



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 20, No. 3 2018

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Executive Director's Column

My good friend and fellow Bone player, Yirdy Machar, has passed! He was a true spirit, please see our tribute to him starting on page 3.

More than 10 years ago I visited the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Ma. to view an exposition of Banjo's including a number of Banjo's from a friends collection, Jim Bollman. Walking around the exhibit, it was clear there was a real connection to rhythm bones, as many of the original photographs featured rhythm bones players along side Banjo players and other musicians. But I was unprepared for what I saw when I turned a corner. There in a glass case were four what appeared to be

ebony rhythm bones, but what I learned later was rosewood, in a glass case mounted on the wall. Each one of the rhythm bones had silver caps on each end, and were decorated by musicians and other figures. On one was the inscription, "To Charles H. Atkinson from the Niagra Firemans Association." I soon learned that the rhythm bones were on loan from the Yale University Musical Instrument Collection. Thinking that I might try to reproduce them, I wrote the Curator of the Collection asking among other things, the dimensions, and any idea of who Charles H. Atkinson (Continued on Page 7)

How I Got To Play Bones In An Opera

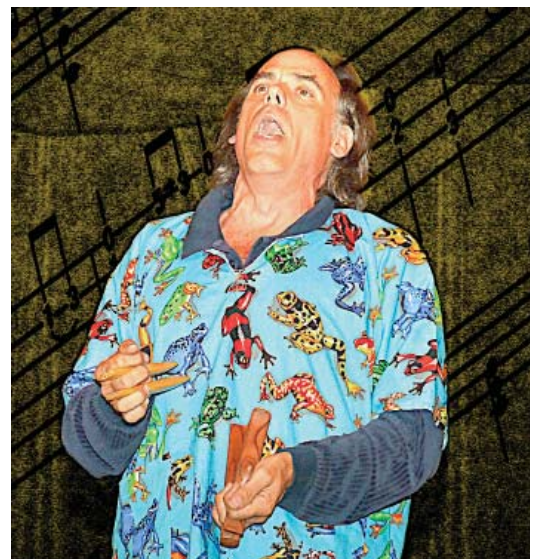
Most of you folks know me as the Bones Playing Opera singer, or the Opera Singing Bones Player. The only opera I know of that officially includes rhythm bones at all is my own piece, LEITHIAN, where one of the orchestra percussionists must play rhythm bones. However, in 1997 I got to work my bones playing into another opera, SUSANNAH by Carlisle Floyd, at the Central City Opera House in Colorado. This is the tale of how that came to be.

In 1996 I was hired to sing the Duke of Mantua in RIGOLETTO -- this is the opera that features the aria I sang while playing rhythm bones at the Shepherdstown Bones Fest (see photograph in right column). While hiking in the mountains above town with my best friend and fellow tenor Richard Troxell, we chanced upon a cow skeleton. I took the ribs back to town, and in the toolshop of the opera company's maintenance guy, used a vice, saw, files and sandpaper to fashion several pair of very nice rhythm bones. I then played two pair of them at one of the traditional after-opera gatherings in the bar adjacent to the opera house, called by the opera company "Après Opéra" -- but by one of the locals, a very literate fan of baseball and beer named Lew Cady (whose wife was the opera fan), "Post Op".

I did this because one of the veteran accompanists had complained that this gathering used to be a fun time for the stars to let their hair down and sing something NOT operatic, but that in recent years it had become a sing-off for the apprentices, all eager to try out some ballbuster aria or other on the public.

I decided to do something more appearances. At one I sang the famous aria from Wagner's Die Walküre, "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond," with the regular piano accompaniment plus my rhythm bones, since that's one of the few opera arias with a steady beat. (Wagner was many things, but he understood the power of repetitive rhythm and persistent percussion.)

My successful performances as the Duke, coupled with the full beard I showed up with -- I had hiked the Grand (Continued on Page 4)



Adam Klein sings and plays rhythm bones to a song from opera RIGOLETTO at Bones Fest XIX. Photo by Art Sands

Editorial

I join with others in this issue in remembering Yirdy Machar. I met him at the bones competition in Iowa and he came to Bones Fest IX staying at my house including a few days after the Fest. I have a ball cap that he calligraphed with my name, and I save it for special occasions. There was a Video of the Month in September remembering Yirdy, and you can view it at <http://rhythmbones.org/video/YirdyMacharTributeVideo.mp4>.

