



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 6, No. 2 2004

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## Executive Director's Column

Ever since Bones Fest I, held on September 20, 1997, it has been my strongest desire to have bones players rise to the occasion and lend their support and efforts to the enjoyment of bones playing and the music which usually accompanies it. "You can feel it in your bones" is not just a slogan on a T-shirt but a real feeling not only among bones players but most folks everywhere. That is why bones playing or just listening to them is so unique. You can feel it. Energy is everywhere and bones players have an abundance of it. There is something about the sounds made by this ancient instrument that brings smiles to faces, tapping of toes and the desire to dance or just clap your hands. Bones

players have been doing this for well over 5000 years and 2004 is no exception. I can hardly wait to go to Reston, VA for Bones Fest VIII on August 20-22.

Out of the original crowd of eleven bones players attending Bones Fest I only Russ Myers of Brightwood, VA and I have been able to attend all seven Bones Fests. However, Steve Wixson arrived at Bones Fest II as a beginner, one handed bones player and soon became a Board Member, Secretary/Treasurer and Editor of the Bones Player. Remarkable! He even became a National Bones Playing Champion and has made many significant contributions to the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Shorty Boulet—He's got rhythm in his bones

### From Littleton's Senior Center to the Smithsonian, Shorty sure can play

Whitefield, New Hampshire—Elwin Boulet's bright blue eyes light up his face when he talks about bones – rhythm bones that is. He has played the ancient musical instruments for 72 of his 82 years including in Washington, D.C., at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

"All I need is the time of the music; I never miss a beat," he says.

He plays the curved, seven-inch-long pieces of wood like a percussion instrument. Clamping the bones firmly between two fingers on each hand, he creates a clacking, drum-like beat by quickly moving his arms and wrists – not the fingers – he's quick to explain.

It's a link to a past as far back as recorded civilization.

Rhythm bones have been excavated from prehistoric Mesopotamian graves (3000 B.C.) and found in Egyptian tombs, according to information on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) Web site. In Europe today, they're most widely heard with Irish, English and Scottish folk music.

Early English and Irish settlers introduced bones playing in the New World.

Then, as today, they were used as

accompaniment to jigs and reels to keep the beat steady by duplicating the rhythm of the music. Bones were also part of African-American minstrel shows, in vaudeville and jazz music. Rhythm bones have made a comeback in recent years due largely to renewed interest in Celtic music.

For Boulet, better known as Shorty, it was

*(Continued on page 7)*



Shorty Boulet playing rhythm bones at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute

## Editorial

The feature article is on member Shorty Boulet. It is a reprint of an article originally found by member Walt Watkins.

I had the honor of interviewing Ted Goon for a feature article for the newsletter (Vol 2, No 2.) Ted died last year and both his son, Bob, and Mel Mercier wrote obituaries. Ted was our first honorary member. We will remember him with a short ceremony at Bones Fest VIII.

Bob Bolton contributed a short article on bones in Australia. Several years ago Bob donated the diagram of a single hand with bones that appeared in the upper left corner of early newsletters. Thanks, Bob.

A short article compares the eight known bones instructional videos that have been reviewed in this newsletter.

Scott Miller has some thoughts about an International Rhythm Bones Competition Association. Maybe this is something we should discuss at Bones Fest VIII.

I just looked at this year's membership rosters and there are 111 paid members. This is more than any previous year at this point in the year. We normally get several members at each year's Bones Fest.

I forgot to include the minutes of the Board and Membership meetings in Vol 5, No 4 and they are presented in this issue.

One item discussed during the General Membership meeting was a Youth Track in the RBS. The idea was brought up by Constance Cook, but she was not present to discuss it. She wrote a short article on the subject for this issue. She hopes to attend Bones Fest VIII.

