



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 22, No. 1 2020

*In This Issue:
Kenny and Teri
Wolin*

*Bones Fest XXIV
Preliminary De-
tails*

*Randy and Mar-
deen Gordon*

Teilhard Frost

Dennis Marks

*In Search For The
Elusive Ebony
Bones*

*Abraham Lincoln
Playing Rhythm
Bones Cartoon*

Columns:

Executive Director

Editorial

Executive Director's Column

Well here we are in the 21st Century, feeling a lot like moments in time when epidemics threatened the world. I'm writing this in the depths of the Brown Bunker located here in Winchendon, where we've been now for about 2 weeks. The effects of the threatening virus has canceled the New England Folk Festival normally held in April, and the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship, normally held in May. We are holding our breath that we may yet be able to hold Bones Fest in July.

While these are but blips on the screen in comparison to the devastating effects on our country, they do matter to us, players of this ancient of

instruments. In truth, my personal schedule hasn't changed much, having been retired for a few years, and spending a fair amount of time at home in a normal week, but for the vast majority of people this is very different. I'm trying to avoid telling you that you have an amazing opportunity here, but clearly it stares us in the face. Practicing has always been a bit of a boondoggle for me, and many other musicians, but here it is, more than enough time to focus on playing, and improving your ability to play. In some ways I feel a weight
(Continued on Page 4)

Kenny and Teri Wolin

Kenny Wolin Profile:

I grew up just a few blocks from the Detroit border-line in Oak Park, Michigan. In 4th grade I wanted to play the trumpet, but my mom thought I would drop out of band after a year just like my older brother and sister. To save money she pretended that I was gonna need braces so, instead of trumpet, I could either choose drums or violin (knowing I'd choose the former). At the time, my parents were pretty relieved that it only cost them a pair of drumsticks and a drum pad, but little did they know how that one pair of Bunken 2B sticks would change my life.

The next few years I was taking private drumset lessons until 7th grade when that all changed. My new teacher was Sam Tundo from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He co-owned a store nearby called "Percussion World" with Norm Ficket (DSO). Sam got me back on the drum pad doing a lot of heavy rudimental-style playing, but once he introduced me to the marimba I was like a duck to water and couldn't stop practicing. Which reminds me, my mom likes to joke about whenever I got in trouble she couldn't just send me to my room because that's where all my instruments were!

Anyway, that same year I played a xylophone solo at the 1979 Michigan Percussion Festival in Ann Arbor for the first time in public for Charlie Owen during his masterclass. Charlie later became my role model. He was the timpanist and marimba soloist with "The President's Own" Marine Band

during the 30s-50s, then became Principal of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and THEN taught at the University of Michigan.

After Charlie's masterclass I decided to stay for the next one, which just happened to be led by Percy Danforth! I can't begin to tell you how amazing it was to see and hear the bones for the first time and be taught by Percy himself. After his workshop I begged my mom to buy me a pair of Joe Birl Rhythm Bones directly from Percy.

Through high school I played in several outside orchestras from the Detroit Symphony Civic Orchestra to my first paid job with the Birmingham/Bloomfield Symphony. I spent most of my summers at Interlochen Music
(Continued on Page 5)



Kenny and Teri Wolin

Editorial

Our main stories are profiles of Kenny and Teri Wolin, Mardeen and Randy Gordon, Teilhard Frost, and Dennis Marks.

The timing of the Wolin profiles beginning on Page 1 is to coincide with them hosting Bones Fest XXIV, and to introduce them to prospective attendees new to RBS. The rest of us know that they have made many contributions to RBS, and Kenny Wolin was elected to the Board in 2009.

We met the Gordons at BVXXI, a crisis Fest interrupted by the arrival of hurricane Harvey. We knew them as makers of Shooting Star rhythm bones, and it was great to meet them. Mardeen wowed us by playing to the William Tell Overture. Their profiles are on Page 5.