Bones Fest V was the first Fest Adam Klein attended, and we were wowed by his operatic voice and rhythm bones playing accompanied by Constance Cook. Over the years he attended several Fests and this year with his wife, Tami Swartz, an opera singer herself. His story of playing rhythm bones in an opera begins on Page 1.

I first contacted the Harlem Globe-trotters about the *Sweet Georgia Brown* record in 2000. A man by the name of Governor Vaughn sent me Page 1 of a history of the recording. I forgot about it until lately, and when I contacted them again they sent me a full copy. The story of how it became their theme song is on Page 6.

The minutes from the Board and General Membership Meetings are a reconstruction from the memories of the Board. After BFXXII, I transcribed my notes of these meetings and emailed them to the Board for review. When I went to insert them into this newsletter, I could not find that email and the Board had to reconstruct. This fact will be noted at the meetings at BFXXIII.

Minutes Of The General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Steve Brown, on June 9, 2018, about 3 PM, outside the Governor's Pavilion in Lincoln, NH with all members present except Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin. The Minutes of the previous Board meeting were approved as printed in the newsletter. The Treasurer's Report was read and approved.

The Board sitting as the Nominating Committee nominated the existing members to run for the coming year.

Skeff Flynn had more RBS Brochures printed and the motion was made and approved to reimburse him for that expenditure.

There was extensive discussion about Bones Fest XXIII. We received a proposal from Randy Seppala to hold a 'Blues' Bones Fest in Clarksdale, MS and a proposal for a Bones Fest held at the same time as the Abbeyfeale Fleadh and Bones Competition in Ireland. We noted that we really would like a Fest in Ireland, but unfortunately, the dates for both proposals are on the same weekend. We will contact Randy about changing the date and poll the members at the General Membership Meeting to see how many might attend each Fest.

The meeting was adjourned at about 4:30 PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve

Minutes Of The Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Executive Director, Steve Brown, on June 9, 2018, about 4:30 PM, in the Governor's Pavilion in Lincoln, NH. The minutes of the last meeting were read and approved as printed in the newsletter. Steve Wixson presented the Treasurer's Report noting we have a bank balance of just over \$7,000. Steve Wixson presented the slate of officers from the Nominating Committee, and Steve Brown opened the floor for nominations. Being none the motion was made and approved to elect the following by acclamation, Steve Brown, Executive Director, Bill Vits, Assistant Director, Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer, and Members At Large, Skeffington Flynn, Sharon Mescher, Dennis Riedesel and Kenny Wolin.

Steve Brown led a discussion about BFXXIII and a straw vote was taken to see how many might attend in Clarksdale and Ireland. There was strong support for both Fests.

The meeting was adjourned at about 4:25 PM. Respectfully submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary.

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 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

Yirdy Machar Obituary

Member Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar, aged 71, passed away Monday, July 9, 2018. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and lived in many different countries before settling down in Denmark some 35 years ago. He was divorced and the father of two children and was a grandfather and a great grandfather too.

Since 1991 he lived in a wooden cottage under a large oak tree at the edge of a forest near Kattegat on the island of Zealand together with his soulmate Mette whom he met back in 1985.

As Yirdy's father was a Naval Officer and travelled a lot his schooling took place in many different countries. He was however fortunate enough to spend some time in Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland, where he because of his then bad hand writing received special tuition from Tom

Gourdie who was a prominent Scottish calligrapher, artist and teacher.

Yirdy left home at an early age and joined the UK Armed Forces. He served in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, and also at The Royal Air Force Station located in Leuchars, Fife, Scotland, where he was a member of the Mountain Rescue Team.

After moving to Denmark Yirdy worked as a pub bartender in Copenhagen for some time until he got stabbed. Following that he devoted himself to the music and the calligraphy.

Yirdy was a passionate rhythm bones and spoons player and loved entertaining audiences with his playing music, his singing and his story telling as well as giving workshops on rhythm bones and spoons and other instruments.

Even in his last days he felt like entertaining. He would crack jokes on the staff at the hospital and on several occasions he captivated the staff with his rhythm bones playing.

Yirdy was a gentleman with a capital G, a man of independent mind, an honest man. He also taught the fine art of Calligraphy.

He learned playing rhythm bones from his family and played a variety of other instruments over the years including pipe band side drum, tenor drum and bass drum, bodhran, harmonica, concertina, diatonic accordion - or button box as he preferred to call it - tin whistle, acoustic bass guitar and mandolin.