Bones Fest VIII is almost upon us and we expect another outstanding event. The Carroll's have selected an interesting venue and have a few surprises for us. We expect several new faces from the Washington, DC area and some old faces we've not seen for a while. You should have received your registration form in a separate mailing. If you have not received it, contact Sally Carroll at 703-709-0020 or email to

## Letters to the Editor

My dad died on August 4, 2003 at age 92. He was ready to go and I am at peace with it. I just wish I could have seen him play the bones one more time.

He enjoyed his friendship with you. The attention you gave him pleased him more than you could have imagined. Thank you for giving pleasure to an old and very talented good man. *Robert H. Goon*

(Editor's note: Bob is sending us a short video of Ted playing the bones that will be shown at Bones Fest VIII.)

Bones are contagious. I just have to learn how to play. I want to teach my grandson too! What a neat form of traditional music. Must keep it alive. *Charlene Rust* (Editor's note Charlene is a new member who found us through Gil Hibben and attended the Bones Fest VII.)

Bones Fest VII was a real hoot for the wife and kids (I thought they'd be bored to tears). They've seen me play bones for as long as they remember, but the fest inspired them to actually pick up some bones themselves and give 'em a rattle. Now they're excited about the possibility of putting on a family act for next year. *Scott Miller*

## Bones Calendar

Here are a few items from the Calendar that webmaster Jonathan Danforth keeps on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**August 7.** Gemini (including bones-player and member Sandor Slomovits). Riverfolk Music and Arts Festival, Manchester, MI. Gemini will be MC-ing and performing, and San will be giving a bones workshop!

**August 13.** Le Vent du Nord (with bones-player Benoit Bourque). Great Lakes Festival, East Lansing, MI.

**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. Contact [www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com](http://www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com).

## *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)

## Website of the Quarter

**[www.fruitjarpickers.com/memory.html](http://www.fruitjarpickers.com/memory.html)**. The Fruit Jar pickers are friends that sing and play music solely for the sheer joy of doing it. They are not a band in the usual sense, but a loosely knit group. They have a couple of CDs that can be ordered through the website.

Their bones player was Albert Bones Baker who died in 2002. The website has a short write-up on him. .

## Recorded Bones Music

RBS friend, Jennifer Cutting of the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, told us about this rather unusual website titled *Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories*. Scroll down and click on bones, then play the audio. A short bones section is about a minute into the recording.

*(Executive Director continued from page 1)*

Rhythm Bones Society. Martha Cowett, my daughter, created our first web page that brought so many of us together. Sons Dan, Al, Tom and John have also made many contributions and two grandchildren are ready for the stage. It continues to be a family affair.

Jonathan Danforth, grandson of Percy Danforth who many of you knew and respected as not only a great bones player but also the greatest promoter of this art, made our web page even bigger and better. Steve Brown, a Bodhran and Bones Player from Winchendon, MA arrived at Bones Fest IV and is now Assistant Director of the Rhythm Bones Society as well as the Worlds Best Irish bones player. Sally Carroll, a beginner in 1999 is a Board Member and will host Bones Fest VIII in August 2004 with husband Terry in Reston, VA.

This did not happen all at once. Along the way I was fortunate enough to meet many fabulous bones playing entertainers such as Darryl "Spike Bones" Muhrer, MO/IL, John "Mr. Bones" Cahill and wife Kay from Jonesboro, GA, Joe Birl, Phil PA, holder of a bones patent and Trade Mark of the Rhythm Bones Society, Jerry and Sharon Mescher, Halbur, IA, David "Black Bart" Boyles, Cedarburg, WI, Paul Duhan, a French Arcadian from LA, Vivian Cox, Shelbyville IN, one of the few professional players left on earth, Mel Mercier, Cork, Ireland, Board Member, teacher, writer and great performer, Gil and Linda Hibben, LaGrange, KY, Walt Watkins, Arlington, TX, Don DeCamp, Redfield, IA, Gerard Arsenault, Quebec, Canada. Shorty Boulet, Whitefield, NH and so many hundred more too numerous to mention who in one way or another charged my battery.

