



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 10, No. 3 2008

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## Executive Director's Column

As Bones Fest XII approaches we are again faced with the glorious possibilities of a new Bones Fest in a new location. In the thriving metropolis of St. Louis, in the 'Show Me' state of Missouri, Bones Fest XII promises to be a great celebration of our nation's history, with the bones firmly in the center of attention. We have an opportunity like no other, to ride the great Mississippi in a River Boat, and play the bones under the spectacular arch of St. Louis.

But this bones Fest represents more than just another great party, with lots of bones playing opportunity, it's a chance for us bone players to relive a part of our own history, and show the people of Missouri that rhythm bones continue

to live and thrive in our modern world. It's a chance too, for rhythm bone players in the central part of our country to experience the camaraderie of brother and sisterhood we have all come to expect of Bones Fests.

But it also represents a bit of a gamble. We're betting that we can step outside the comfort zones where we have held bones fests in the past, into a completely new area and environment, and you the membership will respond with the fervor we have come to know from Bones Fests. We're betting that the rhythm bone players who live out in Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nebraska will be as excited about our foray into their

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Bones and the Chieftains: a Musical Partnership

What must surely be the most recognizable traditional Irish music group in the world, The Chieftains, through their travels, have spread their music and instruments across the globe. Traditional Irish instruments such as the harp and Billycan Pipes are now recognizable instruments in many countries, and nestled firmly inside the group of instruments associated with the Chieftains, are the bones.

Bone playing can be heard on a great number of Chieftain recordings, and even seen on the cover of one of their albums. Great bone players like Tim Riley from Mystic CT., and Rob the bones' Coppard, street performer and musician living in Bantry, Co. Cork Ireland were inspired to play the bones from listening to their albums.

I list myself as someone inspired to play the bones by Chieftain recordings when I impulsively purchased Chieftains 5 in 1976, never having heard the music, but seeing the bones on the cover, I had to hear what they sounded like (see photograph on Page 8).

It's true that the bones are not featured on every track, but rather are sprinkled through out the recordings like sugar on your morning cereal, or parmesan cheese on spaghetti. Bone playing can be found on over 30 Chieftain recordings, some to a greater extent than others, but all with their signature taste and dynamics.

The musical architect responsible for forging the Chieftains and their musical arrangements is

Paddy Maloney. In 1962, Paddy, an uilleann piper from Dublin, along with Martin Fay, fiddle, Seán Potts, tin whistle, Micheal Tubridy, flute, and a friend of Paddy's, bodhrán player, David Fallon met to record a one-time album for Garech a Brún's Claddagh label under the title of *The Chieftains*. The musicians were already familiar

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Chieftains 3 CD cover. From left in front, Peadar Mercier, bodhrán and bones, Martin Fay, fiddle, Paddy Maloney, uilleann pipes, Sean Keane, fiddle, and in back, Sean Potts, tin whistle and Michael Tubridy, flute. Produced by Shanachie Records Corp. Photograph by Claud Virgin

## Editorial

The lead article in this issue is on the Chieftains and their rhythm bones playing. As Steve Brown writes, he was seriously influence by their rhythm bones playing. A list of their CDs with rhythm bones is included. Wouldn't it be great if we could get them to release a CD compilation of their rhythm bones tracts.

One of my personal favorites is *Crowley's Reel* from the album *James Galway and the Chieftains* which showcases Martin Fay's clean and crisp playing style.

A few words for this article were taken from the Website of the Quarter.

Another installment of Beth Lenz' thesis on the History of Bones in the US is included in this issue.

We've made progress on completing the Russ Myers' memorial project and you can soon view the result on your computer.

How many of you remember the Frazier clan at Bones Fest VII in Louisville. Norris Frazier died last year and his daughter sent his obituary and some personal notes.

There are two reports on this year's NTCMA Festival and Contests. The Mescher Trio performed and taught two Bones Workshops. Dennis Riedesel attended his first National Traditional Country Music Festival and competed in the Bones and Spoons Contest. Yes, after two years there was again a contest. Thanks to Dennis and others for competing and making it happen. I asked Dennis for a short article, but as you will see, he had so much to say about it that a few words did not work for him.