A versatile musician who performed with many different bands as well as at myriad venues including pubs, clubs, concerts, cabarets, old-time music halls, radio & television broadcasts, variety shows, folk nights, and festivals around the world as well as in Denmark.

Always carrying his favorite rhythm bones and spoons with him in his rucksack. He mastered two handed playing and would play anything from two to four bones in each hand and for that matter all sorts of spoons.

He used a variety of rhythm bones from various makers, Paddy Sport Murphy, Steve Brown, Nick Driver and Victor Smith (a Shetlander living in Denmark) of Flatbush Stringed Instruments. Victor Smith was the one who made the lovely pair of Brazilian Rosewood Spoons for Yirdy.

He won the 'World Bones Champi-

onship in Iowa in 2002, and competed in the All Ireland Bones Contest a couple of times. He attended Bones Fest XIX and won the hearts of attendees. There are also couple of YouTube videos featuring Yirdy.

His fine playing stays with us in the form of two CDs - 'Mac Bones and the B Band' and 'BoneZone - In Session' - where Yirdy plays rhythm bones or spoons on most of the tracks.

Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar will live on in our memories and hearts. *Mette Warming*

Remembering Yirdy Machar

Like so many other RBS members who knew him, I met Yirdy in 2005 at Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Yirdy was a person you could hardly forget. For starters, there was Yirdy's distinctive physique. He looked like Santa. Yirdy himself admitted that he has "doubled as Father Christmas." In addition to his majestic appearance, Yirdy had an incredibly soothing voice. Listening to Yirdy speak was mesmerizing. He reminded me of a professor I had many years ago whose voice was so soothing we could listen to him talk all day long. And if you thought Yirdy's speaking voice was marvelous, his singing voice was even more phenomenal. Women seemed to melt at the sound of it. Well, my significant other always went gaga when I played Yirdy's *Mac Bones and the B Band* CD. And then there was Yirdy's cheeky sense of humor. He was lots of fun to be with. Yirdy was one of those folks who attracted people like a magnet. You couldn't help but be taken in by the guy.

RBS members at that Bones Fest might best remember Yirdy for the workshop he gave on his "Full House" method for rattling eight bones. Or maybe it was Yirdy demonstrating the fine art of calligraphy. Or maybe it was Yirdy's outstanding performance at the public stage show. But no matter why you remembered him, everyone's life was brightened at Bones Fest IX by Yirdy's infectious congeniality. It's no wonder that Yirdy was such a big hit that year.

Personally, what endeared me most to Yirdy were some life experiences we

had in common. Like, we were about the same age (less than a year apart). And we both attended a handful of elementary schools (5 for me, 4 or 5 for Yirdy depending how you count them). We both left home and joined the military at a young age (me at 17, Yirdy even younger). Years later when much older, we both won the NTCMA (National Traditional Country Music Association) Bones Contest (Yirdy in 2002, me in 2004). And we both regularly rattled eight bones (distinctly different grip styles, but 8 bones nonetheless). I felt a special bond with Yirdy because of the life experiences we had in common. I'm sure a great many other folks had their own special connection with Yirdy.

Yirdy was larger than life and a legendary bones player. We will dearly miss him. *Scott Miller*

In 2002 I flew to Avoca, Iowa to compete in the National Traditional Country Music Association's World Bones and Spoons Championship. It was a sudden decision for me and I hadn't really made any accommodations. I arrived Friday afternoon, and met a fellow competitor, Yirdy Machar, a Scotsman living in Denmark, who had traveled all the way from Denmark to compete. Yirdy was renting a motel room with two beds, and quickly offered to share. The next morning as we were preparing for our competition, I pulled out the whistle and played some jigs. "Would you accompany me?" he asked, "But of course!" I replied. It was a magical week end, hanging with Yirdy, and the other rhythm bones players. At the end of the week end we all five rhythm bones players pledged to go to Abbeyfeale and compete in the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, a pledge only Yirdy and I were to keep. I would meet him again several times over the years, sharing another room with him in 2004, and bunking at Steve Wixson's house in 2005. He was a true spirit, generous, open, supportive, and a great friend. He came in first that first year in Avoca, and beat me soundly. I returned the favor in 2003, and 2004. But we were joyous competitors, always supporting the other. RIP Yirdy! Slainte Mhath, As Aye. Yirdy MacBones. *Steve Brown*

(Continued from Page 1)

Canyon with a friend prior to the start of the opera gig, and hadn't shaved in weeks -- earned me a return contract for the 1997 season, as Sam in SUSANNAH. Artistic Director John Moriarty said he would never have thought of me for the role had I not arrived in Central with that beard, which the director of RIGOLETTO asked me to keep for the role of the Duke; but Sam is a bit of a mountain man so the beard worked to get me the part, although by 1997 I was clean shaven again; no one minded.

