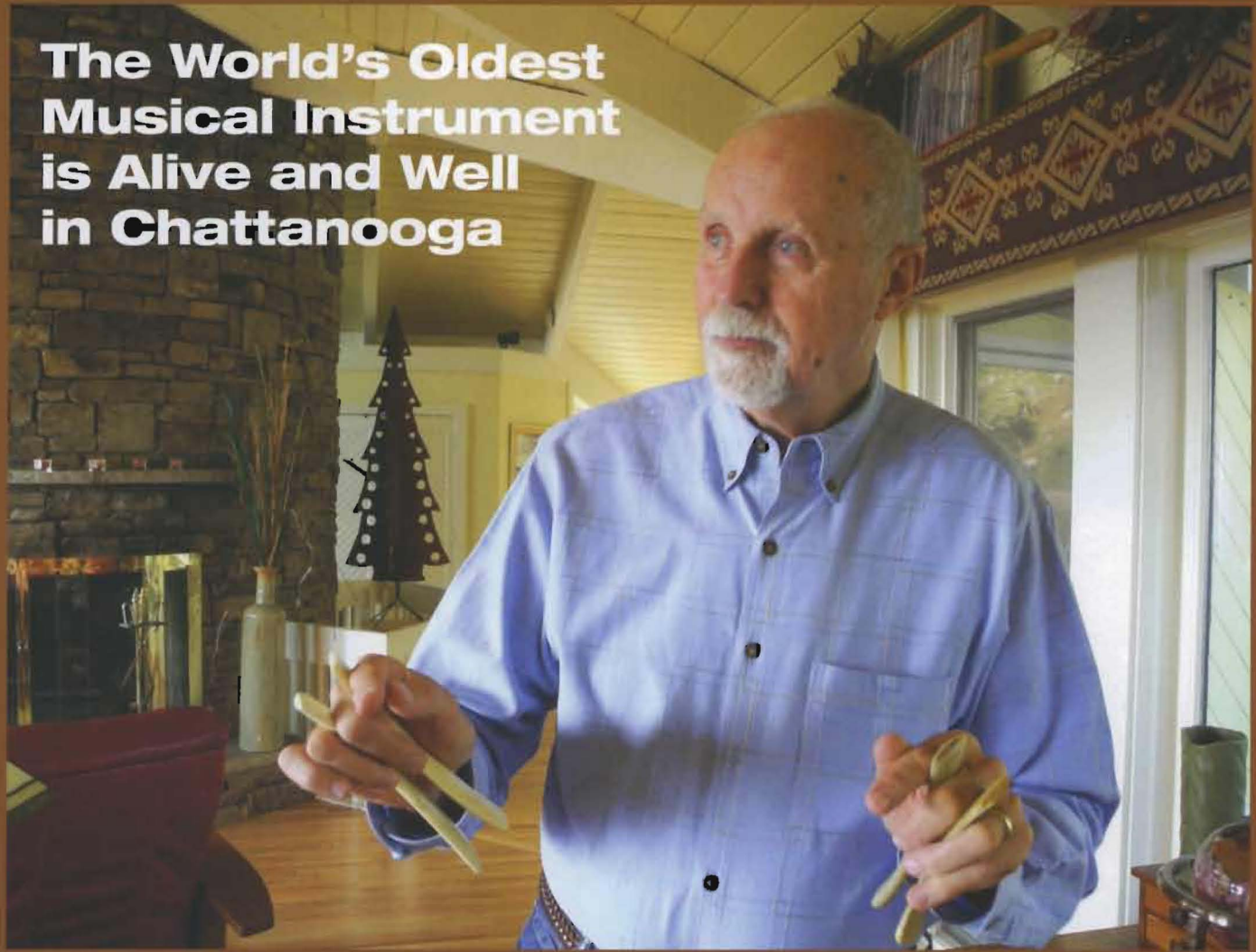
Steve Wixson is a retired biomedical engineer who lives on Signal Mountain. As a child, he learned to play the bones from his father, who was a butcher. "He had been taught by a sailor," according to Steve. "I conjecture the sailor must have been Irish because I learned as a one-handed player," which is how the bones are played in Ireland.

"I was this nerdy kid that carried them in my pocket until I got to high school and the social pressure got too great, so I stopped doing

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# The World's Oldest Musical Instrument is Alive and Well in Chattanooga



Steve Wixson playing bones at his home on Signal Mountain.



Young and old—participants of Bones Fest IX play together at the Mountain Opry.