The spouses of those who hosted Fests, namely Val Cowett (BFI, BFII and BFVI), Wilma Myers (BFIII), Janet Wixson (BFIV), Jennifer Brown (BFV) and Linda Hibben (BFVII), will always have a special place in my heart. This has been a wonderful ride, down hill all the way. Thanks everyone. May your bones be with you.

## Ted Goon Obituary

I had the privilege of visiting Ted Goon twice. I cancelled a third visit at Ted's request because he was grieving after his beloved wife, Barbara had passed away. Fortunately, on the two occasions that I did visit, I got to meet Barbara. I found her charming and I liked her very much. Together, they received me with great warmth and generosity. My time with them was spent chatting informally in the living room of their apartment or in the dining hall where they would treat me to lunch. I also interviewed Ted in a more formal manner and I made video and audio recordings of these sessions. In the informal chats we spoke about current affairs and family, and Ted and Barbara asked me lots of questions about myself and the Rhythm Bones Society. They were also very curious about the current state of bones playing in the USA and Ireland. Barbara took full part in these discussions and she often joined in the conversation when I was interviewing Ted. She would lay out on the couch and listen in to the interview, contributing clarifications when she thought they were required! They also insisted that I play for them and Ted complemented me on my playing. He encouraged me in my efforts to play two-handed and we played together a couple of times, which was a great thrill.

I remember, with great affection, their affection for each other. After each visit Barbara would write to me on occasion and send me photographs she had taken. I felt very welcome in their home.

I interviewed Ted for hours and he remained lucid and energetic throughout. The most remarkable moment was when Ted decided that he would like to play along to his hit records for me. I captured Mr Goon Bones on video playing along to his own recordings! You can imagine how exciting that was - one of those magical fieldwork moments: ethnographic ecstasy! I was amazed at how well Ted remembered the bones arrangements. Naturally he was no longer able to perform them as he

once did but that didn't seem at all important to me. Rather, I was struck by his faithfulness to the rhythmic phrases he had created half a century ago! And there were moments of great poignancy too: once, or twice, when Ted tried to execute those wonderful syncopated passages from his recordings, his frustration with failing muscle-memory and muscle response was evident.

There are, no doubt, many thousands of miles between Cork and Huntington Beach and yet I always felt right at home when I landed at Ted and Barbara Goon's front door, and I will always cherish my experiences there. Ted, too, has passed on now, but his legacy is great, and, I hope that wherever he is, that he is playing those fantastic syncopated rhythms again and giving joy to all around him. *Mel*

## The Case For An International Rhythm Bones Competition Association

I'm sure you've already thought about this yourself, but maybe the time has come to hatch something such as an "International Rhythm Bones Competition Association" (IRBCA).

Such an organization could lend credibility to bones playing by lifting the professional stature of the instrument.

Perhaps the best way to accomplish this goal would be for the IRBCA to sanction official rhythm bones competitions. It might accomplish this aim by making it easy - and profitable - for prospective music venues to conduct rhythm bones competitions.

The IRBCA could encourage venues to hold rhythm bone competitions through education and support. This could take the form of providing, at a nominal fee, assistance such as contest rules and guidelines; a roster of certified judges; official IRBCA logos and trademarks; listing events in "Rhythm Bones Player" newsletter; access to historical archive of IRBCA sanctioned rhythm bones competitions; and maybe even

## Comparison of the Bones Instructional Videos

Over the past few years eight instructional videos have been reviewed in this newsletter. With the review in the last issue of the final video, it seems timely to compare these instructional materials to help bones players decide which one or ones to purchase.

First note that there are two non-video published materials by Percy Danforth's audio tape and booklet and Nicholas Driver's Bodhrán and Bones Tutor. Also there are two unpublished videos, one by Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell and the other by Gil Hibben. Both of these latter videos have been available for review and purchase at recent Bones Fests.