Well, there's this one little song at the end of the first act of SUSANNAH, known as the Jaybird Song. For those of you who don't know this opera, it's an American piece by the aforementioned Floyd, who also wrote an opera based on Steinbeck's OF MICE AND MEN, and several others besides. The plot, based on the biblical tale of Susannah and the Elders, takes place in the fictitious village of New Hope Valley, Tennessee, a close-knit, closed-minded community of mostly hypocrites. The three good people are Susannah Polk and her brother Sam, and a simple-minded neighbor named Little Bat. Before everything goes south, back home late one evening Susannah begs Sam to sing her favorite song: the Jaybird Song. "Jaybird sittin' on a hick'ry limb, he winked at me and I winked at him, I picked up a brickbat and hit him on the chin.... Looky here, little boy, don'tcha do that agin!"

So we come to the first blocking rehearsal for this scene. (In stage-ese, a blocking rehearsal is where the director and singers figure out where to be and go on stage during the scene. In opera, sometimes this is the limit as far as characterization is expected to be developed, but I've generally been luckier than that, with directors who hope the singers will be real people up there. This was always the case in Central City.) Moriarty, also the principal conductor of the company, remembered my numbers with rhythm bones at Post Op the year before, and stepped way outside his purview by suggesting to the stage director that when I sing Jaybird I also play rhythm bones. Michael Ehrman, however, a congenial chap, took the suggestion easily, and so for the first time possibly in the history of this opera, or maybe any opera, Sam

Polk played rhythm bones while singing Jaybird with his sister Susannah on a balmy summer evening, one day afore the elders done spied Susannah a-bathin' in a stream they was a-scoutin' out for a place for Preacher Blitch to baptize people - didn't matter hit was the Polks' own property, didn't matter hit was where Susannah had always done her bathin'. Let's just say that the ending of the opera bears no resemblance at all to the ending of Footloose.

So, folks, there you have it: for eight or ten performances, at 8,500 feet above sea level, in 1997, in Central City, Colorado, I played rhythm bones, freshly made from a cow's remains at 9000 feet, in an opera. The next time I did Sam was in 2014, with Utopia Opera in New York City. I got to be the dialect coach but was not asked to play rhythm bones. Thankee kindly for your attention. *Adam C J Klein*

Profile of Adam Klein

ADAM C J KLEIN was born in Port Jefferson, Long Island in 1960 and grew up split between nearby Setauket and world-away New York City. He is a self-taught traditional music singer/player/songwriter and an opera singer/composer with a Master's degree from Indiana University School of Music, Bloomington.

By age 12 he was lining up different sized terracotta plant pots to play like xylophones, and at 17 he taught himself jaw harp, built his first dulcimer and started playing spoons after seeing a player at the Carter Family Memorial Music Center in Hiltons, Virginia; so when at age 18, having recently found a cow skeleton in Frederick, Maryland, he first saw bones being played, by Jeff Warner, accompanying Jeff Davis playing *The Falls of Richmond* on the banjo, he fashioned a pair from the ribs and figured out some rudimentary technique.

After meeting Percy Danforth at the Croton Clearwater Revival folk festival in 1981, it was all over: he then began making bones from wood, more or less after Percy's design. When he returned to Croton the following summer to show Percy his creations, Percy wasn't there, but people wanting bones were there and he sold out the dozen or so pair he'd brought with him. He's bade rhythm

bones off and on ever since.

Meeting Steve Brown at his table at NEFFA in 2001 or so, he noticed some more artistic shapes, which prompted a flurry of radical design experiments with the ultimate purpose of increasing the tonal range and varying the volume of the instrument beyond what one pair can be made to do.

He has now settled on two main designs: Tree Ribs which more closely imitate the changing curve of a rib: and Klave Klackers which give a recognizable musical tone rather than the traditional click, for play in ensembles such as bateria, the Brazilian samba percussion tradition, and Latin music in general, where the clave is the main timekeeper.