Years ago Teilhard Frost gave us one of his CDs and permission to put a track on our website. Check that out at <http://rhythmbones.com/TeilhardFrostFrom-Flapjack.html>. His profile is on Page 4.

Steve Brown's article on ebony rhythm bones (see Page 7) brings back a memory. I have three sets of ebony rhythm bones including a magnificent set made for me by the late Jerry Mescher, but early on my only set was made by Percy Danforth/Ray Schairer. Val Cowett, wife of the late Everett Cowett, our founding father, was a spiritual person, and when I played those ebony rhythm bones for her she said it touched her soul, not my playing, but the sound of ebony.

A widow named Barbie gave me her husband's ebony rhythm bones even though I tried to get her to keep them and learn how to play them. Now they are my 'Barbie Bones.'

Dennis Marks found our website and contacted us. Some of his story on Page 4 is familiar, and that rhythm bones helped recovery from a shoulder injury is inspiring.

Our country has had times of division, such as the American Revolution and prohibition, and maybe the greatest was the Civil War. Member Dom Flemons found a cartoon from Abraham Lincoln's opponents presenting him as Nero playing rhythm bones. Christian McWhirter from the Abraham Lincoln Library gives us some perspective on Page 3.

Claude Bonang is an occasional *Letter*

to the Editor contributor, and this issue's letter interests me. A few years back, I tried to tap dance while playing rhythm bones by buying a pair of tap dancing shoes and taking tap dancing lessons. Made some progress, but never perfected the 'Time Step.' And it is really hard work until you build up the appropriate muscles which I never did. We do have some rhythm bones/dance examples, Scott Miller, Bob Goulet, Spike Bones, and Anika and Joseph Kooi who not only play rhythm bones in the Mescher style and tap dance, but they also do it together in synchrony.

In preparation for a much needed overhaul to our website, I have converted Adobe Flash video files that require a special player to .mp4 files that everyone should be able to play. Also cleaned up file names which has the side effect of you NOT getting the content of a every requested page. If you find broken pages, let me know via and I will fix them.

There is a real possibility that we will have to postpone or cancel Bones Fest XXIV due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic. This decision will be made and announced in the May RBS Email as well as on our website.

Letter to the Editor

After viewing a video of James Cagney dancing to Yankee Doodle (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4ze_OBI15k, it starts about 2:55 minutes into the video), it provided me with the idea of what I should perform at this year's Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent Show—play my rhythm bones while tap dancing to Yankee Doodle dressed as Uncle Sam.

I now have a pair of tap shoes and I Googled the Internet for lessons on how to tap dance and Mitch Miller's Orchestra's rendition of Yankee Doodle, which I recorded. My Uncle Sam costume arrived yesterday afternoon and I'm sending along the picture that my wife, Ann, took of me after I tried it on (see Page 8). I'm hoping to compete in the Brunswick Rotary Midcoast Maine's Got Talent at the Brunswick High School Crooker Theater at 7:00 PM on May 18th. I hope it isn't going to be canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic. Warm regards,
Claude Bonang

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 22, No 1
First Quarter 2020
ISSN: 1545-1380

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

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

Bones Fest XXIV Preliminary Information

This Bones Fest is subject to cancellation depending on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic. Check our website for the latest news.

Kenny & Teri Wolin are excited to host this year's "Virginia is for Lovers" Bones Fest XXIV here in the heart of Old Town Alexandria (est.1749), and the hometown of our 1st President, George Washington, this Summer July 23-26, 2020.

Once again, we have been fortunate to have the historic Lyceum at our disposal. The Lyceum is located in the heart of Old Town that has seen various service throughout it's 180 year history. It opened in 1839 as the city's first cultural center and provided a place for lectures,



debates, scientific experiments, performances, and quiet reading. It has served as a hospital ward during the Civil War, a private residence, and today hosts concerts, exhibitions, a museum store, and Bones Fests!