Irish style bones playing is taught in four videos by Chris Caswell, Tommy Hayes, Mel Mercier and Aaron Plunkett. The first three are primarily Bodhrán videos with bones added, but much of the information about the bodhrán rhythms applies directly to the bones. The first three teach one-handed bones playing while the Plunkett video teaches Irish and other rhythms using two hands.

Two-handed bones playing is taught in five videos by Percy Danforth, Fred Edmunds, David Holt, Barry Patton and Aaron Plunkett.

The Edmund technique is built on taps and is very different from the other videos which teach a more traditional style of bones playing. Bones players who use his drumming-like style can produce a wide variety of rhythm patterns. The book is the main teaching tool with 172 exercises while the video is a supplement that demonstrates the exercises. A person interested in the more traditional sound of bones playing might find this book and video a way to develop some additional skills. Dr. Edmunds' materials were recently donated to the Society. No decision has been made about what to do with them, but they will be on display at the next Bones Fest.

David Holt's video includes

instructions on several other folk percussion instruments. Tommy Hayes includes a short section on spoons. Chris Caswell includes spoons and Scottish Highland drums.

Hand independence (playing different rhythm in each hand at the same time) is taught in the Edmund and Plunkett videos. Danforth and Holt use the left hand primarily for syncopation.

The approximate length of bones instruction varies with each video as follows, Caswell, 4 1/2 minutes, Danforth, 80 minutes, Edmunds, 100 minutes, Hayes, 7 minutes, Holt, 7 minutes, Mercier, 14 minutes, Patton, 13 minutes and Plunkett, 70 minutes.

Two videos have structured exercises, Edmund and Plunkett.

All teachers are right-handed except Chris Caswell.

All of the video reviews are

### Abbeyfeale Report Steve Brown Wins Again Paddy Sport Murphy is Recognized

It's a wet, dark Monday evening in Abbeyfeale, as Steve Brown steps onto the stage to defend his title as All-Ireland Bones Playing Champion. A large crowd is assembled in front of the outdoor stage in the town square, many sheltering under shared umbrellas. There is a palpable sense of expectation in the air – will the two-handed 'Yank' pull it off again this year or will one of the locals wrest the title from him on this occasion? ('local', that is, in the European sense, of course - anywhere from Abbeyfeale to Copenhagen!)

This event is, for many, the highlight of the Abbeyfeale traditional music festival, which takes place annually over the first weekend of May. The competition is adjudicated this year by one of the icons of Irish bones playing, Ronnie McShane. Ronnie was a member of Sean O Riada's prototypical traditional music ensemble, Ceoltoiri Chualainn, in the 1960's. His is an unenviable task, as the standard of competition is always very high and, even though Steve

Brown has become somewhat of a celebrity in the area since his win last year, support for local players is invariably strong.

All nine competitors give a good account of themselves. Former champion, Patrick Donovan plays himself into one of the runner's-up places along with Yirdy Macher, one of only two, two-handed players to take to the stage this evening. In the end, the other ambidextrous clicker, Steve Brown, gives another superb performance to take the title back to North America once more.

Local bones hero, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy retired officially from competition this year, and, in acknowledgment of his extraordinary contribution to bones playing, the festival committee presented him with a special award at the end of the competition. On behalf of the Rhythm Bones Society, I, too, presented him with an award to honour his achievements. His musical and flamboyant style may no longer be witnessed on the competition stage but he can still be heard regularly, enthralling family and friends at sessions in Matt McCoy's Bar on the main street in Abbeyfeale. Paddy's musical legacy, too, can be seen and heard in the playing of many of the younger, local bones players, many of whom have been strongly influenced by his style. One of his protégés, David Murphy, a fine musician, was awarded second place in this year's competition. And, perhaps more significantly, one of David's own students, the four-year-old John Forde, ran away with the Junior title. John, whose feet don't yet reach the floor while he sits, looks and sounds uncannily like 'Sport' when he plays: a bones-playing, child prodigy? I wouldn't argue with that – he is certainly a wonder to behold. Will we have to wait until he comes of age for the title to come back to Ireland? Stay tuned and watch this space.

