



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 19, No. 3 2017

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Executive Director's Column

If the old adage “ big things come in small packages “ is true, you couldn’t find a better example than Bones Fest XXI. With an impending hurricane, and low attendance, one might think it was a disaster waiting to happen, but when rhythm bones gather, as proven by many Bones Fests, magic happens! Our close nit group bonded and reveled in our association, proving again that all we really need is to be together. Building on the solid foundation of a core group who had been to multiple Bones Fests, add two returning members who had attended their first fest last year, and a new to Bones Fest couple whose expertise on the bones is only exceeded by their sincere enthusiasm and warm personalities and you get a truly fantastic Bones Fest.

Dennis Riedesel did a truly magnificent job of

organizing a shape shifting Fest that required finesse and constant reorganizing in the face of a major hurricane, and he did it with grace and intelligence, not to mention ferrying every attendee to and from the airport in his truck.

Our unofficial award of Most improved Rhythm Bones player was a tie and unanimously went to Bruno Giles and Ron Bruschi, both of whom played great in performances, and clearly are as addicted as the rest of us. Marden and Randy Gordon were truly a delight, selling her distinctive Shooting Star Bones, but just radiating that enthusiasm for rhythm bones, playing, and life that makes a Bones Fest so enjoyable. I’m not going into too much detail here, I’m sure Dennis’ Fest review will do that,

Bones Fest XXI - The Harvey Fest

I planned on a hot time in Texas but things turned out to be relatively cool. Lots of cool things happened at BFXXI. The temperature, wind and rain as cool even while everyone except me was wondering how they were going to get back home on Sunday or Monday. In regards to Harvey, I wish to declare all who participated in BFXXI “Honorary Texicans” since real Texicans (who are knowledgeable) ride out these monsters of Mother Nature by stocking up on food and beer and throwing one heck of a cool hurricane watch party....which we did!

COOL THINGS:

I decided to provide cowboy hats instead of the usual event t-shirt in reaction to the anticipated hot and sunny days, My hat maker was forced by the approaching storm to go back to his home near the coast; leaving me to custom block the straw hats. As it turned out, the hats didn’t have to provide shade but served as very cool umbrellas.

With just a few of us in attendance, we were able to interact with each other on a much deeper, longer, and intense level than we would have been able to do had this been a large festival.

The low numbers also gave us an opportunity to utilize a “System Analysis” tool to take a quick, but yet efficient, look at ourselves and develop a hierarchical plan of actions that I and others serving on the board feel would be beneficial to the growth and future development of our society.

The performance gig inside the walls of the Alamo Compound drew a large number of Alamo visitors and gave us the opportunity to demonstrate and teach about our instruments to people from all over the world.

(Continued on Page 6)



This is how close Hurricane Harvey was to Bones Fest XXI

Editorial

As is my practice while the Fest is fresh in my mind, I write this as I fly home leaving San Antonio on time. While BFXXI was the lowest attended Bones Fest, it was as always a weekend of fun and memories. This was the first Fest for Mardeen and Randy Gordon, and we got to meet the makers of Shooting Star Rhythm Bones. They experienced the solar eclipse as well as the edge of the Category 4 Hurricane Harvey.

In the old movie of the same name, Harvey is an invisible 6' 3½" tall rabbit who is a pooka, a benign but mischievous creature from Celtic mythology who is especially fond of social outcasts (like rhythm bones players). Hurricane Harvey was sort of like that, ever present, but invisible though he caused the loss of three outdoor events. He was close, but never directly seen as shown in the photograph on Page 1. While we were fortunate, there are many in the coastal regions and Houston that were not so fortunate.

I called the last Fest in San Antonio the Performance Fest since we had over 9 hours of stage time, and I call this the Harvey Fest. If you did not attend this year's Fest because it would be too hot, you were wrong. The only hot thing was the rhythm bones playing.

We need a host for Bones Fests XXII, and if you are at all interested, let me know and I will email you a copy of the Bones Fest Host Guide that outlines what it takes to host a Fest.

The article titled "Rudiments of Rhythm Bones" in the last issue of the newsletter posed a question about what to call the rudiment with two clicks. I used the word 'Duplet' noting that it has a different meaning in classical music, and Steve Brown calls it the 'Double Tap.' We talked about it at BFXXI and a better word is 'Double' which I will use editorially in future newsletters.

Letters to the Editor

Some years ago I saw an ad for open sessions advertised in the DC City Paper at Nanny O'Briens on Connecticut Avenue. The ad indicated a session on Saturdays for more experienced players

and a Sunday session for less experienced players. Both were listed as 'open'.

