



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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## Executive Director's Column

Uncle Bones Wants You! We are now heading into a new year and have not secured a site for Bones Fest XII. I would like to encourage anyone with strong interest to contact me, Steve Wixson, or any of the Board members to see how you can become a member in an elite group of individuals. There have been 8 sponsors or groups of sponsors over the life time of Bones Fest with two members sponsoring multiple times, Steve Wixson and Ev Cowett.

I still remember the great joy and awe I felt as I saw Bones Fest V take shape and fly high into the sky. It was a tremendous amount of work, I won't ignore that fact, but I have some incredible memories and a pretty good video to overshadow the memories of hard work. I still have people approaching me at Bones Fest to say that Bones Fest

V was their favorite, and of course we always see a number of T shirts from the fest at each meeting.

I was fortunate enough to have had Nicolas Driver come all the way from England to attend that fest. As it was the only one so far he has attended, it makes it a special event for me, along with many other amazing experiences there.

Each fest has it's own unique character and charm, and something you as a Bones Fest Host could reflect on, and in turn create a number of memories for our membership.

One of my regrets is not having attended Russ Myer's Fest, one of the earlier Fests, but I do have the memory of him attending the fest I

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Nacchere Toscare—Tuscan Castanets

[Editor's Note. The title of this article suggests it is about castanets, and while their castanets, shown in the photo below, are thicker than what most of us play, they are played like most of us play rhythm bones.]

**Their origin and distribution** Scientifically defined as reciprocal percussion idiophones, the nacchere are one of the oldest rhythmic accompaniment instruments in Italy. Two principal types are found in popular use: the "castagnette" or "castagnole" used in the Naples area, in Apulia (Gargano) and in Sicily, and the "crotali piatti" (flat bars), also called "nacchere" which are found in other regions of Italy.

The first type consists of two round concave pieces of wood which are hit together (one in each hand). Their name derives from their resemblance to the chestnut. The second type of idiophone, however, has a completely different form from the Spanish castanets: they are the "crotali piatti" (Latin: *crotalum*; Greek: κρόταλον) which consist of two simple bars of hard wood, each independent of the other and not tied together like the castanets.

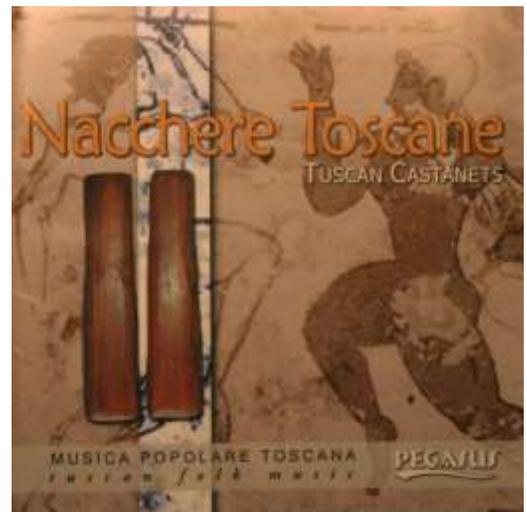
Even though today the word "nacchere" [from the Persian *nakar*; arab *naqqāra*] refers without distinction to both types described above, in the past the word had a different meaning.

In ancient times, "nacchere" or "naccaro" re-

ferred to a military instrument made of two drums, similar to two kettle drums that were played with sticks, often by someone on horseback.

*Tympanotriba* were the players of the nacchere. Francesco Redi (Arezzo, 18 February 1627 – Pisa, 1697) in the eulogy "Bacco in Toscana" (vv. 398 – 408), gives us a detailed description: "the nacchere are also two copper instruments in the shape of two big pots cov-

*(Continued on page 4)*



Front cover of CD lines notes booklet. See Page 3

## Editorial

I found a new rhythm bones playing friend in Italy—Paolo Casini. He calls them *nacchere Toscane* which translates to *Tuscan Castanets*, and while they are a bit thicker than what we call rhythm bones, they are played exactly like we play rhythm bones.

The Nacchere was once more popular in Italy and then declined much as rhythm bones and related instruments have in other parts of the world. There is a resurgence in Italy by a dedicated group of players. The article on Page 1 tells a part of that story.

Steve Brown has hosted four Regional Bones Fests. How many have you hosted? I must admit to none, though I have hosted BFIV and BFIX.