*Mel Mercier*

(Editor's note: To learn more about Paddy 'Sport' Murphy read Mel Mercier's article on him in the Rhythm Bones Player newsletter, Vol 2, No. 3. Back issues are available.)

# Bones Down Under

The playing of bones has a long history in British folklore. Their widespread popularity with Australian bush musicians would appear to be prompted by visiting minstrel shows but the Negro traditions of bones playing only appear in African countries formerly under British rule.

Playing bones are usually short pieces of bullock ribs that have been boiled, scraped and dried or else similar pieces carved from hardwood. One is locked rigid against the next finger by the thumb or forefinger and the second bone is held more loosely between the next two fingers. A rocking action of the wrist causes the bones to click together to the rhythm of the music.

Some virtuoso players can play bones in both hands at the same time with three or four bones in each hand. Cross and counter rhythms are possible and vaudeville stage performers could produce an astonishing array of sound effects to train stories and the like. Dance music is better served by starting with a good solid beat from one pair of bones before making things difficult for yourself.

It becomes increasingly difficult to get a good set of playing bones. The sort of beast slaughtered for beef these days is much too light to give a good firm set of bones. An old ex-butcher I knew had worked as a boner back during the days of vaudeville. He told me of the stage players sorting through the bones looking for 'the ivory ones' - the hard heavy bones best for playing; and that was back in the days when cattle still walked in to market! What hope have we now they are chauffeured in by road train? Your best bet is to ask your butcher for about 170 - 180 mm (6¾" - 7") of the heaviest rib bone he can lay his hands on and make sure you knock up some spares at the same time.

Alternatively you can try making some out of wood. Some old-timers insist Tasmanian Oak (*eucalyptus regna* / *~obliqua* / *~delegatensis*), Gidgee (*acacia cambagei*) or some other hardwood is the only one that

will do. One vaudevillian I interviewed said the only way to make a good set of bones was to carve them from 50-year-old Jarrah (*eucalyptus marginata*) floor boards! Another timber loved by stage performers was *lignum vitae* (*Guaiacum officinale*). You needed to know someone at the Naval Dockyards to get scraps but it does make some really good 'bones'. Unfortunately, it is now restricted by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) legislation. Some really hard Australian hardwoods - particularly the desert mulgas (*acacia* spp. - especially *~aneura*) - are too damn hard to comfortably play as bones!  
*Bob Bolton*

(This article was excerpted from a paper titled *Australian Traditional Bush Instruments* distributed through

## Tips and Techniques More on quadruplets

I am practicing my quadruplet roll as described in the last two issues of the newsletter. I cannot generate enough speed using Bill Vit's technique (three outgoing taps followed by one returning tap) so I am using Aaron Plunkett's method (a triplet preceded or followed by a tap.) I have greater appreciation now for what Bill can do with his hands.

We teach beginners three basic movements, the tap and the triplet which generate one or three sounds and the triplet roll. The tap works with most all music and other music is written in threes, jigs for example, such that the triplet is the basic to use. We also play a triplet in a quarter note beat and that can sound good too.

A lot of music is written in 2/4 and 4/4 with two or four beats to the measure and the beat being a quarter note duration. We are seeing more people playing duplets, twos, and quadruplets, fours to better support that music. Spoon players have an advantage in that it is easy to play twos and fours as well as ones and threes and more.

The last column talked about a quadruplet roll as being 16th notes,

that is four sounds to a quarter note beat. In a more general sense, a quadruplet can be played at any speed and what we heard Bill Vit play was a fast roll version where each sound was a 16th note or four sounds to a quarter note beat.

There are other ways to create quadruplet sequences. A series of duplets or double taps can make a quadruplet and note how different the accents (the louder beats) sound.

We have lots of control over taps and they can be turned into quadruplets. In the sequence tap, silence, tap, silence, this will be a quadruplet if all four elements are completed in one beat. The variations on this are endless particularly when playing two-handed bones.