## Letter from Norris Frazier's Daughter

[Editor's note. Norris and his wife attended Bones Fest VII in Louisville and a dozen or more of his family came early and surprised them as they entered the doors of the Kentucky Theater where the Fest was held. Most of the family played rhythm bones and performed for Fest attendees. The DVD mentioned below will be shown

at Bones Fest XII in October.]

I am so pleased and touched that you cared enough to include Dad's obituary in your next newsletter.

Also, I already had in mind sending you the memorial DVD I put together for the funeral service. It's all video clips of him in action, no photos, just action footage with lots of "bones" clips. I thought you and whoever else wants to see it would really enjoy it. If you could email me your address I'd be glad to send you the DVD.

There's one clip of him doing the drum part for the song "Wipe Out" on his bones that will show you how good he really was.

When he came to the bones festival in Louisville, he had slowed down quite a bit and I've always felt that you all didn't really get to see what he could do! He sure enjoyed the festival and I wish I could have been there along with everybody else.

I'd also like to mention that at Dad's memorial service we opened it with our family members performing *I'll Fly Away*. We included three bones players, the jews harp, fiddle, piano and two singers. You should have seen the heads turn! It was great, and we were told by some that it was the most upbeat funeral they'd ever attended. It was truly Dad.

Thanks for thinking of Dad and God bless.... *Sandy Riggers*

*(Executive Director Column - Continued from page 1)*  
part of the country as we are to go there. And we're betting that even though the country has a bit of an economic downturn, it's not going to stop us from doing what we always do, play the rhythm bones.

Spike Bones and Scott Miller are working tirelessly not only to make a festive event, but to make sure its affordable for all our members.

And while you hear about the woe's of the airline industry, I was able to book the cheapest flight of any bones fest I have ever attended.

So practice those rhythm bones, pack that suit case, and prepare yourselves for the wonder's of a state placed smack in the middle of our great country, because it's time for us to 'Show Me' and all of the great mid-west what the rhythm bones are all about. *Steve Brown*

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

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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)

## Notice of Vote to Change By-Laws

At the Board meeting at Bones Fest XI, a motion was made to amend Article VI of our By-Laws so that our fiscal and tax year co-insides with the calendar year. Currently our fiscal year runs from October to September of the following year. For this motion to be adopted, it must be voted on by the membership at our General Membership meeting at Bones Fest XII and passed by at least a three-fourth vote.

The original October start date was selected because our Fests were in September and it made sense to start the new year right after the Fest. More recently Fests have been held in the summer making the October date not relevant and confusing to members.

If the amendment passes, one result will be five issues of the newsletter this year only instead of four.

This is the formal announcement for the vote as required by our By-laws. *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

# Norris Frazier Obituary

Norris Frazier, 80, a longtime Kamiah, Idaho resident, passed away on Sunday, Dec. 23, 2007, at the Grangeville Health and Rehabilitation Center after a long, hard-fought battle with congestive heart failure. He is now "rattling the bones" at heaven's ongoing jam session, leaving us with a lifetime of loving memories and a legacy of courage and stubborn determination to survive in spite of the health challenges he faced.

Norris was well known in the region as a talented musician, playing his banjo and bones to the delight of many audiences. He shared this talent by teaching bones classes to adults and children. He was also a talented woodworker and made sets of bones and many other creations for his family and area residents.

His talent as a bones player is perhaps best summed up with this quote from his niece, Deanna's eulogy:

"I loved the way he played music. What most set him apart as a musician was what he could do with a pair of rattle bones--nothing more than carved hardwood -- often carved by Uncle Norris. At first glance, they would appear to be the last instrument a person would select for the purpose of making music. But in the talented hands of Uncle Norris, the result was an incredible and intricate rhythm of clackity clack in time to a song or even by itself that was amazing enough to stop you in your tracks."

## Bones Fest XII Update

The Bones Fest XII Announcement and the Registration Form was emailed to members a few weeks ago. There is a paper copy enclosed with this newsletter for you procrastinators.