There are many members, particularly in the western part of the US and in Europe, who have not attended a Bones Fest due to the high travel cost.

A Regional Bones Fest might be just the answer for these people. If you would like to host one, contact Steve Brown and he will help you. These one day events are easy to organize.

For the second year in a row, there was no Bones Contest at the National Traditional Country Music Association's Annual Festival. Such contests help inspire people to achieve excellence with their instrument.

The All-Ireland Bones Competition organizers talk about expanding their contest into an International Competition (which would be great for rhythm bones playing), but not many in the US would be able to compete in that competition due to the high travel cost. If anyone has an idea on how to promote the NTCMA contest, pass it on to a Board member.

## Letters to the Editor

A couple of issues ago as the "elder generation: keeping our craft alive. At home I play my bones with the St Louis Banjo Club on meeting nights and when we perform out. During my five months in Texas, I 'jam' every afternoon at different parks where a lot of good musicians gather. Enclosed picture was taken at a jam in January where I celebrated my 91st birthday (now almost 92.)

I'll never forget that Bones Fest IV. It was great at your house and at the 'show place. Seems like since then I can't squeeze it in between square dancing, Banjot Club St. Luke group and other things. But I'll try some time. *Ida May Schmidt.*



Ida May Schmich Playing three bones in one hand and two in the other..

I hope this find everyone in the best of spirits. I have included money for last years and this years RBS subscription and a copy of our CD which is not yet mixed but it will give you a flavor of what is to come. I will of course, send you a proper CD when we finally get it produced. It was supposed to be ready at Christmas, but the way it is going, I would not even bank on it for next Christmas. There are still quite a few technical problems to be iron out especially with the volume of some of the instruments. In the bones number they also vary quite a bit as I used a variety of bones from various makers, Paddy Sport Murphy, Steve Brown, Nick Driver and Victor Smith (a Shetlander living in Denmark.) of Flatbush Stringed Instruments. He was the one who made me the lovely pair of Brazilian Rosewood Spoons.

I forgot to mention the band I play with (apart from "The B Band") is called Bones Zone. It would have been Boyzone, but they said I did not qualify. They are a great bunch of young guys. The bass, guitar and fiddle players are all classical trained at a Danish Music Conservatory and all teach at the Folk Music Conservatory when

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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)

required.

They are also talented jazz musicians, the olds of them is about 28. The fourth is the banjo player and he is only 22 and lives in Galway along with Anders (the box player from the B Band.) This banjo playing is now gaining great respect from many of Irelands top musicians. We have only played 5 gigs since we formed the band two years ago.

I am hoping to go to Abbeyfeale again this year, if I can afford it. It's not just for the competition as I get to play with Anders and Jonas (banjo) at the same time which is a rare occasion to be savoured.

I can fly to Ireland cheaper than the train fare to the Danish mainland—Juland. It's ridiculous the price of transport here, although, I suppose that is because it is extremely well organized and efficient.

I close now wishing you the best for the coming year. Slainte Mhath, As Aye, *Yirdy 'MacBones' Machar*

(Continued from page 1)

sponsored. Having been able to spend time with him and see him enjoying himself at the Red Apple Farm is one of my most cherished memories.

So I ask those of you so inclined to think about sponsoring the Fest this year. You would go down in the annals of Bones Fest History by creating an event which not only benefits the organization, but enriches the community in which it is sponsored. And besides, you are creating your own personal memories you will have the rest of your life, Think about it. *Steve Brown*

## Steve Brown's Regional Bones Fest

The Regional Bones Fest went well. It was held on October 27th at the newly completed Red Apple Farm Events Hall which was warmed by a fire in the beautiful new fireplace. Grey skies and occasional rain did not keep our spirits down.

We had about 30 people total, with 17 bones players including Ernie Duffy, Shorty, Skye, Rob Rudin, Phil Brake, Ron Trainor, John Hodgekin, Richard Clifford, Brian Butler, bob King, Al Lemieux, Jeremy Brown, Constance Cook, Daniell, Bill Rose, Jane and Thomas Rose.

We spent the morning jamming and getting acquainted. A beginners workshop was held in the morning with about 5 attendee's. A workshop on how to play to jigs was held in the afternoon with about 8 eight attendees.