A triplet without the final tap can be a quadruplet if followed by silence all in one beat. A triplet is typically three sounds in one beat followed by a tap which is the first sound of the next beat followed by two periods of silence. (By the way, have you noticed how hard it is to play just a triplet without following it with a tap.) With practice, the silence can be the first, second or third sound (that is, non-sound) of the sequence.

The two handed bones player can play a rhythm in one hand such that each sound of the rhythm played in the other hand falls half way between the sounds of the first hand. This in essence doubles the timing making a 16th note sequence out of an eighth note sequence.

Aaron Plunkett, on his bones video, teaches how to play 3 taps in one hand against 12 (four triplets) in the other hand thus accenting every fourth beat in the triplet roll creating the quadruplet sequence.

By using more energy and a longer arm swing, the triplet motion can generate four sounds instead of three. I cannot generate a one-handed roll doing this as my arm is way out of position at the end of the swing. So this may not be too useful.

If you have other ways of generating quadruplet sequences, please share it in a Letter to the Editor. *Steve Wixson*

## Minutes of the Board Meeting

Ev Cowett called the meeting to order about 4:00 pm on Friday, July 25, 2003 in the Boardroom of the Downtown Holiday Inn Hotel in Louisville, KY. All members were present along with Terry Carroll, Jonathan Danforth, Russ Myers and Walt Watkins

Gil Hibben reviewed the program for Bones Fest VII. The public is invited to attend the Saturday night session for free. The T-shirt company misspelled Louisville on our shirts and donated the defective ones to us. Motion was made, seconded and approved to sell those T-shirts for \$10. A professional video will be made of the Fest. Steve Brown reported on his experience with the BFV video purchased at \$20 and sold for \$25 to pay for postage. Motion was made, seconded and approved to do the same with the BFVII video.

There was a discussion about the need to get new blood on the Board. One possibility that was presented was to increase the number of Board members to as many as 13. Motion was made, seconded and approved to establish a committee to formulate such an amendment to our Bylaws. Ev Cowett appointed Sally Carroll, Chair; Walt Watkins and Steve Wixson to the committee with him being an ex officio member. He requested a report within 2 months.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to purchase 9 years use of the rhythmbones.com domain name for \$135.

Sally and Terry Carroll volunteered to host Bones Fest VIII in the Reston, VA area. Motion was made, seconded and approved for them to do this.

The Board thanked Jonathan Danforth for the great job he is doing with the website.

The motion was made, seconded and approved to prepare a Special Recognition Award to Paddy 'Sport' Murphy from Ireland for his contributions to bones playing. Ev Cowett will modify the existing Meritorious Service Award to generate this Recognition Award.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to raise dues to \$25 per year.

Gerard Arseneault sent us a gift of \$20 and requested some document to show that he was a member. This seemed like a good idea. Motion was made, seconded and approved to generate a Membership Certificate to use as needed. Ev Cowett will create this.

Sally Carroll announced that the Big Bone Lick State Park Festival would like to locate some bones players. This will be announced at the General Membership meeting.

Steve Wixson noted that Jim Meyer donated the rights and materials to Fred Edmunds' bones instructional books and videos to the Society. There was no time to complete this item.

The meeting was adjourned about 7 pm. Respectfully submitted, *Steve*

## Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Ev Cowett called the meeting to order at 4:15 pm, July 26, 2003, in the Auditorium of the Kentucky Theater in Louisville, KY.

Motion was made, seconded and approved to dispense with reading of the minutes that were printed in the newsletter (Vol 4, No 4).

Ev announced the Board decision to raise dues for next year to \$25 per year.

Ev presented the nominations by the Board for officers for next year; Everett Cowett, Executive Director, Steve Brown, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer and opened the floor for additional nominations. The motion was made, seconded and approved to close nominations and elect the officers by acclamation.