Being a singer, he uses rhythm bones primarily as a song's accompanying instrument, but will happily jam on rhythm bones with players of other instruments, from dulcimer to Cajun band to African drumming ensemble. The one kind of music he won't jam to is the prerecorded kind: music for him is a community activity.

His playing style, nurtured by Percy Danforth and developed with fellow player Art Scholtz in the early 80s, has grown more eclectic due to contact with RBS members such as Steve Brown, Jim Runner, the Meschers, Tim Reilly, Bill Vits, Kenny Wolin, Skeffington Flynn and Jonathan Danforth, who along with all RBS members demonstrate to the world the astounding variety achievable by just banging two sticks together, and who we hope in time will pull rhythm bones out of their long obscurity back into the public consciousness where they can take their rightful place beside the other amazing human inventions known as musical instruments.

Bones Calendar

Bones Fest XXIII. May 2-5, 2019, in Clarksdale, MS. Host is Randy Seppala. See details on Page 8 and on our website.

NTCMA Bones Contest. August - September, 2019 (dates not posted yet), LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.

Johnny Bones the Life of a Busker

I have told parts of this story several times at Bones Fests. I was walking down the street in Tombstone and heard the clatter of rhythm bones across the street. There was Johnny Bones the first rhythm bones player I had heard since my grandfather died in 1967. He told me about the Rhythm Bones Society and on-line lessons and off I went. Little did I know that chance meeting would change my life. After practicing all summer back in NY, I returned to Arizona and started playing the rhythm bones with the minstrels. In doing so I learned a lot about busking and a very unusual individual.

Most of the rhythm bones players I have met over the years are lovers of music and playing the bones. Many play other instruments and the rhythm bones are just part of their repertoire. Very few are musicians who make their entire living playing rhythm bones. Johnny Bones has made his living entirely from busking while playing rhythm bones for almost 11 years.

Starting life in Toledo, Ohio he worked various occupations: roofing, restaurants, a minstrel show performer on banjo and actually played hard rock guitar for a while. He confesses to being a stunt junky and loved performing in gunfight shows near Phoenix, AZ. Diving out of windows, falling off roofs, being thrown over hitching rails were part of the fun. However, that is a young man's game and will take a toll on the body after a while.

His first exposure to rhythm bones was a Percy Danforth video. He said he watched it long enough to see how to hold them and get a few clicks then turned off the video because he wanted to develop his own style, which is not unusual as you who have attended a few Bones Fests can attest. Most of us have our own style of play. He continues to wish for a set of Danforth bones. The ones he uses in Tombstone are hand made by him from buffalo ribs.

He has made a study of the old time minstrel shows which usually had a Mr. Bones and a Mr. Tambo or tambourine player. The clothing style of these old time bones men led to the crazy and

colorful costumes that Johnny wears to attract attention on the streets of Tombstone, Arizona. He can be seen and heard 6 or 7 days a week on Allen Street. He is usually alone except on Monday when he is joined by the rest of the Silver King Minstrels consisting of Joe Andrews on banjo, Burt Webster on guitar and vocals, and me on harmonica and rhythm bones. When he is alone he has a boom box hidden inside an old carpet bag sitting on an antique chair. It is fun for me to watch various people's reactions to him and his costumes. Most people really get a laugh out of it and want their pictures taken with him. After 11 years he has become an institution on Allen Street and returning visitors will go out of their way to look for him. A large poster picture of him and a British tourist was at one time on display in Heathrow Airport in England.

Busking is a meager living at best but the people he comes in contact with can make it worthwhile. He tells of a young man with cerebral palsy being pushed past him in a wheel chair. His head was down and he was unreactive until he heard the rhythm bones and music. His head came up and he got excited and clapped and tried to sing and dance. After the song his parents wheeled him on and unfortunately he retracted back into his former state. His mother told Johnny that was the first time in two years he had reacted to anything. Another time a couple walking with the woman's mother came by. The mother was a stroke victim and very downcast. She saw Johnny and stared and looked him up and down and smiled a big grin. Passing by she turned back and grinned again. The daughter came back and told Johnny her mother had not smiled in a very long time. Being a crazy looking bones player can have its rewards.

There can also be frustrations. In 2012 a new city administration was determined to get rid of buskers and particularly Johnny Bones. They passed an ordinance that was unconstitutional forbidding busking without a permit. Johnny contacted the ACLU and got them involved. The city was forced to back down as the ordinance was deemed a restriction of free speech. Johnny had weathered another storm. He has persevered through 100 degree days, high winds (from

weather and politicians), and other buskers trying to take his spot and seems content to do so for the foreseeable future.