Mid way through the afternoon workshop, a loud braying sound interrupted the workshop leader to the delight of the attendees. Many were to speculate if it had to do with the content of the workshop. Both workshops were led by Steve Brown.

The afternoon consisted of individual performances both for the group and general public. the afternoon was concluded with a group jam.

Music was provided by the Reiner Family Band, long supporters of the bones. the general public audience consisted of about 20 people made up of friends and relatives of the partici-

pants, and Red Apple Farm attendees.

All in all it went pretty well and I may not hold another for the next three years. See photographs of the event on Page 8. *Steve Brown*



Bill Rose, owner of Red Apple Farm and rhythm bones player

## Website of the Quarter

<http://pierce.state.nh.us/nharts/artsandartists/tradroster/tradartistinfo.asp?ArtistID=151>. This website is the [New Hampshire Traditional Arts & Folklife Listing](#) which lists Elwin 'Shorty' Boulet as a Franco-American "Bones" Player

## Bones Calendar

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

**Bones Fest XI.** August 17-19, 2007. Details in this newsletter.

**NTCMA AND Bones Contest.** August 25-31, 2008.

## Recording of the Quarter

**Nacchere Toscane: Tuscan Castanets.** Everyone knows the Spanish or Neapolitan castanets, but few people these days know of the existence of "nacchere" or "gnacchere" (castanets) in the typical Tuscan shape, two single wood bars (*crotala* in Latin) which have been used in this part of Italy since the time of the Etruscans. Once used throughout Tuscany both as a children's toy and a rhythm instrument for popular music (especially dance music), nowadays their use is limited to very few areas including Maremma. The memory of this ancient percussion instrument is however still alive and thanks to the nacchere players who are still active, the tradition of their use and the techniques for making them have been passed on to a new generation.

Thus, Tuscan nacchere will continue to play for the long run and the sound of their wood blocks will continue to catch people's attention whenever it is needed to counteract the dull global culture that is inflicted on us on a daily basis.

This CD, the first for this instrument, is a collection of sound recordings from the 1970's to present days. *Paolo Casini*

[Editor note. A portion of the liner note from this CD are included in this issue courtesy of Paolo Casini. They begin on Page 1.

This CD is full of fun folk dance like music. I play my rhythm bones along with it, There is bones playing on almost every track. Lots of accordian etc.....

Order this CD from [www.pegasus-records.biz/CD\\_007.htm](http://www.pegasus-records.biz/CD_007.htm). You can listens to audio samples there.

At present it is not possible to buy the CD with credit card from the site [www.pegasusrecords.biz](http://www.pegasusrecords.biz). The best way should be an International Money Order (IMO) like Moneygram. The price your for our Society members is 20 Euros each shipping costs included. Or keep checking the website as they will soon add credit card and PayPal options. ]



Tarquinia, "The lioness tomb" (VI century b.C.). The dancer on the left holds a pair of castanets (crotala).

ered with leather, with the opening of the pots covered in animal hide which are played with two sticks, hitting alternately one or the other of the two instruments, now called taballi, and timballi which were mostly in use among the Saracens."

(...)  
 indi allo strepito  
 di flauti e nàcchere  
 trescando intuonino  
 strambotti e frottole  
 d'alto misterio;

(...)  
 FRANCESCO REDI, Bacco in  
 Toscana, vv. 404-408)



Turkish dancer with crotala. Engraving by Arnold Van Westerhout (1723).

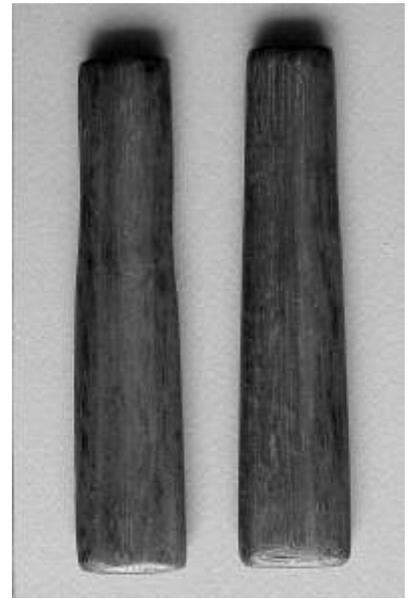
A much older reference to the nàcchere as this type of drum is found in Greek mythology, to be exact, in one of the "Twelve Labors" (attributed to Pisano di Rodi, circa 600 B.C.), the series of episodes which recounts the feats accomplished by Hercules (Ercole). For the fifth labor, Hercules had to drive the bird monsters away from Lake Stinfalo. These animals had feathers, beaks and claws of bronze and were equipped with a sharp sense of hearing. It was this characteristic which allowed Hercules to scare the birds away. In fact, with the deafening roar of the miraculous nàcchere made by the god Efesto and given to him by Athena, the birds took to flight and he killed them with arrows poisoned with the blood of the Hydra of Lerna (a monster in the shape of a snake with nine heads, the middle of which was immortal).