Our host hotel will be the newly renovated Sheraton Suites Old Town Alexandria. The Sheraton is nestled a few blocks away from the banks of the Potomac River. It is located just 2 miles south of Ronald Reagan National Airport and 1 mile from the Lyceum. It is less than 5 miles to our Nation's Capital and is a short drive or water taxi to Mount Vernon. If you plan to fly in we strongly encourage you to arrive through Reagan National (DCA) as the traffic here is...challenging. There is 2 hour street parking around the hotel (9-5p) and then free after 5pm. Sunday, street parking is free so there may be away around paying so much for overnight. Good news is that the hotel is next to a Harris Teater (organic grocery store) and Trader Joes. Click the link at the bottom of this page to book your room.

We're looking forward to seeing all of our Bones-family here, and to also celebrate our 10 year anniversary since our marriage at Bones Fest XIV. *Kenny and Teri Wolin*

Bones Calendar

NEFFA, April 24-26, 2020, with Steve Brown's Workshop. **Canceled**

All Ireland Bones Competition, May 4, 2020, Abbeyfeale, Ireland. **Canceled**

Bones Fest XXIV. July 23-26, 2020, Washington DC area. Check newsletter to see if Fest is Canceled.

NTCMA Festival, October 3-6, 2020, Fremont, NE (NEW LOCATION). Bones Contest will likely be on Sunday.



A cartoon showing Abe Lincoln as Nero playing rhythm bones

This political cartoon appeared in a Civil War newspaper hostile to Lincoln on December 27, 1864. People who opposed the Emancipation Proclamation (and the 13th Amendment, which would pass congress about a month later), frequently tried to foster racist, negative associations between Lincoln and African American imagery, especially minstrelsy. This goes all the way back to his first presidential campaign, when some tried to characterize him as a secret abolitionist. There was also a scandal during the 1864 election, in which some newspapers falsely reported that Lincoln had requested a minstrel song, "Picayune Butler," while touring the Antietam battlefield. My guess is this image was intended especially to recall the Antietam incident.

So, what you have here is a take on the old "Nero fiddled while Rome burned"

trope but instead it's Lincoln playing an instrument associated with minstrelsy and African American culture, with exaggerated facial features intended to make him resemble contemporary racist depictions of African Americans, while the Union burns in the background. These kinds of attacks were common and fed off of minstrelsy's association with African Americans and "lower" culture, Lincoln's fondness for the genre, and general racism towards African Americans.

So, there's a lot packed in here. For your purposes, it's a good example of how rhythm bones could have negative connotations at the time as symbols of supposedly inferior African American culture. *Christian McWhirter*, Lincoln Historian, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, IL

(Continued from Page 1)

being lifted from me, as I've always felt a bit guilty practicing instead of doing all those things I'm suppose to be doing and now, poof, it's there for you if you want it.

But practicing in and of it's self has never been particularly motivating for me. And I have found that when I get a wave of excitement like a new piece of music, a new band, or a Bones Fest, I'm able to ride that wave in a flurry of playing and practicing, carrying me on, and helping me to stay at practicing for some time.

So here's the challenge: get excited, get inspired, seek that which brings you closer to why you started playing rhythm bones in the first place. Inspired by old bones players like Percy Danforth, Jerry Mescher, or Joe Birl? Go back to the source on record, video, or music they played. Inspired by Bones Fests? Go to the video section of the RBS web site and watch workshops and performances from a number of Bones Fests. Remember times that you felt inspired and get on that wave!

One of my significant moments came from a recording by the Chieftains, and Ronnie McShane, Chieftains 5. The last track on side two features Ronnie playing a set of Kerry Slides, and it never fails to get me back on board. Often times it's in the shadow of disaster that our greatest triumphs are born.

I don't go any further that a young father whose child was born with the prospect of lifelong disability, both mental and physical, and yet the child inspired him to change his life and work in the field of disabilities, and has never failed to bring great joy into his life.

The Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, once said to a patient when he had lost everything to a fire, "Let's open a bottle of wine and celebrate, something good will come of this." So maybe we too can celebrate this seeming catastrophe, something good will come of this too!
Steve Brown

Teilhard Frost

I started playing rhythm bones in Toronto Ontario back in 1997.

A friend had loaned me a set of English whale bones which her great-grandfather had used as a longshoreman off the East coast of England.

I would ride my bicycle through downtown Toronto, practicing with one hand, then the other, avoiding cars and pedestrians, adding to the distraction.

I played for many years with the renowned contra dance band Flapjack, then with Sheesham, Lotus and 'Son and now often touring solo.

I take a set of rhythm bones with me where ever I go and have recently introduced them to the Indonesian Gamelan Orchestra in Ubud, Bali.

My main two sets of rhythm bones are camel rib bones I brought back from Mongolia and solid cow femur bones from here at home.

I live on Wolfe Island, located in the St. Lawrence River, where I make rhythm bones, banjos and old time world music.

Here is a video from time in Bali:
<https://www.facebook.com/2061490087399570/videos/400328337545074/>
(cow femur bones)

This isn't a great video but here is something:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHzMIR5rXDw>
(those are the camel ribs)

Here is a rough video a friend of mine and I did:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msd7zl2Avl0&t=39s>

Teilhard (tay YAR) Frost, Musician, banjo maker

Dennis Marks

I am sorry that the East coast has a monopoly on Bones Festivals.

It is unrealistic that I will ever check this off my bucket list, but it sure would be fun to wander the streets of New Orleans for a few days and play along with the multitude of street bands there.

My Dad played the rattle bones quite well and when I was a kid showed me how they were held and played, but I

never did play along with him. He passed away in 1988. I retired in 2011 and in 2014 I ran across a box that was his, in it were a couple sets of his old rhythm bones.

I decided that I should learn to play them and started practicing. At first I could only play along with 1 or 2 songs before my wrist and arms became tired. I burned a CD of appropriate music started playing one pair while driving to and from work. I felt that I was doing pretty well when I had a severe right shoulder injury and subsequent surgery 4 months later that took away the ability to play right handed.

The enjoyment of rattling out a beat to the music was strong enough to keep me playing left handed and trying to regain the ability to play with the right as well. Now, 2 1/2 years after the surgery I can manage a few songs right handed before getting tired, but can play left handed for hours and enjoy an almost daily session.

I am fully self taught and have looked for other rhythm bones players in my area to learn from, but have not found even one other rhythm bones player. I purchased a couple of new sets of rhythm bones on-line and I have made a few sets myself. I enjoy the different sounds from different woods and playing 2 different wood sets that play in what I call the same key so they compliment each other.

The picture on Page 8 was taken in 2019 at the Fischer's Mill 3rd annual folk festival in Silverton, Oregon. The old pipe display case just seemed fitting and Dad's old 'Rhythm Bones' box got the idea across or at least that was the plan. I also gave out business cards with several web site links to rhythm bones info and had pictures from the web on the back side showing how to hold rhythm bones in your hand. They were popular with a few folks. I did get to play a number on stage with a guitar player that put out a good tune to play rhythm bones with.

I gave 2 pair of rhythm bones to a local school teacher of 3rd or 4th graders. Who knows where they may lead...

I play rhythm bones regularly to recorded songs and do enjoy it greatly. The guitar player and I got together again a few days ago and even though less frequent than I would like, playing to live music is progressing and that exposes more people too. *Dennis Marks*

Randy & Mardeen Gordon

RANDY GORDON:

My wife Mardeen and I live in Ben Lomond, CA in the Santa Cruz mountains, since 1988. A rhythm bones player since 1982, I got started by playing wooden spoons at the Renaissance Faire in Agoura, CA as a performer with an English Country comedia/dance troupe.