Figuring I had sat in with a number of luminaries on the local and national scene I headed up to Connecticut Avenue for the Saturday session. I started playing on a tune and was promptly told by the leader this was a 'closed session' and required that the players have a certain level of expertise. Figuring I had played for years at the Ben Bow with Jesse & Terry Winch (Celtic Thunder), and taught Karen Seime Singleton bones at the Ben Bow and sat in with DeDannan at the Birchmere there shouldn't be a problem. Not so, said the leader and was told the Sunday session was open, Saturday was reserved for 'experienced' performers. So I left. Two weeks later I figured I would show up again and see if this 'leader' was still obtuse. As I started to play the so called 'leader was about to bust my chops when Rowan Corbett came in and greeted me. He asked if I would come sit by him so we could trade some licks and compare technique. At that point the 'leader' left me alone and I played until the session ended. I never went back to this session and any session I know he is associated with I make it a point to avoid. This session leader is well known in the DC metro area and, like me, has also played at the White House. *Hank Tanenbaum*

Executive Director Column Continued

but I do want to thank each and every attendee. This is a Fest that will stand out strongly and most fondly in my memory! You don't have to go any further than the Fest group picture to get the full flavor of it. Yippie yi yo ki yay!

Our thoughts have once again started to focus on next year. As no one has come forward to host, we are coming to you, our membership, for someone to come forward to volunteer. One idea that has been floated is the possibility of a fest committee which would take some of the burden off the host. Please contact me directly to further explore this. In particular we reach out to those of you who have been to a number of Fests, perhaps have entertained the idea of hosting but perhaps are put off by the seeming enormity of the task. A commit-

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The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.org

tee could really cut down on the size of the task, and make it more manageable. Talk to one of the previous hosts to get an overall picture of hosting a fest. Remember, these Fests continue because of the individuals that have embraced them. If you have been to multiple Fests and haven't hosted, maybe this is your time! Uncle Bones Needs You! *Steve Brown*

Bones Fest XXII Host Needed

As requested by RBS Board, this is an ad for a host for Bones Fest XXII. Steve Brown described the need at the end of his Editorial just above. If interested, use our Contact Us page to let us know and we will send you our BF Host Guide that shows what the job entails. One of the fun things about hosting a Fest is the planning because you have complete freedom to come up with something really unique and neat.

Minutes of the Board Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 2:05 PM in the Alamo Room of the Crocket Hotel. Those present were Steve Brown, Sharon Mescher, Skeff Flynn, Dennis Riedesel and Steve Wixson with guests Jonathan Danforth and Randy and Mardeen Gordon.

The minutes from the last meeting were approved as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented the 2016 Treasurer's Report and it was approved. A copy with all supporting documentation will be sent to the Executive Director.

Steve Brown called the meeting to order as the Nominating Committee, and all current members were nominated for 2018.

New Business. A motion was made and approved to pay all expenses for BFXXI since the Fest Budget did not cover the low attendance and the Hurricane. The Board gave Dennis a round of thanks for hosting BFXXI.

No one has volunteered to host Bones Fest XXII, and an announcement will be placed in the RBP newsletter.

There was a discussion of the Planning Session that Dennis organized. One item was Networking and Communications and Jonathon will setup a Google Group for members to communicate.

There was a discussion about the website upgrade by Steve Wixson. There was consensus that we need to understand how the website is being used before we can implement a new website, and that we can use Wixson's update with Google Analytics to give us that data.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:05. Respectfully Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

Steve Brown called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM in the Alamo Room of the Crocket Hotel.

The minutes from the last meeting were approved as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented the 2016 Treasurer's Report. Steve Brown opened

the meeting for the election of Officers and Board members, and Steve Wixson read the slate of nominated members, Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members, Skeff Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin. The floor was open for other nominations and there being none the motion was made and approved that the nominees be elected by acclamation.

There being no new or old business, the meeting adjourned at 3:14 PM.

Respectively submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

A Reflection on Bones Fest XXI

Is there any threat from Mother Nature that can prevent rhythm bones players from gathering at a festive venue? Based on Bones Fest XXI, Hurricane Harvey couldn't even dampen the excitement and anticipation of rhythm bones friends who attended. And, with Dennis at the helm, we adjusted to a well-planned and full-of-activities schedule for the Fest.

The fact that only fourteen RBS members attended the Fest did not seem to effect the experience. We wowed a huge crowd of tourists in the Alamo Compound. So much fun!