"Nàccherare" or "nàccarare" was the action of playing the nàcchere, meant as drums, or more rarely as castanets, while "nàccherino" or "nàccarino" was the player. In Toscana, "nàchero" or "nàcchero" (dim. "nàccherino") refers also to a short person who limps; or this word can be used familiarly to call a child (Pasini, 1847).

Relying again on Redi in the above-mentioned text (v. 386), we find the crotala which refers in this case to *crotala* (singular *Crotalum*) used by Latins and also by the Etruscans. These were the percussion idiophones used by the dancers (*Crotalistrìa*) to keep the rhythm and they consequently became part of popular music. The *crotala*, predominantly of copper, were also made in clay, wood and ivory. The simplest form was made by cutting the lower part of a branch in half lengthwise and then reattaching the two parts at the end using a ring or piece of cord, which would allow them to turn and hit freely.

Already by 1700 "nàcchere" or "gnàcchere" were used without distinction to refer to Spanish Castanets and the flat type derived from the *crotala*.

Idiophones of this type made of diverse materials (wood, tortoiseshell, bone), but shaped in a similar way, are common in the Middle East, in Africa and North America. Imported perhaps by Irish immigrants in the United States, the flat nàcchere (bones) were made principally of bone and their use



Traditional shape, oak. Manufactured by C. Barontini.



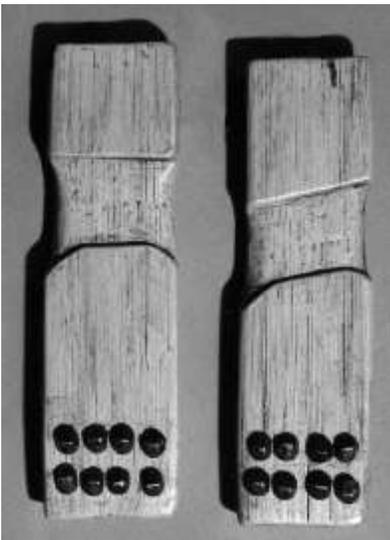
Iroko wood. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Bay oak wood. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Beech wood. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Bamboo and hobnail. Manufactured by I. Corti.



Oak (left), rosemary (right). Manufactured by I. Corti.

is documented until the end of the 1800s when they became used exclusively in Minstrel Shows, in Vaudeville, and generally in many Afro-American forms of music, from the blues to jazz (especially in the style of New Orleans). These instruments are still widely used both in folk (blues and country) and in other musical forms for which there are special organized events (concerts, exchanges of experience for constructing the instruments, and seminars).

In Italy the flat naccchere were common in Lombardia (*tich-tèch*), in Bergamo (*terlèch*) and the Western Alps, especially in Valle d'Aosta (*assette*) (Maragliano, 1962; Gibelli, 1987). Similar instruments made of stone are documented in Liguria (Simeoni and Tucci, 1991). Others made of stone but in rougher shape are in use in Sardinia (Gavoi) and in Calabria (in the Province of Cosenza) (Guizzi, 2002).

Even though wood was the material most often used for the construction of this type of naccchere, in Sicily there are some examples made of flat bones used in a percussion technique similar to that used with a pair of spoons. Such instruments were typical of the musical traditions of the "Orbi", professional musicians educated in orphanages and charity institutions. Here, especially the blind were prepared for the occupation of musician, and some of their bone naccchere players were considered true virtuosos of this instrument (Guzzi, 2002).