It was there I was introduced to rhythm bones and acquired my first set...a pair of Percy Danforth rhythm bones, although I had little training and knowledge of how to make them work! Once I'd accomplished a triplet with one hand, and matched it with the other, without the nonexistent YouTube, there was little to help me figure out how to do anything other than make an annoying noise, let alone music.

Months later, while attending a dulcimer festival at a mansion in Beverly Hills with a Morris dance team, my wife and I were stunned to come around a corner upon Percy, Danforth, Mr. Bones himself in the flesh, playing incredibly phrased passages to classical music coming from a boombox behind him, matching the music with delicate flourishes in the way only Percy could. We were astonished and fortunate to then get schooled by the master himself. He left an indelible impression on me.

Since that day, my skill and abilities have grown immensely, and I continue to push myself to find different ways to contribute to and enhance the sound of whatever music I am playing with. Mardeen also became a rhythm bones maker, and together we still manage and produce Shooting Star Bones proliferating rhythm bones and rhythm bones players whenever and wherever we can.

MARDEEN GORDON:

My husband, Randy and I were introduced to rhythm bones at the Renaissance Faire in 1982, where we got a pair of Percy Danforth rhythm bones, but not much instruction. After teaching ourselves to get a triplet, we were lucky

to meet Percy himself, as my husband described in his bio.

Once we had the basics, I wanted a pair of my own, so I made one. When we took them to the Faire, I ended up teaching someone almost every weekend, and soon was selling the pairs I made.

The name "Shooting Star Bones" came from the way I signed my name at the time. My maiden name was Smith, and I wrote the M of Mardeen with 3 lines above the star, and you get the Shooting Star logo.

Lark in the Morning was the first catalog to carry my rhythm bones, and Capritaurus Music sold them at their booth at Faire. Eventually, we created our own booth, "Bonecastle", partnering with a friend selling her ceramic castles, and teaching hundreds of people to play.

Several other music stores have carried my rhythm bones over the years, and we did a couple of road trips on the west coast, doing workshops at music stores along the way. We also sold them at the Strawberry Music Festival in the Lark in the Morning booth for several years.

That is where I met an Irish rhythm bones player who showed me a different way of holding them that enables changing tone while playing. That has become my preferred way to play. Currently, Shooting Star Bones can be found through Scott Miller at Bone Dry Music (www.bonedrymusic.com).

[Mardeen wrote a story about her Shooting Star rhythm bones that appeared in newsletter, Vol 14, No 4, Page 6, available on-line on our website]



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

(Wolin - continued from Page 1)

Camp where my teacher, Eric (Wetstein) Forrester recommended his teacher, Mike Rosen at Oberlin Conservatory to study marimba.

I auditioned and received a full scholarship to Oberlin, and then I attended the University of Michigan on a Fellowship for percussion performance studying under Michael Udow and Saul Rabbio. It was my 2nd year there in 1991 when Percy Danforth was the guest artist on bones during our percussion ensemble concert. We played a mallet sextet arrangement of a tune called "Graceful Ghost Rag" as Percy improvised on the bones, which was just a year before he passed away.

For the next 6 years after college I moved to Boston and played with the Rhode Island Philharmonic until I finally won the Marine Band audition after 4 tries since 1992. Perseverance!

Fun fact: "The President's Own" Marine Band was founded by an act of congress in 1798 making it America's oldest continuously active professional musical organization in the country. In 1801 President Thomas Jefferson named us "The President's Own."

My first year in the band we celebrated our 200th anniversary with a gala performance at the Kennedy Center with guest conductor, John Williams. The program featured his film scores, complete with the scenes projected on a screen behind us. One of the pieces was from the movie "Far and Away" that had a prominent rhythm bones part. Huzzah!

Everything was coming full circle since that MI Perc. Festival almost 20 years earlier.

I excitedly rushed back home, rummaged through my sock drawer and found my rhythm bones. It also didn't take very long to also find that 1: these plastic bones weren't going to cut it with John Williams, and 2: I forgot how to play them.