Dennis led us through the history of the Alamo, and the making of the movie, "The Price of Freedom," in which he had a part. I loved the history, but I did enjoy his story about the director's opinion of Dennis's performance during the filming! Even though we had seen this movie in 2011, the Brown family and I watched it again. I wanted to try to find Dennis among all the actors, but I didn't. I did hear rhythm bones, but couldn't even find this person!

I loved visiting and jamming with all of the familiar friends, and meeting and making new friends. Mardeen Gordon's gift of her embroidery of Jerry's and my hands was "icing" on the Fest (see photograph on page 5). She spent a year-and-a-half stitching this magnificent piece of art.

Thank you, Dennis, for hosting another action-packed, marvelous Bones Fest.

Report on BFXX Sea Shanty Workshop

The emphasis of this workshop was to work on our singing and playing rhythm bones at the same time through authentic sea shanties and fore-castle songs of the 19th century.

Tim Reilly and I broke down the shanties (work songs) into different categories depending on the various heaves and hauls needed to operate various ship-board equipment (i.e. Halyard, capstain, bunting, pumps, etc). These were all sung in a call-and-response manner.

We also performed fore-castle, or recreational songs, accompanied by all of the attendees, ending with a rousing version of Spanish Ladies (as mentioned in Melville's Moby Dick, Chapter 41).

There is a vast repertoire of this aural tradition, but we tried to emphasize rhythm bone friendly pieces, some of which are as follows:

- Fuba-Wuba John (opening warm up song)
- Haul Away Joe
- Johnny Come Down To Hi-Lo ("...I put that jawbone on the fence and I ain't Heard nothing but the jawbone since")
- Reuben Ranzo
- Haul Away For The Windy Weather
- Strike The Bell
- Old Balena

When demonstrating rhythm bones to people who have never seen them before, it's a nice option to have a little ditty to sing as an accompaniment (to the rhythm bones, of course!).

You can discover more shanties (also spelled "chanteys") by a quick YouTube search for Stan Hugill, who was a sea music historian and the last true working Chanteyman. Between Stan and the X-Seamen's Institute, that's about as authentic as it gets.

(Honorable mention to Steve Wixson also discovered a rare album from Bristol by Erik Illott who sings and plays the bones on most of the tracks).

Remember, in the words of Stan Hugill, a strident voice is much preferable over a pretty one!

Cheers Bonesmates.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenny Wolin



Jonathan Danforth performing at the Alamo Compound



Randy Gordon Performing at Saturday's Show



BFXXI attendees kicked out of the Bar at the Menger Hotel



Steve Brown introducing Bruno Giles at the Alamo Compound



Bones Fest XXI Attendees from the left, Jonathan Danforth, Jim Runner, Randy Gordon, Mardeen Gordeon, Jeremy Brown, Steve Brown



Bones Marketplace



Closeup of the Bones Fest XXI Hat



Jim Runner performing at Alamo Compound



Ron Bruschi performing at Saturday's Show



Dennis Riedesel custom blocking our Fest Hats



Mardeen Gordon embroidered this for Sharon Mescher. Sharon's hand is on the left and her late husband Jerry's is on the right (See Page 3).



Mardeen Gordon teaching Jeremy Brown



Dennis Riedesel's RBS Planning Session



Host Dennis Riedesel, Jennifer Brown, Bruno Giles, Sharon Mescher, Ron Bruschi, Marie Bruschi, Steve Wixson and Skeffington Flynn

Not only are BFXXI participants able to place in their performance bibliography an entry that they performed at the Alamo but they can also include that they performed in Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders bar of renown — "The Menger Bar." And then they were promptly thrown out of the bar. Some people get thrown out of a bar just once for playing bones, but I have now been thrown out of this bar twice!!

The performance concert Saturday evening was an awesome experience of observing all the different bones playing styles in concert with accompaniments of blues guitar, whistling, fiddles, harmonica, banjo, voice, and electronic music sources. In addition, there were just "bare bones" with no musical accompaniment and, I believe, one or two debuts of original works.

I got to provide, for taking Texas selfies, my cowboy reenactment clothing and accouterments which were promptly utilized to turn everyone into the cowboy idiom "drugstore cowboy—all hat but no cows."

For me, the fest was fun. I enjoy a challenge of making an event "come together" and this one was a bit more than what I expected with making changes on the fly as the situation kept developing and then redeveloping. I think the only time I "lost it" was Saturday after the membership meeting when I forgot my revised2 schedule and forgot about the Round Table Discussion on Teaching Bones. However, the impromptu discussion about teaching after the concert took care of that—Way Cool!

Super Cool—I think everyone from the Fest is home safe and sound; some after experiencing flight changes and delays. I heard back from most everyone after they got home.