Tombstone now seems comfortable with having Johnny around. He is often in parades for special events. The Silver King Minstrels open the music for Wild West Days. We played at the annual Christmas Charity Ball in Schieffelin Hall built in 1881 with 1800s music and costumes. Rhythm Bones and Johnny are here to stay. *Gerry Hines*

NEEFA Report

Although it's looked little like spring around here over the last month, one sure sign of spring was seen last week end as the 74th New England Folk Festival was held in Mansfield, MA much to the delight of people interested in Folk Music and Dance. And in the heart of it was rhythm bones, as usual. Rhythm bones players and would be rhythm bones players descended upon the festival as more than 60 people participated in the Rhythm Bones Workshop.

Rhythm Bones Society members Bruno Giles, Ari Urlbaum, Skeff Flynn, Ron Bruschi, Tim Riley, Constance Cook, and Adam Klien, as well as long time rhythm bone player Tom Weldon provided teaching support as I attempted to describe the basic elements of playing rhythm bones.

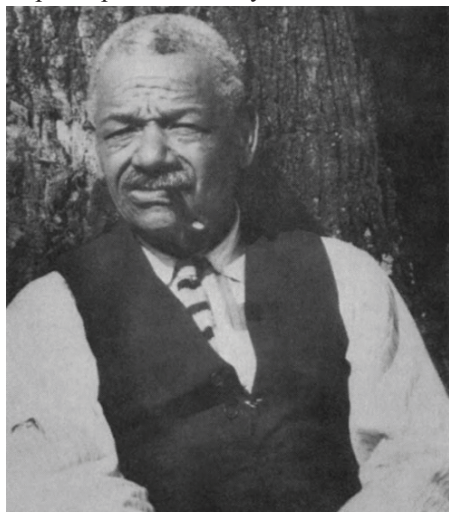
The audience was a mixture of local attendee's and some from as far away as Denmark. Jessye Bartlett, co-host of Bones Fest XXII, attended to encourage all attendee's to come to Franconia Notch in June for Bones Fest XXII.

At the completion of the rattle section, it seemed that more than 50% of the attendee's completed the task! Each of the Rhythm Bones Instructors then demonstrated their own style in individual performances and several pass offs. Regular attendee Jeremy Brown displayed his two handed style, while delighting the attendees, and then attempting to hug each one. Many a happy face left the workshop, some of whom cemented their rhythm bone playing by purchasing their own pair of rhythm bones, before going off into the world to demonstrate a new found skill.

And as they filed out of the workshop a voice was heard to exclaim, "See you in New Hampshire for Bones Fest XXII!" *Steve Brown*

Thaddeus ‘Tad’ Goodson

Thaddeus “Tad” Goodson (1869-1957) was an African American rhythm bones player who lived in Richland County, South Carolina near the capital of Columbia. Some of the songs he played were recorded by Charles Seeger for the WPA in 1939 which I had digitally transferred by the American Folklife Center and have uploaded to YouTube (<https://bit.ly/2OV0XLt>). He is immortalized in the book *Tales of the Congaree* which collects his fables, folklore and songs from the 1920’s. His family still has his cherished rhythm bones and sixty one years after his death, he has inspired me to pick up the bones myself. Thanks Tad!



Here are the songs that feature rhythm bones on those recordings. Please note the “n” word is found in some of these songs. I’m planning on getting a show together to showcase these songs, hence me playing rhythm bones, so some lyrics will need to be changed. *Hardy Childers*

That Girl I Love:

<https://youtu.be/g9Kepzpwna8>

Roll Down the Line:

<https://youtu.be/V8p14IYyqlE>

Slide On, Tramps:

<https://youtu.be/YYuXXmN4DJk>,

Bile Dem Cabbage Down:

<https://youtu.be/FVMFcYw1JR4>,

My True Love Treat Me So Cold:

<https://youtu.be/HGTzfGpk6-A>,

Ridin’ on a Humpbacked Mule:

https://youtu.be/_aMNPQErQOE, and

I’m the Leader of High Society (Since I Got Mine):

<https://youtu.be/DrSTRhp2mrc>.