I was able to get a hold of Percy's instructional VHS tape as well as a pair of wooden Danforth bones, and a few pairs of the Cooperman Fife & Drum Company rosewood, steam-bend ones. In my research, I was happy to discover that there were more rhythm bones players out there than I thought. Then I got downright "giddy with delight" to find out that a Rhythm Bones Society existed

and that their next “Bones Fest” was only a ½ hour away in Reston, VA! Woo-Hoo! Our good friend and bandmate, Scott (he provided the sound for our last bones Fest here) jokingly compares us to a bunch of platypuses: when you think that you’re the only platypus around and all of a sudden you’re swimming in a nice cove with other platypuses. That’s bones bliss, my friend!

This first Bones Fest made such an impact on me. The first rhythm bones player I met was Russ Myer in the bookshop. He asked me to help him find the book, *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, showed me how he changes pitches on rhythm bones (What?!), and then pulled out some seashells and played em like rhythm bones. If you’ve ever met Russ you’d totally get that!

Jonathan was outside with his fiddle and after we stopped jamming together on some mixed-meter Nickel Creek tune, he said he had someone I HAD to meet. Once he put Tim Reilly and I together, well to quote my lifelong dorymate Tim, “it’s like gas and matches.”

But when I saw Bill Vits run out on stage with a lampshade on his head playing burning fast rhythm bones, followed by Steve Brown and Steve Wixson (wearing a long blond wig) parodying a Bernie and Jerry Mescher variety show act, I oddly felt at home.

Since then I dedicated more time to our folk tradition and over the years I had the opportunity to teach a lot of rhythm bones. My favorites that come to mind are a few times with Tim and Jonathan at the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festivals, and at Camp Lejeune to a room full of active-duty marines.

Besides playing rhythm bones with the Marine Band for our anniversary concert, I got to perform several times with rhythm bones on two of our national concert tours across the country. I’m also in my 10th year as the leader of the Marine Band’s White House Irish Ensemble/Celtic Combo, mostly playing concertina peppered with some bodhran and rhythm bones. Each year we provide the background music (session tunes) during the St. Patrick’s Day Reception honoring the taoiseach/prime minister of Ireland.

Outside of that, Teri and I perform together as The Mollyhawks (formerly

Anston Bruder) with an emphasis on Celtic sea music, and (full circle) we were one of the featured groups at the Kennedy Center a few years ago.

Our latest project is called McCushla celtic marimba guitar duo combining my three loves: Teri, session tunes, and marimba! <https://www.facebook.com/McCushlaMusic/videos/933390213712597/>

Although, I do have to say that my favorite performances has been doing skits at our Bones Fests— here are just a few that come to mind:

<https://youtu.be/xRY3VsPD9x8>, <https://youtu.be/ywMsHcevJ8s>, <https://youtu.be/gdkBpXTFj2M>

Considering that I met my wife 15 years ago at Bones Fest IX in Chattanooga, got engaged on stage at Bones Fest XIII in Louisville (<https://youtu.be/p0m2bzTXXJ0>), and hosted AND got married at Bones Fest XIV in Alexandria, Teri and I really love rhythm bones and our rhythm bones family because it’s what brought us together. *Kenny Wolin*



Teri Wolin’s Profile

I’ve had a love of percussion since I was about 7 or 8 years old. That was during the folk revival era of the 1960’s and everyone was picking up guitar. My mom wanted me to do the same. She thought it would be great to have someone in the family who was able to play some accompaniment around the campfire and get everyone going with “If I Had a Hammer” or something like that. I don’t know why she was so insistent that I learn guitar for that reason; growing up we NEVER went camping or even had a

fire pit in our back yard. I really dug my heels in on drums though and she struck up a deal with me to let me take private drum lessons if I took group guitar lessons at the local YWCA in the summer. That sounded like a good compromise so I learned both. It’s a good thing too, because these days I earn a living with a guitar in my hand not drum sticks but it doesn’t hurt to be versatile.