The are suites still available at the Crowne Plaza Hotel and dorm rooms at the University. Check the back of the enclosed Registration Form for details. Our host, Spike Bones, has lots of details on [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com).

Spike is introducing some new things Bones Fest XII. Come help make it happen.

Bones Fest XII, October 16 to 19, 2008 in St. Louis will be a celebration of our 12 great Bones Fests. Since you receive the "Rhythm Bones Player" you are also a Rhythm Bones Society member and enthusiastic bones player. You are the faithful and will be at the heart of our presentations for the public. My wish is that you all can attend. Whether you attend or not, please put the word out about BFXII on your personal networks (in person, phone call, E-mail or Snail-mail). Tell everyone go to [www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com) for details and registration information. If you know anyone that does not have web access please forward us their address and we can mail them information. If you are unable to attend, send Steve Wixson a 3 to 5 min video that we can play at the fest.

For those that can attend, here are a few notes from the Captain:

1. In October Missouri may be hot or cold or both. Bring a Jacket, comfortable shoes, and a small back or fanny pack for our march to the arch. For anyone not wanting to walk too far, there will reserved parking close to all venues.

2. We encourage any costuming Saturday afternoon for our march to the arch and riverfront revelry! We are choosing the era around 1870 when all the performing bones players would have to walk the 18 blocks from the train station to the riverboat. But remember we are bones players and not reactors! So have fun, be comfortable and anything goes.

3. There are still special bones suites available at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. The Plaza has now offered to extend the special rates to include Oct 16 and 19Th for anyone wanting to attend the pre or post fest events. We are hoping that at least 5 of the 10 suites will be the 2 room and a kitchen suites, and can participate in a round robin receptions, Saturday 5-7 PM.

The Captain's suite will feature a chance to meet Queen Madaline (my mom), Mark Twain and Lewis and Clark. The volunteers will deliver all supplies and refreshments to the hosts suites. These Suites are large enough to party, play bones, and watch bones videos.

4. If you fly and need to make a hasty departure Sunday you may want to check out the airport hotels. The METRO train has two stations at the airport and only 5 minutes to the UMSL south campus stop site of our venue. It takes 30 to 45 minutes to take the train on to the riverfront. Also you can get special deals for both hotels and air fair on sites like [Obitz.com](http://Obitz.com). The Airport Dury Inn has offered us a deal similar to AAA or AARP discounts.

5. Remember to bring a T-shirt, vest or any other garment you would like a BFXII logo affixed to.

Register now so you will receive one of our 50 gift bags.

All aboard Bones Fest XII, *Spike Bones*, (773) 787-7778, [spike-bones2002@yahoo.com](mailto:spike-bones2002@yahoo.com)

## Bones Fest XIII Proposals Requested

Your Board of Directors is seeking proposals for Bones Fest XIII next year. If you are interested, please email me and I will send you a *Bones Fest Host Guide* that will explain what is required. Talk to any previous host and they will tell you how much fun and rewarding it is.

Please respond quickly so your proposal can be discussed at this year's Fest. At this stage, a verbal proposal is all that is needed. *Steve Wixson*, [wixson@chattanooga.net](mailto:wixson@chattanooga.net)

## Bones Calendar

Check out the Calendar on the [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website.

**Bones Fest XII.** October 17-19, 2008. Details in this newsletter and at [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com).

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest.** August 31-September 6, 2009

## Website of the Quarter

There are many website where you can learn more about The Chieftains. One good website is [members.shaw.ca/chieftains](http://members.shaw.ca/chieftains) where you read their history, see a complete list of their albums and more.

## NTCMA 2008 Update

The results of the 2008 NTCMA Bones and Spoon Contest are in. Kenny Myers, who accompanies the Mescher Trio, won first place. Kenny, inspired by the Meschers, started playing after last year's Festival.

This rhythm bones playing inspired Magdalene Biesanz to write a story for the Friday, August 29, 2008 issue of their newspaper titled *No strings, no mallets -- musical bones make simplicity sound good*. Below are some extracts courtesy of the Le Mars Daily Sentinel.