More on Sweet Georgia Brown, Brother Bones Arrangement

There is a story about Brother Bones, that is Freeman Davis, in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol 4, No 3, with information about his life and his recording of *Sweet Georgia Brown* which due to its adoption as the theme song of the Harlem Globetrotters (HGT) basketball team is one of the most played songs in the history of recorded music. From the point of view of rhythm bones players, it is a shame that most listeners do not realize that rhythm bones are the percussion instrument in that recording.

Sweet Georgia Brown is a jazz standard and pop tune written in 1925 by Ben Bernie and Maceo Pinkard and Kenneth Casey. The song was reasonably popular when it was written and recorded by several popular singers.

According to Wikipedia, “reportedly Ben Bernie came up with the concept for the song’s lyrics – although he is not the accredited lyricist – after meeting Dr. George Thaddeus Brown in New York City. Dr. Brown, a longtime member of the State House of Representatives for Georgia, told Bernie about Dr. Brown’s daughter, Georgia Brown, and how subsequent to the baby girl’s birth on August 11, 1911, the Georgia General Assembly had issued a declaration that she was to be named Georgia after the state, an anecdote which would be directly referenced by the song’s lyric: “Georgia claimed her – Georgia named her.”

“The tune was first recorded on March 19, 1925, by band leader Ben Bernie, resulting in a five-week number one for Ben Bernie and his Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra.”

The president of Tempo Records discovered Freeman when he was playing in a downtown Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles. The recording was made with Freeman whistling and playing rhythm bones, and it quickly reached the airwaves.

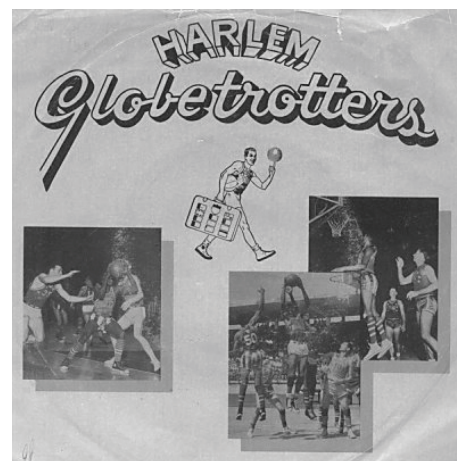
The connection to HGT came about this way. Albert Van Court was a HGT fan and also involved in the west coast

jazz recordings. A friend introduced Van Court to Abe Saperstein, the HGT founder, owner and first coach, who was always looking for ideas to promote their games. Many props, music, etc were tried and disposed of. Van Court suggested *Sweet Georgia Brown* was in the image of the HGT, and the use of music to advertise and promote the games and during warm up with the ‘Magic Circle’ was the perfect choice. An arrangement was made and the record was sold as a concession item. This was in the 1948-49 season and has continued every since.

In the fall of 1950, Columbia Pictures started shooting the first HGT movie, *The Story of the Harlem Globetrotters*. The producer, Buddy Adler, wanted very much to use the Brother Bones’ recording, but the royalty was too high for the movies’ budget. Van Court suggested the recording in a full length movie might be important and a deal was made where 5 cents of every record sold would be paid until the fee was met. The music was in the movie, and the use of it as a HGT theme song was firmly set.

Van Court held the exclusive distributorship of the record from Tempo Records, and distributed it only to the HGT organization. Abe Saperstein agreed to continue to use the record as the theme song for five years, but of course it has continued since then. *Steve Wixson*

[Thanks again to the HGT organization for more history about this record.]



The front cover of the Harlem Globetrotter’s version of the *Sweet Georgia Brown* record

A Set of Presentation Minstrel Bones

Among the instruments currently in storage at the Yale University Collection of Musical Instruments is a set of presentation minstrel bones dating from the mid 19th century (See photograph on Page 8). This set, which comprises two pairs, is made from a dense, reddish-brown tropical hardwood (possibly rosewood). Each bone is tipped with silver mounts that are engraved variously with floral patterns, blackface minstrels, and fireman's regalia.

Two of the bones bear mounts that are inscribed: Presented to C. H. Atkinson by the Niagara Fire Association, New Britain Ct, June 9th, 1860. Engraved on the tip is a minstrel playing two pairs of bones, the word CHAMPION inscribed on his belt. On the tip of the other is a minstrel playing the banjo.

One guesses that this elegant set of bones was presented to C. H. Atkinson by his fellow firemen—perhaps as a prize for being the winner of a bones competition, or as an award for being an exemplary player, or as a gift on the occasion of his moving away from New Britain to new and different climes.