Ev presented the nominations by the Board for Board Members for next year, Sally Carroll, Gil Hibben, Mel Mercier and Jerry Mescher and opened the floor for additional nominations. The motion was made, seconded and approved to close nominations and elect the Board Members by acclamation.

Ev announced that Bones Fest VIII would be hosted by Sally and Terry Carroll in Reston, VA.

## Bones Fest VIII

August 20-22, 2004

Lake Anne Plaza

Reston, VA

(20 minutes from Dulles Airport)

*Hosted by  
Sally and Terry Carroll*

Registration Forms were sent in a separate mailing. If you have not received this information contact Sally Carroll at 703-709-0020 or email to [BonesFestVIII@att.net](mailto:BonesFestVIII@att.net).

See you there!

Steve Wixson reported briefly on Steve Brown's Regional Bones Fest and Jonathan Danforth as one of the attendees added some comments. We are looking for people to host annual and regional fests and a couple of people informally volunteered. The Board will follow up.

Kay Cahill brought up a idea from Constance Cook who wants a youth track in our Society. There was considerable discussion of this idea. Jonathan Danforth talked about using our website as a youth chat room and maybe the Society could produce educational materials. Ev will have the Board look into this.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:47 pm. Respectfully submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

(Fred Edmunds—Continued from page 1)

bones being played at house dances called kitchen junkets that drew his interest when he was 9 years old. He grew up in Newport, Vt., on Lake Memphremagog near the Canadian border.

“My mother played piano and dad called square dances. We’d go from one house to another [on weekends]. Sometimes we had fiddle players come, too,” he said. “I only owned a little harmonica. I watched someone who came [with bones] and I learned to play. At 10 years, I was playing them.”

Boulet said the elderly fellow, he recalls his name as “Chick,” became a good friend and taught him to play rhythm bones.

“I would borrow bones from him,” Boulet said. “I even dropped one pair in the lake while I was crossing over a channel on the lake. I never found them.”

Music at the kitchen junkets featured primarily French-Canadian tunes, Scottish and Irish jigs and reels. Over the years, Boulet taught himself to play guitar, tenor banjo, mandolin and a little piano, all by ear. He does not read music.

A wiry, energetic man with unbridled enthusiasm for music, Boulet seems ageless when he’s performing, including last month at the Littleton Area Senior Center with fellow Folklife Festival musicians Dudley and Jacqueline Laufman of Canterbury.

Yet his story is more like the song, “It’s a Hard-knock Life.”

His father died when Boulet was 15 and he went to work for a baking company in Newport, making deliveries “and fighting in the ring on weekends to make a little extra money,” he said. “My mother was blind and I had two younger brothers. My mother worried I’d get hurt.” But he continued to support the family with both jobs.

In 1944 he was in the Army and found himself in Japan. “The bones went with me,” he said. “I drove trucks.” His unit built campsites “and we hauled a lot of bamboo. We were waiting for the invasion [of Japan] but they surrendered.”

Meanwhile, his wife, Vaulene, had moved to Lisbon, where Boulet had also lived as a child. After the war, he first returned to New Britain, Conn., and his former job of driving a tractor-trailer for Spector Motors. The couple decided to make Lisbon home.

In Lisbon, he served in the Police Department for 13 years and in the Fire Department for about 17 years “I used to police the Lancaster Fair,” he said.

After the couple divorced, he settled in Whitefield in 1971 when he found a house “that fit my pocketbook then,” he said. He also served in the Fire Department in that community for about four years. His second wife, Audrey Thompson, died of cancer.

He continued to play bones with venues that included the Mt. Washington Hotel with the Blake Mountain Band, a Tri-County Senior Action event with the renown Riendeau brothers from Berlin, and teaching workshops in schools in Dalton, Whitefield and Jefferson through the N.H. Council on the Arts. He’s also played with David Andersen in the lobby of the Nashville Country Music Hall of Fame.

But the highlight of the years for Boulet was performing on the New Hampshire Front Porch at the Folklife Festival in Washington for two hot weeks from June 23 to July 4.