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Jonathan Danforth coaches young players.

that. I played off and on. Many years later I went into a music store and said, you got any bones?"

That question began a trail of research that eventually led Steve to attend the second Bones Fest gathering of players and fans in 1998. After that he got involved in organizing the Bones Fest gatherings and helped start the Rhythm Bones Society. Now he is the Secretary-Treasurer. He also serves as newsletter editor and has researched the bones extensively. Bones Fest, which had its fifteenth gathering in 2011, has been hosted by Steve twice in Chattanooga.

Some people think spoons playing grew out of the bones, but the playing style is distinctly different. While two spoons are held in one hand, as bones are, spoons are always played against the body. Bones are held away from the body, like castanets, which are definitely a cousin.

Although the first rhythm bones were, indeed made from animal bones, most are carved from wood now, about 5-7 inches long and lightly curved.

"When we look at other cultures around the world, most everybody who plays the bones all play the same way," says Steve. "The bones are placed between the first and second fingers. The middle finger holds one of them stationary against your hand and it doesn't move, like a drumhead doesn't move. The drumstick, or in this case the second bone, is put here," between the middle and index fingers, where it can move freely.

"A snap of the wrist is the basic movement, and you can get triplets and quadruplets and other things. When you play with two hands you can do polyrhythms."

According to Steve, the bones were everywhere in the ancient world. "The first physical artifacts were found 5,500 years ago in China and Egypt. They had a 1000-year run in Egypt. They made it to Greece. They made it to Rome. We know they're in England in Shakespeare's time," because Bottom the Weaver in *A*

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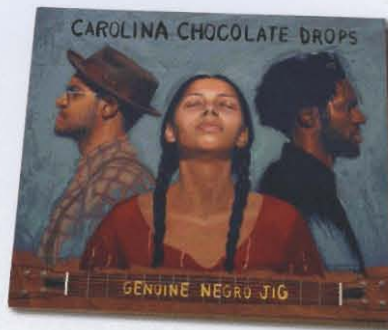
Midsummer Night's Dream says, "I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones."

"Then they jumped the pond. In the 1830s they were one of four instruments that started the almost 100-year minstrel movement in America. The minstrel troupes went all over the world. A lot of people think the bones came to America from Africa along with the banjo, but not so."

Research at the University of Michigan has shown that the bones came to America from Europe. "In Europe right now there's a history of the bones associated with the end-of-winter celebration known as carnival, or "fastnet" in Germany, sort of like Mardi Gras," says Steve. "The bones and other noisemakers are used to drive out the evil winter spirits." In more recent times, the Irish traditional music group The Chieftains brought rhythm bones into musicians' repertoire again starting in the 1960s.

Though not as prevalent as they once were, the bones have been spotted in a number of movies, according to the Rhythm Bones Society web site, including the 1997 Titanic movie, where bones are seen being played down in the ship's hold by Irish immigrants, Mary Poppins, where they are played by a member of the band performing "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," and for two seconds in Gone With The Wind. They're even in How the Grinch Stole Christmas, played by one of the Whos in the parade after Christmas is restored.

The bones have recently had two high-profile appearances in Chattanooga when the old-time string band The Carolina Chocolate Drops played at Nightfall and Riverbend. The band's principal bones player, Dom Flemons, even recognized Steve Wixson from the stage



Bones player Don Flemons is a member of the grammy-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops. He is left, on the cd cover.

at this year's Riverbend festival. The Chattanooga bands Olta and the Molly McGuires also sometimes include bones players.

Steve, who won the World Bones Championship at the 2003 National Traditional Country Music Festival, has performed frequently around town as a street performer at Riverbend, doing Tennessee Folklife demonstrations outside the Tennessee Aquarium, at the Creative Discovery Museum and many times at churches, nursing homes and schools.

Rhythm bones are a great ice breaker, according to Steve. "My wife and I went on the Tennessee Aquarium trip to China," he says. "China was one of the places where early rhythm bones artifacts were found, so I was on the lookout for them. One night in downtown Beijing, I was walking the streets, quietly playing my bones—that is, trolling for someone who might know about them—when an old blind beggar and his wife came up to me. He held out his hands asking for my bones. When he started playing them, his face turned from sadness to joy and he started to sing and dance. I do not speak Chinese so was unable to learn his bones story, but I bet it was interesting." 

For more information, including free instructional videos, visit [www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com). Also see [www.carolinachocolatedrops.com](http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com)

Rich Bailey is a freelance writer and public relations professional who lives in Chattanooga and Manhattan.

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