"He's not a doctor. He doesn't study dinosaurs. But Jerry Mescher likes to play with bones. The musical instrument that is.

"Mescher, his wife Sharon and his sister Bernie Worrell are clicking and clacking away at the Old Time Country and Bluegrass Music Festival this week at the Plymouth County Fairgrounds in Le Mars.

"They're preserving a tradition, Mescher says, and they're passing it on to others. On Thursday they taught a group of about 30 people the bones basics (see two photographs on Page 8.)

"If you can hold the bones, you can play the bones," he said, positioning two small flat wooden sticks in each hand. "And playing them is all in the wrist."

"The bones are probably one of the oldest instruments at the old time music festival. Versions of them were found in graves dating as far back as 2000 B.C.

"They used to use real bones," Sharon said. "Some people still do use cow shinbones or rib bones."

"In the Middle Ages, the bones were used by people for spiritual music and by lepers, warning others of their approach.

"The instrument was likely brought to the United States by the first settlers from Scotland, England and Ireland, Sharon said.

"Jerry Mescher and his sister, Bernie, grew up hearing their dad Albert play. [See Volume 8, Number 4 for a more complete story on the Mescher Tradition.]

"Albert kept it in mind, then finally found a fellow who knew what the bones looked like, so he made Albert strips of wood out of old pitchfork handles.

"Later, he met a man that knew how to hold the instrument, but not play it.

"From there, Albert taught himself. "He'd sit down with the old self-player piano -- there were no CDs or record players back then, but every home had a self-player piano," Jerry said.

"Jerry also taught himself. "I made my bones out of peach crates -- my mom canned peaches -- and I'd play them to the polka music on the radio, three times a day for 15 minutes," he said. "It takes the three Ds. Desire, determination and discipline. But if you don't have the love for it, you're not going to have the discipline."

"Most sets of bones wind up in the drawer after people buy them, Jerry said.

"Don't let frustration set in," he urged the crowd, then he and his wife and sister took the crowd step by step through how to hold and play them.

\*Make a fist, and bend your wrist up at about a 90 degree angle.

\*The first bone is stationery, held between the index and middle finger, right down the middle of the palm, and squeezed tight.

\*The second bone is held between the middle and ring finger, with the ring finger acting as a spring when the wrist moves, moving the second bone to click against the first.

\*Turn the wrists out and down, letting the second bone hit the first.

"Mescher Bones has more information and songs on their website, mescherbones.com.

"People of all ages joined the workshop to learn. Jerry's wife said she learned just a few years ago.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm missing out on all the fun,' so during harvest, out in the tractor, I practiced by myself," she said.

"Now she's got it down.

"Lori Cloud, a visitor at the music festival from Anthon, stopped in at the workshop after she heard the trio -- dubbed Mescher Bones -- play.

"I think I'll get it," she said, holding

two of the wooden strips in her hand. "It's kind of like snapping, the way you move your wrist."

"The sound, she said, is like tap dancing.

Cloud said she was glad she came to the lesson.

"I think," she said, "it's a lost art."

## Dennis Riedesel's Reports on his NTCMA Experience

I cannot attend Bone Fest XII this year because of a board meeting I have to attend. So I used my Bone Fest funds to attend this year's NTCMA festival in Le Mars, Iowa.

I arrived Friday afternoon and spent the afternoon and evening setting up my backpacking camp (tent and camping gear small enough to carry in my luggage aboard the plane) and then visited the different stages and jam sessions. There were two outdoor stages and five indoor stages with a new 'act' every 15 or 30 minutes on each stage.

As I was walking around the different venues, I heard bones rattling so I made a beeline straight to that building. I said to myself, "Self, I know that bones routine; that's the Meschers!" Sure enough, as I entered the building, Jerry, Sharon, and Bernie were putting the finishing touches to a Bones Workshop. We visited and then joined several jam sessions the rest of the afternoon and evening.

The first thing I did when I got to the festival was to enter the bones competition. I was a bit concerned because I was only the second one to sign up. That held true for most of Saturday, but Jerry insisted that he could get the minimum of five bones players to sign up so we could have the competition Saturday evening.