However, the most super-duper cool thing was to see the embroidery artwork of Mardeen Gordon's (from Shooting Stars Bones fame) that was presented to Sharon Mescher. One of Jerry Mescher's hands holding a set of bones and one of Sharon's hands holding bones in this life-like rendering by thread was a tearjerker!

Special thanks to Marynell and Glen Young who provided live music for the weekend and Dave Williams who joined them on Thursday and at the Alamo. *Dennis Riedesel*

San Antonio Newspaper Article

Title: "One man's barbecue scraps is another's musical instrument."

Rhythm bones are indeed an instrument for all generations. Dennis Riedesel on Page 8 shows Alamo living historians Scott Jones, center, and Joe Weathersby how to hold them during a public performance by the Rhythm Bones Society. According to the Rhythm Bones Society, the instrument dates back as far as 3000 BC.

Rhythm bones may look like the picked-clean scraps at a barbecue rib buffet, but in the hands of Dennis Riedesel and his fellow members of the Rhythm Bones Society, the obscure percussive instrument is the stuff of music gold.

Take the sweet noise it made recently in San Antonio.

Late last month, Riedesel and several other bones players gathered at the back of the Alamo grounds, clickity-clacking with the front-porch folk music of an acoustic guitarist and a married couple on the fiddle, the wife garbed in an apropos skeleton T-shirt and leggings.

If you've never heard of rhythm bones, it's not surprising as it's hardly mainstream and players are few. Riedesel, a Boerne resident, may be among the only in the area.

The most basic rhythm bones are just that — actual bones, such as beef short ribs, which you can boil clean, dry in the sun or oven, then cut to length and sand smooth. But despite the skeletal name, Riedesel said most rhythm bones are made from some type of hardwood, such as teak, ebony, birch or walnut.

"It usually depends on the loudness and then the tonal quality of the bones," said Riedesel, himself a fan of African blackwood. "How crisp they are and how lively sounding they are versus a dead thump."

Playing the rhythm bones is a lot like playing the spoons or castanets, just with more wrist action, less finger pinching and a completely different rhythm. Bones players hold a pair of the slightly bowed little planks between their fingers like chunky chopsticks, then rotate their forearms and hands so the bones hit together

in single, double and triple beats.

Gus Wanner, whose encyclopedic knowledge of guitars and other instruments has served musicians for more than a decade at Guitar Tex sales and repair shop in San Antonio, said rhythm bones was primarily the instrument of slaves and was culturally appropriated much like the banjo.

"It's a wonderful rhythmic thing, and it is the precursor to playing spoons," Wanner said.

The Rhythm Bones Society website traces the instrument's roots as far back as recorded civilization, noting rhythm bones have been dug up in prehistoric Mesopotamian graves and Egyptian tombs from around 3000 BC. "It has existed for eternity, if you want to say that," Riedesel said.

Rhythm bones likely hit North American shores with early English and Irish settlers, the site said, and would grow to become a cornerstone of minstrel shows in the 19th and early 20th centuries, then later vaudeville and jazz music.

The site also noted the renaissance of folk music in the 1960s has since made rhythm bones an added fixture to zydeco, bluegrass and classic folk music of the Ozarks and Appalachian Mountains.

Riedesel prefers playing the bones to what he considers the authentic Americana folk music of the late 1700s and early 1800s — namely old Irish, Scottish and English precursors to bluegrass. Riedesel got his first taste of bone playing while a re-enactor and wardrobe crew member on the set of the 1988 IMAX film, "Alamo: The Price of Freedom." He noticed another cast member playing the bones in a scene and was intrigued.

Riedesel has his own collection of rhythm bones in various materials and from various animals. He has some made from Texas iron wood, buffalo ribs and even a set he carved from a chunk of mammoth tusk found in the Alaskan permafrost. He also has some custom LED-rigged wood bones that flicker like fireflies, plus a bone-shaped bone tie for those extra formal occasions.

And if you think those bones materials vary, their playing styles are just as colorful and eclectic. Rhythm Bones Society member Skeffington Flynn out of West Virginia plays with both hands at the same time, waving one over the other

like a sort of chattering hand jive. Mardeen Gordon, who was at her first Bones Fest last week with husband Randy from California, prefers a single-handed play with one bone held high and the other held low.

“Everyone else plays different,” said Sharon Mescher, a Rhythm Bones Society member from Iowa. “The diversity is what I like.”

Mescher picked up the bones 11 years ago as another way to connect with her late husband Jerry, a Rhythm Bones Society member who died in 2015 and who had been playing the bones since he was 10.