I’ve played both instruments in many bands over the years from metal to Irish and as a music director at a couple of churches. I was even lounge - lizard in my 20’s (hey, it paid some bills so don’t judge). I’ve been a music teacher for the past 15 years and love introducing rhythm bones to the kids. In the beginning, they have a love/hate relationship with them. The love the idea of clacking them but get a little dispirited when they find it’s not initially as easy as it looks. What joy comes to their faces when they manage their first triplet though! I remember that feeling.

I’ve been a member of the RBS for around 13 years. I began playing rhythm bones around 14 years ago and was inspired first by the instructional video put out by Mel Mercier on bodhran & bones. Once I got my first rattle & snap going, I began to search for other means of improving my technique. That’s what led me to the Rhythm Bones Society. I was so excited to learn that there was an entire group of people that were so passionate about this ancient, odd & cool instrument that I quickly became a member myself.

I was told that there was this strange event that occurred every year called the “Bones Fest.” That sounded intriguing so I made plans to go to my first Bones Fest hosted by Steve Wixson at Chattanooga TN. WOW – what an event! I was blown away by all of the rhythm bones players gathered there. I enjoyed the fact that some players had a certain expertise in one particular style and that others could switch from one type of playing to another. All were so willing to share their knowledge. While I wouldn’t dare play in front of anyone that year (yes, you could say I was just a wee bit intimidated), I took what I learned from these gracious musicians and practiced for a year – until my next Bones Fest hosted by Jonathan Danforth in New

Bedford, MA.

That was another amazing year! I wasn't so shy about playing in front of others any longer and had the thrill of playing alongside of my very first rhythm bones tutor Mel Mercier in addition to Tim Reilly and, best of all, my (now) husband Kenny Wolin. There were some amazing Irish jam sessions with Jonathan Danforth and a host of so many others.

Bones Fest has come to mean so much to me that I'm thrilled to be hosting another Fest here in the DC area. Kenny & I have such amazing memories of past Bones Fest's such as meeting at a Bone Fest, getting engaged at a Bones Fest and getting married at a Bones Fest. It is with great pleasure that we look forward to celebrating our 10 year anniversary at this year's Bones Fest in Old Town

[Editor's Noe: There are many references to Kenny and Teri in the on-line newsletters, and you can search for them using their names (search also using Teri Davies). Below are their newsletter articles.

Kenny's Articles:

Bones with John Williams at the Kennedy Center, Vol 5, No 4 Page 6

Kenny Wolin Bones Fest Workshop Follow Up, Vol 6, No 4, Page 5

Bones on Tour with "The President's Own," Vol 8, No 2, Page 6

Bones Fest VIII Summary, Volume 8, Special Issue, Page 13

Kenny Wolin Played Rhythm Bones in the White House, Vol 12, No 2, Page 6

Teri's Articles:

Bones, A Great Instrument, A Great Lesson Plan (teaching rhythm bones to children), Vol 8, No 1, Page 4

Highlights From Russ Myers Funeral, Vol 8, No3, Page 3

Both of Them:

Highlights from Bones Fest XIV, Vol 12, No 3.

Bones Fest XIV Summary, Vol 18, No 4, Page 9

In Search of the Elusive Ebony Bones

"Species of ebony include *Diospyros ebenum* (Ceylon ebony), native to southern India and Sri Lanka; *Diospyros crassiflora* (Gabon ebony), native to western Africa; and *Diospyros celebica* (Sulawesi ebony), native to Indonesia and prized for its luxuriant, multi-colored wood grain. Mauritius ebony, *Diospyros tessellaria*, was largely exploited by the Dutch in the 17th century. Some species in the genus *Diospyros* yield an ebony with similar physical properties, but striped rather than evenly black (*Diospyros ebenum*)." Wikipedia. The use of ebony in carvings and furniture dates back to Egyptian times. It has also been used for furniture, particularly cabinets in Europe dating back to the 15th century.

From my earliest days of playing bones I have heard the stories of ebony bones. Not the ones you can get from China or Pakistan, but the old ones, only found in Antique stores, Flea Markets, or sometimes passed down in families. They seemed to be as rare as hen's teeth, they say, but occasionally you run across them in the most unlikely of places.

Using Ebony for rhythm bones seems to have started in the mid 19th century, when bone playing was common and popular during the minstrel show era. A number of companies produced ebony bones including banjo producing companies in Boston and other locations. A number of mail order companies, including Sears, offered ebony bones in their catalog. So we know that ebony bones were available to the general populace, but how common would they be, and the best question, how do you find them.

In my private collection I have some 25 pairs of ebony bones, and I have to say, I mostly acquired them by pure accident. The bones themselves vary in size, although the shapes are almost identical. The quality of ebony is both pure black Gabon ebony, and the brown streaked lower quality Macassar ebony reportedly from Indonesia. I'm going to relate a few stories of collecting these bones, hoping they might inspire you to search on your own.

The first acquisition of ebony bones occurred in late 1979 or early 1980. I was two years into my bone playing apprenticeship with Percy Danforth, and had heard numerous stories about ebony bones. They seemed to be particularly hard to get, but everyone you talked to seemed to have a story.

I was dropping in to a local music store in Fitchburg where I worked, just to check in. The owner, a friend, looked surprised to see me. "I thought of you the other day. I was in an Antique store and saw some ebony bones." "Where. Where?" I repeated. Within 10 minutes I was walking in to a local Antique store. As I walked up to the front counter, I couldn't help but stop short. There in the front display case was literally a pile of black ebony bones. Trying to keep my composure, I asked the clerk to take out the bones. As she lifted the tray, she said, "They're all ebony, \$2.00 per pair". I quickly counted, 8 pairs or 4 sets. One bone caught my eye right away, and though I was thrilled, I said to the clerk, "Not all ebony, this one is much lighter than the others, see?" Taking this as a rebuff, she said, "Oh you can have them all for \$5.00!" Barely able to compose myself, I paid, and ran out the door, feeling somewhat like a thief. Years later I showed the one set of matched Gabon ebony bones I got out of the set to Jerry Mescher, who called them one of the finest sets of ebony bones he had seen.

I've had some success stopping into to various antique stores in my travels around New England. Mostly I get blank stares from the owners, but one time in New Hampshire, I stopped in a store to look around. In a collection of bric-a-brac I spotted one ebony bone. I picked it up, and went to the young clerk behind the counter. "Where is it's mate?" I asked. She looked at me puzzled, I explained they come in pairs. She was tending the store for her mother, and said she would call her. In a few minutes in came her mother with the matching bone. Total cost: \$10 per pair.

I was working one day a week in the Employment Office in Gardner a number of years later, and became quite friendly with another worker there who often went to auctions. I told him of my fascination with bones, and asked if he



Mardeen and Randy Gordon (See story on Page 5)

ever found any. “Oh yes, we see them occasionally.” But hadn’t seen any in years he said. I asked him to be on the look out, and several months later he called, “Hey I found some of those bone things you’re looking for.” Meeting him at the office the next day he opened a bag with 8 pairs! Total cost: \$40.

Those old bones are elusive, and do play tricks on you. I’ve had several pairs stolen in the most unlikely places, but I’ve also had people call me out of nowhere with pairs they have found or been given. Well don’t give up trying, and persevere! When you least expect it, they suddenly appear! *Steve Brown*



Dennis Marks and his Rhythm Bones Box (S)



Steve Brown’s Ebony Rhythm Bones Collection (see story on Page 7)



Claude Bonang and his Yankee Doodle costume (See story on Page 2)

Rhythm Bones Society

1060 Lower Brow Road
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

Address Correction Requested