“We were billed as the Franco-American Soiree and Fiddle Traditions,” he said. “During the day, we played three, four sets and then we played at the hotel at night where the entertainers stayed.” The musicians and family members stayed at the Marriott in Alexandria, Va., just outside the city.

For Boulet and his wife, Shirley, it was the trip of a lifetime. “It was a wonderful trip, and educational,” said Boulet. “We did some sightseeing. My wife had never been to Washington.”

Boulet brought back a certificate from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which states in part that it was awarded “*in appreciation of exceptional contributions to the increase and diffusion of knowledge about cultures and traditions which enrich our nation and the world.*”

Since it was initiated in 1967, the festival has hosted presentations of cultural traditions with more than 16,000 musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, storytellers and others at the National Mall. They come to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and community-based traditions. It is the largest annual cultural event in the U.S. capital. New Hampshire’s presentation in 1999 included construction of a covered bridge and a stone wall, with all materials shipped to the site for authenticity.

The next big trip for the couple was to the rhythm bone festival Louisville, Ky., in July 2003.

## Playing 'dem bones . . . a Sidebar to the Shorty Boulet story

Watching Boulet clack the wooden pieces in time to music looks deceptively simple, especially when he says, “Anyone can learn to play them. The main thing is learning how to hold them.”

Once correctly positioned between the fingers of one hand or both, the trick is not to try to use the fingers to manipulate the sticks, but to use movement of the wrist and arm to generate the clacking sounds. It feels somewhat like trying to make sounds with oversize chopsticks.

When Boulet gets going, his whole body takes on the rhythm as he moves up and down, sideways, sways from side to side or continues with arms raised above his head. And he never misses a beat!

When he’s not busy performing, he handcrafts sets of rhythm bones from ebony, ironwood, even cow bones. When polished, the latter look like ivory. The curved pieces are seven inches long, an inch wide and one-quarter inch thick. Boulet gives lessons locally to those who buy sets from him.

“I still have the set I’ve had since the age of 10,” he says proudly. *Gina Hamilton, The Courier*,. Reprinted with permission.

## Youth Track in RBS?

Here is hoping some kind of a national (or international) children's wing can develop in the Rhythm Bones Society. The kids would love it. Could they have a kids price newsletter? (or e-newsletter)

Me, I am working on infiltrating the Junior Highs in my area. In each grade 6 class that graduates from my school, there are more and more competent bones players. I send referral lists over to the Junior High listing things like: (in addition to their band instrument and choral information) 2-handed bones player, bones soloist, one handed bones player, plays jaw harp, made his own bones, etc. If children are moving to another school, they often come by the music room to buy a pair of bones before they leave. In addition to kids figuring out how to make bones, we now have a parent who carved his son a beautiful curved spoon sort of bone out of bone, I think, to use with one of the wooden bones he had from his set he bought from Adam Klein.

Jonathan Danforth came to our Flag



Constance Cook, Adam Klein, Steve Brown and kids from Louis F. Angelo Elementary School

day (2003), and my students were marching with bones! Jonathan said he took pictures.

I taught a young man at the Smithsonian Folklife Fest (2003) how to play bones while standing in line for the porta-potties (one must amuse oneself). He loved it, and wants to buy heavy rib type cow bone bones. I referred him to [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) to see if there might be a regional group meeting in the Tacoma Park, MD area.

The interesting thing about having bones made by Adam Klein, Stephen Brown and the maker in the South (can't remember his name, but the one

who makes them for Mr. Bones-- Michael somebody) is that all these different styles give my students a way to compare sounds and styles and figure out what works best for them. Each student has a definite preference for a certain type of bones.

Upcoming: Rob Rudin will be visiting the Angelo School, for an afternoon, (March 2004) teaching washboard, bones, jawharp and other instruments of the jug band, and a student teacher's family hopes to donate quite a few more washboards to the school jugband program. Yours in boniness, *Constance Cook*

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*