Being a rare musical instrument, rhythm bones have a way of getting passed down through the generations.

One of the instrument’s most notable players, the late musician Percy Danforth, taught his grandson Jonathan Danforth from Massachusetts, who joined the Rhythm Bones Society a little more than a decade ago after discovering the group at a Massachusetts folk festival.

“The discovery of a community — which is what this really is, almost a family like community — brings a lot of joy into an instrument that I already loved a lot through my own family connection,” Jonathan said.

It’s the kind of connection Rhythm Bones Society Executive Director Steve Brown strives to make with bones enthusiasts and curiosity seekers alike.

“The bones became kind of a major part of my life,” said Brown, who joined the Rhythm Bones Society when it began in 1999 and has headed it since 2004. “It’s a combination of the youthful aspects and historical aspects of it.”

Brown is considered somewhat of a living legend in rhythm bones circles, both domestic and abroad. He was the first American ever to knock out back-to-back wins at the All-Ireland Bones Competition in Abbeyfeale, considered the world championship of bones playing.

Brown said rhythm bones remain unusual and rare enough that most people don’t know they exist, though most people have heard the instrument’s most high-profile player and tune. That player would be Freeman “Brother Bones” Davis. And that tune would be Davis’ 1949 recording of the 1925 jazz standard “Sweet Georgia Brown,” best known as

the famous whistled and bones-backed theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters.

Brown said today the most recognized bones player would probably be Dom Flemons, co-founder and former member of the Grammy Award-winning, African American string band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops. The multi-instrumentalist now tours as “The American Songster,” playing folk instruments that include the banjo, harmonica, and of course the bones.

Nevertheless, rhythm bones remain that extra rare sight and sound, including in San Antonio.

“I don’t think you see it much of anywhere,” said Steve Schnipper, vice-president of entertainment for the San Antonio Blues Society. Schnipper said he’s been around blues music since the mid-1960s. In all that time he’s only seen the bones performed twice.

At least both times were relatively recent. The first was last year at the International Blues Competition in Memphis. The other was a few months later in San Antonio, when the city hosted the annual convention of the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica. Alas, neither instance involved a San Antonio bones performer.

Riedesel said he knows of fewer than 10 bones players in Texas, so he hopes the Rhythm Bones Society’s latest noise out of San Antonio draws more players and enthusiasts, perhaps for some open mic sessions where he can join them for a jam.

Any excuse to open more eyes, ears and especially hands to that ancient instrument whose roots are tied to the very beat of music. *René A. Guzman*. Copyright 2017 San Antonio Express-News, reprinted with permission.

[Editor’s note. To view this article online, see more photographs and watch the video that was taken during our Alamo performance, do an internet search for “expressnews.com rhythm bones riedesel”]

Rhythm Bones History Rap Song

[Editor’s Note: This was performed with rhythm bones accompaniment at the Bones Fest XXI Saturday Night Show.]

The bones have been around since man began. Along with the drum they made the first rhythm band.

Buried in graves in Mesopotamia and played in the theatre of ancient China. They’ve been used for everything from hunting prey to awakening the spirits on a holy day.

But I like to play them just to hear their sound. So let me show you how I shake my bones around.

The best part is their versatility. How two sticks of wood can be so wild and free. With a flick of the wrist the rhythm can change from a 4/4 time to a 1-2-3-1-2-3-1-2-3-1-2-3.

The Irish adopted the bones and the bodhran to play in the pubs for a dance or a song. And when they arrived on the shores of our country. To keep up their spirits they brought them along.

The next group of migrants to take up the rhythm were brought to our country without their consent. The songs that they sang as they worked the plantations. Brought African rhythms wherever they went.

And when they came North with their newfound freedom. They entertained all with their black minstrel shows. Playing along with the songs and the stories. More often than not you would find Mr Bones.

Popular culture has never embraced them. And yet they’ve been clacking for three thousand years.

The tongs and the bones were requested by Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream by William Shakespeare.

And when Mary Poppins and Bert went a-strolling the cartoon band had the bones rattling ‘round.

And thousands have heard them without realizing in the Globetrotter’s theme song of Sweet Georgia Brown.

They are still played today with some bands you might know of, but it’s up to the boners to keep them alive.

By playing and teaching a new generation this age old tradition continues to thrive. *Mardeen Gordon*



Rhythm bones are indeed an instrument for all generations. Dennis Riedesel, right, shows Alamo living historians Scott Jones, center, and Joe Weathersby how to hold them during a public performance at The Alamo. Photograph by Darren Abate. Copyright 2017 San Antonio Express-News, reprinted with permission.

Rhythm Bones Society

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