Through out the entire day Saturday, I boned in on various jam sessions whenever there were not any stage acts I wanted to watch and listen to.

For the bones competition, we had to find our own 'live' music accompaniment and in one three hour long jam

session I was interested in a young, excellent banjo picker. I asked him to play for me and he agreed. At a later jam session he was joined by a young friend of his that played a very, very, very good guitar and I asked if he would also join me on stage for the competition.

I happened to pick the number that made me the first to perform so I got on stage with my two 'pick up less than an hour before' players. However, the guitar player came on stage with a mandolin and I thought to myself, "OK, Lets see what this kid has on the mandolin." Talk about being lucky and picking up two of the better players at the entire festival!!!

But just a couple of problems, I had to bone to three songs and we had not picked out what songs to play!. We settled on a bluegrass version of *Red-wing*., but I don't know what I did--I was boning on automatic--don't know how many of my licks I was able to demonstrate.

The second song was (again a bluegrass version) of *Grandfather's Clock* and I think I did OK--at least I was able to catch the 'Tick-Tocks' in the song and do that on the bones. Also for this piece, I played my stone age bones which I had made from the ivory of a mammoth tusk (I know these are stone age because the mammoth has been extinct for 10 to 12 thousand years.)

For the third piece, I asked the players to play a waltz so I could demonstrate the three bone waltz rhythm I have developed.

The organization would not release the results of the competition until the final performances on Sunday evening but I had to leave to catch the plane back to Texas. I know I came in at least in sixth place because that is how many bones players were in the competition.

I want to finish this with a short description of a 'musical moment' that I experienced after the bones competition Saturday evening. I went back to the jam session and found some of the best players at the festival playing. Jerry was jamming along so I just sat on the sidelines and watched.

I started my music career learning to play cornet while in the fourth

grade. In between the Sophomore and the Junior year of high school, I taught my self to play tuba and played that the rest of my high school and early college years. In college, I taught myself to play string bass, played that in the college band and then played bass violin in our local symphony for the next ten years.

Since then I have been playing a wash tub bass with a lever at the top of the neck to change the tension of the string for the different bass notes. So I have had some experience in the bass playing world.

Remember my guitar, mandolin player--he was playing the bass but Oh how he could play the bass. The players were passing around the melody line and they passed it to this bass player. The song was "Grandfather's Clock" and this kid played a bluegrass version of the melody of *Grandfather's Clock* on the bass!! This made my trip to Iowa worthwhile!!!

Steve wanted this to be short, but I had to tell the story. One good thing for me--it has taken me so long to write this that hurricane Ike has turned away from us and seems to be heading north with landfall above Houston--hope he doesn't turn South and take aim at me again! *Dennis Riedesel*

## Russ Myers' Memorial

A memorial for Russ Myers was established after his death (See Volume 5, Number 2 for a story on him.) The Possum Ridge String Band gave us copies of their CD with Russ playing bones and telling stories asking only that recipients donate toward this memorial. About \$400 was received.

The Board approved the purchase of a TV/DVD that will be placed in the Historical Society building in Madison County, VA where Russ lived. Mel Mercier and I are working on a video that will be played on the TV/DVD as well as on our [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com) website. This video highlights Russ' bones career and includes lots of video, photographs and audio of him playing bones and telling stories. I will bring a draft of the video to Bones Fest XII. *Steve Wixson*

## History of Bones in the US—Part 4

[Part 1 of this thesis appeared in the Vol 8, No 2 issue of the newsletter. Part 2 appeared in Vol 8, No 4 along with the Table of Contents for the entire thesis. Part 3 appeared in Vol 9, No 3.]

The final musical context involving the bones to be discussed here is the instrumental dance music of Appalachia. Documentation of this tradition, especially documentation which mentions the bones, is difficult to find. There are several reasons for this. First of all. This music is part of an oral tradition. Information has been passed from musician to musician through word-of-mouth, not through the use of written materials.