Whether Atkinson used them subsequently in performance is unknown. But, given their exceptionally fine condition (virtually no pitting or scarring), it is probable that they were valued more as a keepsake than as a musical instrument.

Charles H. Atkinson was born about 1837 in Maine. In 1860, he was employed as a machinist in New Britain, CT, where he lived with his wife Mary A. (age 22), son Charles F. (age 3), and infant daughter Sally.

By 1870, he had moved to Lowell, MA, where he was working as a “showman.” Ten years later, he and

his family were boarding on Pemberton Square, Boston, Charles H. earning his way as an actor and Charles F. working as a professor of elocution.

Atkinson's unusual set of bones was given to Yale in 1963 by G. Lauder Greenway of Greenwich, CT, who had purchased them from James Robinson, Inc., Old English Silver & Porcelains, 12 East 57th St., New York, date of purchase unknown. *Susan E. Thompson*, Curator, Yale University Collection of Musical Instruments, New Haven, CT. email address: susan.thompson@yale.edu

[This article extracted from an article that appeared in the Newsletter of the American Musical Instrument Society, Vol 34, No 1, Page 8, in the spring of 2005: <https://amis.org/publications/newsletter/2001/34.1-2005.pdf>. That article has additional photographs not include here.]



Detail of a minstrel playing two pairs of bones, the word CHAMPION on his belt. Figure measures 18.5 mm in height. Photograph by Susan E. Thompson



Detail of a minstrel playing the banjo. Figure measures 18.2 mm in height. Photograph by Susan E. Thompson

Executive Director Editorial (Cont)

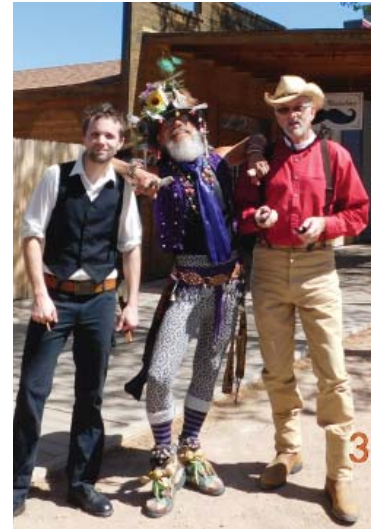
could be. She replied with the full specifications, but regarding Atkinson, only that he might have been a “benefactor of the Association.” While perusing Beth Lenz Dissertation, “The Bones in the United States,” I came across an entry, Appendix B, entitled “Biographical Sketches of Nineteenth Century Bones Players” reprinted from Daddy Rice’s book *Monarchs of Minstrelsy* which included “Chuck Atkinson” also called “Master Charles.” With my investigative juices flowing I wondered if this is the same person for whom the presentation rhythm bones were intended? A visit to the Brookline, MA library produced a copy of the February 9, 1909 edition of the “Brookline TAB,” and the obituary of “Charles H. Atkinson” purported to be the oldest living Minstrel before his death. Though I visited his grave, no additional information was available, and it wasn’t until I stumbled upon the article included in this issue that the trail of the Atkinson Bones began to heat up once more. I hope you enjoy it!

I have just returned from a very enjoyable trip to Quebec City. I have some good leads on rhythm bones players and participated in a very enjoyable evening of music at our Hotel, L’Auberge Du Mont in Valcartier, Qc. I met some of the local musicians, and learned how much Irish music has influenced French Canadian music. Look for an article in the near future!

Though eight months away, the promise of the Blues Bones Fest in Clarksdale, MS. is truly intriguing. At the edge of the Mississippi, near the cross roads where Robert Johnson bargained with the devil, it will give us a whole new perspective on rhythm bones and the blues! Just let that percolate for a while and do show up in Clarksdale! *Steve Brown*



Set of presentation bones crafted from tropical hardwood and tipped with silver. Average length, 169 mm; average width, 30 mm. Yale Acc. No. 1000.1963. (see story on Page 7) Photo by Christopher Gardner



Photograph on left is a closeup of Johnny Bones. The photograph on the right shows Johnny with Sky Bartlett on left and Gerry Hines on right (See story on Page 5)



Bones Fest XXIII will be in the birthplace of the 'Blues' in Clarksdale, Mississippi on May 2-5, 2019 hosted by Randy Seppala. Preliminary details are on our website and more details in the next newsletter

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested