



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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## Executive Director's Column

I've always been resistant to musical notation. From my piano lessons in 5th grade, to school band and drum lessons, it didn't seem to mean what I was hearing, maybe my lack of perseverance. Later, in high school when I played rock and roll and Jazz, the emphasis was on what you were feeling in the music, and that seemed just right to me.

That's always the way I've played rhythm bones. It's in the feeling of the music, especially in Irish music, that indescribable "flow" of the music.

Percy asked my brother to transcribe some of his playing in the 70's for exercises, and he used standard musical notation, which seemed to work out ok,

though I didn't pay much attention to it.

But I admit, developing a specific notation for the instrument brings it into a different realm, gives it a certain kind of credibility, not to mention sharing specific ideas on the bones.

Rhythm bones themselves seem to defy standard notation, with the different movement of rhythm bones, as Annika Mikolajko has demonstrated in her notation, and almost indescribable rattles and rolls we seem to emanate. In some ways, rhythm bones notation has been a bit of a holy grail, with various players searching for some way to express (Continued on Page 2)

## Rhythm Bones Notation

Have you ever played along with a song and did a 'lick' that sounded good that you wanted to remember, and then later could not repeat it? You could have memorized it, recorded it, practiced it until as Bill Vits says, "you put it in your rhythmic vocabulary," or just written it down in some way. This article examines what it might take to write down rhythm bones rhythms.

First is a review of the known ways to notate rhythm bones rhythms, and that is followed by comments on the different schemes.

Kenny Wolin presented several Bones Fest workshops where he notated what he was teaching on easel paper. After his "Latin Rhythms and Notation" workshop, he recapped the workshop in a newsletter article.

On our website is Dr. Fred Edmunds "Bones Unlimited" instructional video and Fred used a notation scheme of his own design.

Matteo, member and world class castanet player, devised a scheme he called "Castanotation." He gave RBS a video that demonstrates his scheme.

Jonathan Danforth in his article on Chlefele found a Swiss website with a notation scheme.

Dr. Mel Mercier in his PhD theses used a notation scheme to document the late Jerry Mescher's arrangements.

And at Bones Fest XXIV, we met Annika Mikolajko who commissioned a piece that uses a notation scheme. Her article on the scheme is what inspired this special issue on Notation.

So where do we go from here. Our professional players use percussion notation, and likely don't need a different scheme. Most of us can feel the rhythm in a song and string our rudiments together instinctually. That playing doesn't want notation as live performance can create moments of magic.

Bill Vits during his BFXXIV workshop talked about a 'rhythmic vocabulary' (which for him is quite large) from which you think it and your hands do it. For the successful beginning traditional rhythm bones player, their 'rhythmic vocabulary' contains the Tap, Triplet/Tap, and Triplet roll, but not the Triplet which is hard to play. Would we notate the Triplet/Tap as two separate rudiments or is it a derived element with its own name. How would a large 'rhythmic vocabulary' be notated?

When we hear people like the late Jerry Mescher's playing solo or with his sister, Bernie Worrell, playing arranged songs, we appreciate that. For them it lets them practice until they are very good. We do not know if Jerry or his father used a written notation, but we do know from Bernie that she learned arrangements from recordings that Jerry sent her so that when they rehearsed together they worked on polishing their performance.

I hope this issue leads to a discussion as something good could come from it. *Steve Wixson*

## Editorial

Rhythm bones notation has come up a few times over the years, and Kenny Wolin is the only person who has written an article on the subject. Now Annika Mikolajko tells us about the rhythm bones notation used in a work she commissioned, and it inspired this issue.

Annika is a talented young rhythm bones player who attended Virtual Bones Fest XXIV, and we are trying to figure out how we have not known about her until now. Check out her article on notation and her profile.

I wanted to pay tribute to the late Jerry Mescher so I used Mel Mercier's notation (see Page 6) to learn his signature piece, *Maple Leaf Rag*. I performed it decently at a recent Bones Fest, but I do not have the timing and speed that made Jerry one of the all-time best players and had to slow the recording down a bit. I could not have played it without Mel's notation.

In Dom's Letter to the Editor he mentions his friend Taj Mahal. Dom's note reminded me of an article I wrote on John Henry *Bones* Noble, and I went to the Internet and found more information about him that is presented on Page 8. The tie-in is *Bones* and Taj Mahal play a duet in an on-line movie titled *Bones*.

## Letters to the Editor

Friends! Here is a bit of "John Henry y los Vaqueros", my arrangement of the traditional tune. I'm playing the rhythm bones which are real cow rib bones and joining me onstage is Brian Farrow on fiddle! I was at the Louie Bluié Festival, and also opened for my good friend Taj Mahal. *Dom Flemons*

<https://www.facebook.com/DomFlemonsMusic/videos/1678591388832395>

Here with Dante Pope on Cow 'rhythm' bones.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVJVomMBNug>

This is a friend of ours, Paul Draper on banjo playing with Dom & Company in Virginia; James Pentecost, Dom Flemons, and Paul Draper at historic Clover Hill Tavern, Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, 2019. *Ron Bruschi*  
[https://youtu.be/9FGb\\_dnBE-I](https://youtu.be/9FGb_dnBE-I)

(Director continued from Page 1) their playing on paper, but never getting it to be a universally accepted method.

In this issue, while several older and newer methods are examined, guest author and accomplished musician Annika Mikolajko gives us the first in depth method for transcribing rhythm bones playing onto paper. I think we need to take a long, hard look at this, and what it means for rhythm bones playing in the future.

Speaking of Annika, she showed up at our Virtual Bones Fest this summer, and made quite a splash in our rhythm bones playing world. Her highly developed playing, and relationship to classical music wowed us, but her genuineness, and openness in embracing us and our quirky instrument was heart warming. If you haven't perused her video's, you will be amazed at her playing! Thank you Annika for joining us in our rhythm bones playing pursuits!

I am sitting here looking out the window at a major snow storm paralyzing the Northeast, and causing us to stay inside even more so that the Pandemic has. Jennifer is baking cookies, and Jeremy is taking in yet another Christmas movie.

It brings me back to a snow storm over 40 years ago, the Storm of 78' which resonates with everyone around here. It was right at the beginning of that storm that I found a package on the front steps of the house, and wrapped in brown paper I found 2 pairs of rhythm bones, instructional material, and a picture of the sender, Percy Danforth. Scrawled on a note was the message, "have fun with your bones!"

It was then that my bones adventure began, and in the short term it meant attempting to make some kind of sound while trapped inside of a three room apartment with 2 women, and 3 kids! Suffice it to say that I wasn't thrown out in the snow, or dismembered, and eventually some kind of sound did emerge from the rhythm bones which I could build on, and develop. But a snow storm always brings me back to that time, and reminds me, maybe now is the time to bring out those rhythm bones, keep them rattling, give yourself a little joy, and remember those who inspired you to play in the first place! Thank You Percy! *Steve Brown*

## Rhythm Bones Player

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Editor  
Steve Wixson  
wixson@epbfi.com

Executive Director  
Stephen Brown  
bones@crystal-mtn.com

Web Site Coordinator  
Steve Wixson  
webmaster@rhythmbones.com

Board of Directors  
Steve Brown, Executive Director  
Skeffington Flynn  
Sharon Mescher  
Dennis Riedesel  
Bill Vits, Assistant Director  
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer  
Kenny Wolin

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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](http://rhythmbones.org)

## Matteo Castanotation

Matteo, a RBS member and world class castanet player had a soft spot for rhythm bones. He attended Bones Fests III and IV and dazzled us with his castanet playing. In his book, *Woods That Talk*, he called rhythm bones a type of castanet.

He developed a notation scheme he called *Castanotation*. Castanet rudiments have a Spanish name and he assigned each a symbol: both tap, TOC, plus sign; right tap, Ti, dot; left tap, TA, slash; right roll, RiA, dash+slash, left roll, RAi, dash+dot; and hit both together, CHOCUE, vertical+dash.

On Page 5 there is an example of an exercise called Master Combination. He made a video that demonstrates the notation and more including the Master Combination at [rhythmbones.org/video/Newsletter-matteocastanotation.mp4](http://rhythmbones.org/video/Newsletter-matteocastanotation.mp4).

## Kenny Wolin's Notation Workshop

Since I'm a percussionist, I mostly notate rhythm bones with sticking patterns similar to traditional snare drumming.

I have led several workshops where I use easel paper to show what I am teaching using a simpler? scheme. The figure below was used in my Latin Rhythm and Notation Workshop at BFXIII. In the figure, numbers are used to mark measures and plus signs mark the off beat. Numbers that are circled are played as a tap and in this case two quarter note indicate a Double that can be played traditionally or with two Taps. This sequence can be typed by replacing the circle with an underline.

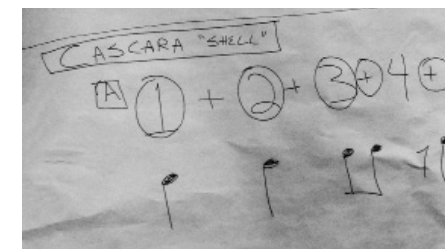


Figure ?? Workshop Notation

NOTATION:  
 (L) — CAN be 3 (TRIPLET) OR 4 (GALLOP) Rhythm  
 (R) — DEPENDING ON NOTATED Rhythms ~  
 T = together ( R L alternate notation )

DRUM CADENCE:

Fillers:

Figure ?? Wolin Triplet Notation Ideas

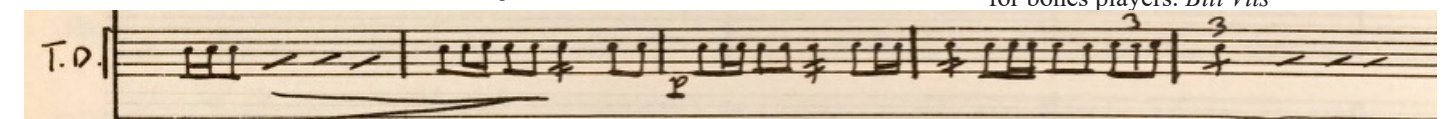


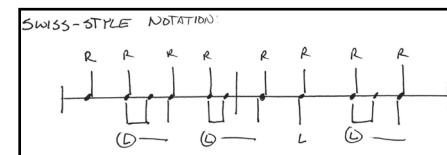
Figure ?? - See Bill Vits Article

$\underline{1} + \underline{2} + \underline{3} + \underline{4} \pm$

For more details read the Workshop Summary in Vol 15, No 4.

It does get challenging to notate the unique motion of the rhythm bones triplet, but I found a way to do that for myself that I'd like to share. This helps me differentiate from playing rapid single taps, which I could then be able to notate differently. See the two column Figure below.

I have also been experimenting with Swiss drumming notation which has the hands separated by the up and down stems on the line.



Swiss style notation

I'm still experimenting to find a notation that could help bones players with limited music theory knowledge, but still provide some kind of practical shorthand for ideas they come up with (apart from just video taping themselves).

*Kenny Wolin*

## Bill Vits' Rhythmic Vocabulary

During my Bones Fest XXIV Workshop I mentioned my 'Rhythmic Vocabulary' and how I used it to perform the Tap Dance line (see figure below) in Morton Gould's *Tap Dance Concerto*. A Rhythmic Vocabulary is stored in the brain (probably in the basal ganglia), and is put there with lots of practice and repetition. With years as a professional percussionist and long time rhythm bones player, my rhythmic Vocabulary is very large. All I have to do is think it and his hands do it. A completely different example is touch typing where you do not think about the letters you type, but think of words or phrases and your fingers type the letters.

The Tap Dance line below was written as a guide for the dancer and I approached it as such by adding accents and embellishments ad lib. My performances probably varied, but I used the written rhythm as a point of departure.

In rudimental drumming all stickings are precisely notated. We could borrow the tradition of "F" for a right flam (leftRIGHT) and "F with a circle around it" for left flam (rightLEFT). These save space and are widely accepted.

Music notation often covers rhythm, pitch (for bones not necessary), dynamics (volume from pp-ff) and other performance instructions. The varying motions of bones playing often accompany distinct rhythms but would be challenging to notate (arms in and out, side to side, overhead, etc.). Mahler was famous for extra instructions so they could be added (play like a drunken sailor!)

I have never tried to notate other bones solos but it might be interesting to transcribe some famous players. I know Mel Mercier dissected the Mescher tradition but this was for research. Bones players are often so unique that it would be interesting to see a notational fingerprint from each. We all tend to vocalize rhythms and perhaps this has been the tradition for bones players. *Bill Vits*



# TALAM I

## Notation For Rhythm Bones

In 2014, composer Natalia Wojnakowska dedicated to me a piece "Talam I" for rhythm bones and contemporary cello. I worked with Natalia for a few months before the world premiere of this piece and we created a special method to write down the part of rhythm bones. Our goal was to present not only the rhythm but also the diverse and complex sound of rhythm bones

The whole piece is based on Indian rhythmic and because of that we created our own system of notation.

Basic types of hits of equal length are connected with Indian rhythmic:

1. T (Ta) – bones hit OUT
2. Tk (Taka) – bones hit OUT and IN
3. Tkt (Takita) – OUT IN OUT
4. Tkdm (Takadimi) – gradually changing from crossed position to parallel position from arms down to arms raised up

5. Trktt (Tarikitatom) – OUT IN OUT IN OUT

The duration of each note in one square is equal to one eighth note. Hexadecimal pauses are marked with dashes as shown in the figure below).



You can see it on the sample page as shown in the upper figure on this page.

For this piece I had two pairs of rhythm bones – one thicker pair which sounds lower and one that sounds higher. Changes of pairs is marked in score by words.

Because of different pitches, the position of the rhythm bones is strictly planned. As you can see in the figure titled "The position of bones in hand," we have 5 different positions (bones held parallel in half of length, bones held parallel in upper part, bones held parallel in lower part, bones crossed, bones shifted relative to each other) and to changing positions (gradually cross bones, gradually changing crossed position to parallel

### THE POSITION OF BONES IN HAND

- ⌋ - stationary bone      ( - moving bone
- ⌋ - bones held parallel in half of length
- ⌋ - bones held parallel in upper part
- ⌋ - bones held parallel in lower part
- ⌋ - bones crossed
- ⌋ - bones shifted relative to each other
- ⌋ - bones shifted relative to each other
- ⌋ ---> ⌋ - gradually cross bones
- ⌋ ---> ⌋ - gradually changing crossed position to parallel position

position).

Another collection of marks is devoted to "Special positions of bones" (see figure to the right). In this section we can find symbols for holding bones one inside the other, for striking a muffled pair of bones against one another, for rubbing pairs with the shorter parts of bones against the surface of the other one, for rubbing the edge of one pair of bones against the surface of the other one, for playing on bones propped up on the cheeks.

Because of that sound of bones is changing depending on the position of the instrument in relation to the body of the musician, the composer clearly indicates that the "Position in relation to the body of the musician" (see figure to the right). There are seven different positions: standard (at right angles to elbows, arms slightly extended), front (arms extended), arms raised up, arms down, right arm extended to the right, left arm extended to the left, arms crossed in front. There is also a mark for gradual change between positions.

"Special articulations" got different marks (see figure to the bottom right). We have here tremolo (fast movement OUT and IN), tremolo started with the accent (with right or left hand), tremolo performed with circular hand movements, very fast change from position up to down connected with wavy movement of the wrist (approximate rhythm: 2 thirty-second notes and 1 sixteenth note), an infinity-shaped wrist movement.

You can see the video of world premiere here (on YT channel Annika Mikolajko): <https://youtu.be/VUAG6hZfYo>.  
Annika Mikolajko

### Matteo Notation

### SPECIAL POSITIONS OF BONES

- ⌋ holding bones one inside the other
- ⌋ striking a muffled pair of bones against one another
- ⌋ rubbing pairs with the shorter parts of bones
- ⌋ rubbing the edge of one pair of bones against the surface of the other
- ⌋ rubbing the surface of one pair of bones against the surface of the other
- ) O ( playing on bones propped up on the cheeks

### BONES POSITION IN RELATION TO THE BODY OF MUSICIAN

- ⌋ standard (at right angles to elbows, arms slightly extended)
- FR front (arms extended)
- ↑ arms raised up
- ↓ arms down
- R right arm extended to the right
- L left arm extended to the left
- ⌋ arms crossed in front
- ↑ ---> ↓ gradual change between positions

### SPECIAL ARTICULATIONS

- ⌋ tremolo (fast movement OUT and IN)
- ⌋ tremolo started with the accent (with right or left hand)
- ⌋ tremolo performed with circular hand movements
- ⌋ very fast change from position up to down ⌋→⌋ connected with wavy movement of the wrist (approximate rhythm: ⌋⌋⌋)
- ⌋ very fast change from position right or left to standard position ⌋/⌋→⌋ connected with wavy movement of the wrist (approximate rhythm: ⌋⌋⌋)
- ⌋ an infinity-shaped wrist movement (approximate rhythm: ⌋⌋⌋)





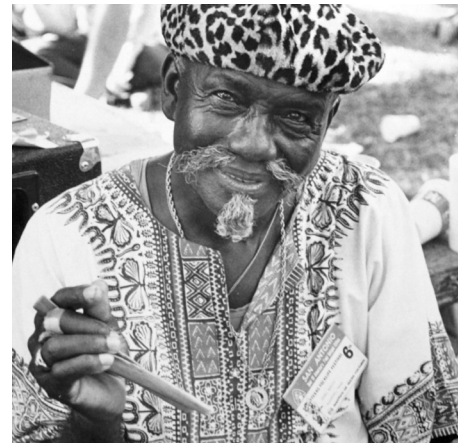


Annika Mikolajko from Poland Her article on notation is on Page 4 and a profile is on Page 7.

## John Henry *Bones* Nobles Update

I learned about John Henry *Bones* Nobles from member Dutch Kopp and after researching him I wrote an article that appeared in RBP, Vol 10, No 1. Part

of my information came from historian, Alan Govenar, who I recently discovered thought enough about *Bones* to create a study guide for children to learn about *Bones* and his traditional culture (see <http://www.everydaymusiconline.org/11>). That website has a video of him



playing his rhythm bones, and his style is quite unique. There is also a video of his daughter playing rhythm bones.

The original article mentioned a movie about him titled *Bones* produced by Carol Mundy Lawrence, but at that time it was not on-line for viewing. Well it is now at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gE8uOtNMPqI>. There is a duet in the middle of the video with *Bones* and Taj Mahal.

Don't we wish *Bones* could have attended our Blues Bones Fest in Clarksdale, MS. He would have been right at home. *Steve Wixson*

# *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*