Secondly, instrumental dance music of Appalachia seems to have escaped the notice of music scholars. What limited materials do exist touch only briefly on Appalachian instrumental dance music of this time period; their main focus is on the commercial development of "hillbilly music" or the "old time string bands" of the 1920's and '30's, a genre which gradually evolved into what is now known as country and western music.

The accounts that do exist mention the repertoire of Anglo American dance tunes only as part of the repertoire of "old time string bands" recorded by record companies in the early 1920's. Although some features of Appalachian dance music are preserved on these recordings, most often the recorded performances feature a more elaborate instrumentation than one would have encountered in the Appalachian area. Furthermore, the introduction of the guitar to dance music in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century brought a shift from a non-harmonic style to one harmonically based. Recordings made during the early 1920's tend to catch the emergence of the new harmonic style rather than preserve the older non-harmonic style.

Thirdly, there is a lack of information about instrumental musical practices in seventeenth-, eighteenth-

*(Continued on page 6)*



(Continued from page 5)

and nineteenth-century Appalachia due to its isolation from mainstream American culture. As has been pointed out earlier, the Appalachian Mountains were populated primarily by the illiterate lower classes of British society and their descendents. They tended to avoid urban centers where they might face the same problems encountered in Great Britain and settled in remote areas, keeping to themselves. Musical styles I present in the rural South, including Appalachia, did not become widely known by the rest of the country until the early 1920's when the recording industry stumbled onto them.

Despite a lack of indisputable evidence that the bones were a part of Appalachian instrumental dance music in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the use of bones in the performance of Appalachian dance music today suggests otherwise. Tunes found in Appalachia include those that are pentatonic or modal in character and imply a non-harmonic style. Less common are hornpipes, reels, and jigs, whose melodic outlines clearly imply ties with common-practice harmonic style. Both types of tunes are of British origin and have been performed in Appalachia since British immigrants settled there. Today both types of tunes are ~ performed on the fiddle and/or banjo, or in combination with one or more of the following instruments: guitar, hammer dulcimer, bones, and string bass. The fiddle and bones are still commonly used in the British Isles for the performance of the same basic repertoire found in Appalachia today.

It is evident that the music of black slaves, minstrel performers and Appalachian musicians have something in common:

The similarities between the early minstrel song and some of the oral-tradition music of the southern Appalachians are so numerous and striking as to be unquestionable. Less clear is the sequence of events: whether the minstrel song was the progenitor of this sort of "mountain music," or vice versa; and just when the banjo passed from black American to white.

The bones, triangle, and tambourine were part of the caricature of

blacks that white men created to entertain other white men. The supposition that the early minstrel theatre was modeled on improvised slave entertainments is credible but not yet proven.

The above quotes by prominent musicologists suggest possible ties between the music of minstrel performers, Appalachian musicians and black slaves. On closer examination, one finds similarities in repertoire, instrumentation and playing styles in the music of these three groups of people.

Musicians in all three contexts mentioned above played many of the same tunes; one need not look far to find an example. "Turkey in the Straw" was the tune most often cited by ex-slaves in the narratives collected by the W.P.A. in the 1930's, Charles Hamm points out the use of the same tune by minstrels and Appalachian musicians:

Recent research has identified most of these tunes [i.e., minstrel tunes] as coming from oral-tradition Anglo American music [i.e., that which is found among musicians in Appalachia]; "Zip Coon," for instance, was sung by both Farrell and Dixon in 1834 to one of the most venerable of all Anglo-American melodies, best known in the present century as "Turkey in the Straw.

While many early minstrel tunes had Anglo-American roots, later performers used songs composed explicitly for minstrelsy such as Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" and Dan Emmett's "Dixie. Both types of tunes have been recovered from Appalachia and were also known by southern blacks in the mid-nineteenth century.

The instrumentation used by black musicians, minstrel performers and Appalachian musicians also had something in common--the use of bones with fiddle and sometimes banjo. The earliest references to blacks playing bones are from the mid-nineteenth century. The bones were probably played with fiddle in Appalachia as early as the seventeenth century when British immigrants settled there. When the banjo reached Appalachia in the nineteenth century, it was often used with the bones-fiddle combination.

In addition to the use of bones,

fiddle and banjo in the standard minstrel quartet, the hammer dulcimer was sometimes used in minstrelsy with banjo and bones. It has also been present in Appalachia since the eighteenth century and used in combination with various instruments, among them fiddle, banjo and bones.

The three musical contexts under discussion here also have playing styles in common. The oldest style of banjo playing in Appalachia, known as "frailing" or "clawhammer" style, utilizes the same techniques and achieves the same sounds as early minstrel banjo playing. Following is Charles Hamm's description of this style of banjo playing:

There are no chords; the style consists of melodic elaboration of a tune, or patterns of running notes acting as an accompaniment to a melody played by a fiddle, sung by the banjo player, or played on the banjo itself.

The fiddle in both Appalachia and in the context of minstrelsy was played in a style similar to the banjo style described by Hamm above. As with the banjo, techniques used by fiddlers in both traditions were quite similar and produced the same type of sound: the upper strings were used to play the melody while the lower strings acted as drones.

Pinpointing the playing styles of black musicians is more difficult to do than for the other two musical contexts already discussed, but may still be done with a certain degree of success. By the end of the seventeenth century, black fiddlers commonly played for the entertainment of both whites and blacks. Dances included European dances associated with the cultured classes--the minuet, waltz and cotillion--as well as "country dances" done to music adapted from that of Great Britain's lower classes. This same class of people included immigrants who settled in Appalachia. Thus black slaves in the New World knew some of the same tunes as did British immigrants in the Appalachians. Although no documentation exists, one can reasonably assume that the tunes blacks were taught to play, at the very least, slightly resembled the playing style of Great Britain's lower classes, where the music origi-

nated.

There is little documentation on the banjo style of black slaves. Yet one may reasonably assume that it had elements in common with the banjo styles of Appalachian musicians and minstrel performers since the banjo was first brought to America by African slaves. Initially, any contact whites had with the banjo would have been through contact with black slaves.

The presence of common factors among the music of Appalachian musicians, southern blacks and minstrel musicians suggests interaction among the three groups. Although all groups experienced change due to interaction with each other, the traditions associated with southern blacks and Appalachian musicians had been in existence long before the birth of minstrelsy. An examination of southern black and Appalachian traditions reveals what musical resources were present in each tradition, and suggests what components of these two traditions might have been borrowed by minstrelsy.

Black musicians in the South had access to the banjo (from Africa), the fiddle (from Europe), and music brought from both continents. *Beth Lenz*. Copyright by Beth Lenz, 1989. Used with permission.

## Bones Fest XII

October 17-19, 2008

St. Louis, MO

Host: Spike Bones

*Co-Host: Scott Miller*

Registration Form Included  
in this Newsletter

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*(Chieftains and Bones—Continued from page 1)*

with each others from playing together in Seán Ó Riada's folk orchestra, Ceoltóirí Cualann, and from various sessions in and around Dublin since the late 1950s. The album reflected a new approach to playing traditional Irish music through interpretation and arrangement. An album featuring just instruments playing music was considered a rarity in the 1960's.

I caught up with Paddy as he finished lunch on a bright, and beautiful (at least in New England) Labor Day afternoon. He graciously agreed to reminisce about the bones and his musical journey.

Paddy's earliest memories of the bones were as a child, "I must have been 8 or 9, we used to make them out of slate, find two that went together." He does remember seeing them played in early films, but not at sessions. Paddy was drawn to percussion instruments, and remembers "an old character playing two spoons on a tin milk can", and, later, when he was about 13 he played the drums.

Ronnie McShane was the first bone player he played in a group with, and he remembers Ronnie as a "very good bone player". Ronnie played both in Ceoltoiri Cullenann, and later with the Chieftains on "5" and Bonnapart's Retreat. Ronnie toured Australia with the Chieftains, "He was a very funny guy, quite a character" Paddy remembers. [See Volume 7, Number 1 for a more complete article on Ronnie.]

Peadar Mercier was the first bones and bodhran player with the Chieftains, recording #'s 2-5 with the group, and the ground breaking recording "Tin Whistles" with both Paddy, and Sean Potts.

Peadar was born in Cork, Ireland in 1914, and did not begin to play the bodhran and bones until the 1950s. His son, Mel Mercier, said, "Unfortunately, we don't know how my dad started playing the bones."

He was invited by the composer, Sean O Riada to join his m folk orchestra music ensemble, Ceoltoiri Chualainn, in the early 1960s. In 1966 he joined The Chieftains. He performed and recorded with the group until 1976, becoming the first ever

professional bodhrán and bones player. His compelling motor rhythms added great drive and color to the Chieftain's sound and his influence as a bodhrán player is unmatched to this day. His one-handed style of bones playing is heard to great musical effect on the Chieftains early albums.

During these early recordings, the bones were often used as a punctuation point to the music, as they attempted to create a musical atmosphere. "the bones had a sensual sound" Paddy described, "an eerie sort of feeling" like during the Battle of Aurlingim on Chieftains 4, or on counter point on the Morning Dew on the same recording. Paddy remembers Peadar as being able to play bones with both hands, quite an aberration in Ireland, although on recordings he would always play with one hand.

Bonaparte's Retreat, a musical retelling of Napoleon, effectively uses the bones as a counter point to the bodhrán, similar to Paddy's use on the Morning Dew. This recording received much acclaim, and Paddy has recently completed an Orchestral version which is slated for performance in several venues.

Martin Fay took over bone playing duties with the band from Chieftains 7 until his retirement in 2002.

Martin was born in Dublin in 1938. He played classical violin but was always drawn to traditional music. He played in Sean O Riada's Celotoiri Cualann orchestra and became a founding member of the Chieftains. I plan to research and write a more complete article on Martin and his bones playing for a future issue.

Paddy said "he was a very good bone player, and he still is." He describes his playing as very precise.

Paddy relates liking the sound of the bones and feels they are particularly good for creating atmosphere in the music. He related being particularly impressed with Mel Mercier's work with the bones and how he has really, "gone to town" in his development and use of the bones. He does want to use the bones in the future, and sees a place where this percussion instrument can continue to flavor and enhance traditional Irish music. *Steve Brown*



Bernie Worrell in the left photo and Sharon Mescher in the right photo from the Meshcer Trio teach one of two Bones Workshops at the National Traditional Country Music Festival. Also in the left photograph on the right is Kenny Myers who won the 2008 Bones and Spoons Contest. See story on Page ????????. Photographs by Magdalene Biesanz and courtesy of the Le Mars Daily Sentinel.



The Chieftains 5 CD showing their instruments. The rhythm bones in the lower left were Peadar Mercier's and were passed to his son, Mel. CD produced by Shanachie Records Corp. Photograph by Angus Forbes.

## Recorded Bones Music Index to Chieftain Albums with Bones

Below is a list of Chieftains albums with the names of the rhythm bones players. It is not a comprehensive list as we could not find all of their albums to preview.

Chieftains 2 [1969] Peadar Mercier  
Chieftains 3 [1973] Peadar Mercier  
Chieftains 4 [1974] Peadar Mercier,

Martin Fay  
Chieftains 5 [1975] Peadar Mercier,  
Ronnie McShane  
Chieftains 6—Bonapate's Retreat  
[1977] Ronnie McShane  
Chieftains 7 - [1977] Martin Fay,  
Sean Potts  
Chieftains 8 - [1978] Martin Fay  
Chieftains 9: Boil the Breakfast Early  
[1979] Martin Fay  
Chieftains 10 - Cotton-Eyed Joe  
[1981] Martin Fay  
The Year of the French [1982] Martin  
Fay

The Chieftains in China [1985]  
Martin Fay  
James Galway & The Chieftains in  
Ireland - [1987] Martin Fay  
Celtic Wedding [1987] Martin Fay  
Irish Heartbeat [1988] Martin Fay  
Reel Music: The Film Scores [1991]  
Martin Fay  
Another Country [1992] Martin Fay  
The Essential Chieftains [2006]  
Martin Fay, Sean Potts

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*Address Correction Requested*