The Tuscan tradition of the use of flat naccchere, widely called "gnaccchere" (Barberini, 1995) is very old and probably of Etruscan origin (Von Vocano, 1970). A picture in the "Tomba delle Leonesse" in Tarquinia (520 B.C.) strengthens this hypothesis. Here, in fact, a dancing couple is represented, the feminine figure has two objects in her hand, (the naccchere) and seems to keep the time of her own movements (Dennis, 1848; Pallottino, 1959).

**Their form and use** In Maremma naccchere have been used uninterruptedly up to the present time and, according to oral tradition, they were also used in other areas of Tuscany, in the provinces of Florence, Siena, Pistoia and Massa Carrara. But it is the area of Maremma which has produced the real

virtuosos on this instrument, not only as talented musicians but also as skilled craftsmen (Barontini, 1997).

The "nacccherini" or "nacccherai", the naccchere players in popular jargon were often present at parties and dance events. Traditional dances, such as tresconi, quadriglie, sciortisse, veneziane and manfrine as well as waltzes, polkas and mazurkas look on a new life if their beat was kept by a talented naccchere player. The best of them were able to embellish the accompaniment with sudden stops, uptakes and even "rolls" with supple play of the wrist. These two small pieces of wood became a hobby for the children who took on the task of making them. Referring to this, the Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca of 1612 says: "We also use the word naccchere for a children's instrument made of wood which they play for fun. "More recently both Giovanni Giannini and Amos Parducci, as well as Alessandro Giustarini, in their books dedicated to traditional games of Tuscan children, include naccchere in the chapter on toys and games for young children. In Siena, in particular, until the 1950s, children used to play naccchere especially during the time of the Palio, trying to imitate the drums of the historical procession (Baldi, 1993).

In Tuscany the "classical" form of naccchere was a narrow rectangle with the smaller side sometimes slightly concave for a better grip while the size and weight varied; an average wood bar was 135 mm long, 35 mm wide and 10 mm thick. The average weight for the traditional naccchere varied from 50 to 80 g. Tradition has it that the heart of an oak tree, the middle of the trunk of this plant, is considered the best wood for making them, but each nacccherino maker has his own closely-guarded secrets concerning the preparation and treatment of the wood.

Tuscan naccchere are held tightly between the fingers, for the most part using the index, middle and ring fingers. A naccchere should pivot on the palm of the hand and be held firmly with the thumb which closes the piece of wood between the index and middle fingers. The other naccchere is used for hitting. The sound is produced by the movement of the wrist and forearm. This is the "classical" position, but as we will



Some type of castanet handles and their position. The castanet on the right is the “fixed” while the woodpiece on the left is the “movable” one. Upper left photo is the “classic handles”. Lower right photo: the ‘triple castanets’, an idea by Ido Corti.



see later, there are some variations inspired by the experience of each player.

Among the Tuscan *nàcchere* players, there are those, like Ido Corti (see the following note) who have experimented with the wood and form of construction getting incredible results as far as the timbre (adapted to accompany one rhythm instead of another) and the suitability of the pair of wood bars for a simple rhythm or for the whirling rolls (Barontini, 2002, 2005). It is these variations which can be well-regulated by slightly changing the grip on the bars or their position while hitting.

For example, the *nàcchere* which acts as “hitter” or “mover” can be positioned on its side giving to the sound a “drier timbre” or by keeping the hitter flat but positioned slightly higher, not directly opposite the fixed bar, a “softer” sound can be produced.

The players who are the most discerning can accurately decide, even during their construction which of the two bars is better for being the “fixed” or “moving” one (suitable for bouncing quickly against the other). And thus should always be held in the same position.

Following the second world war, *nàcchere* were used less and less often in Tuscan popular music and almost disappeared. Thanks only to Maremma and its still active players, we can confirm that their use has survived globalization. But more than that, the players in Maremma, even those who aren’t from Maremma, have developed a following.

**Nàcchere players** This part of the text is dedicated to the players presented on the CD, but it is also necessary to mention other players whose music has not been recorded but only reported orally. We are sure that many

Tuscan families remember this ancient instrument; by recovering these memories we would have a way to reconstruct (at least in part) the extent of its use. For example Gino Fanelli (called “I morino”) class of 1896, is remembered as an active player in the area of Greve in Chianti. More recently, thanks to the rediscovery and promotion of this instrument for a wider audience, in the ongoing activities of the “Coro degli Etruschi”, starting in 1975, and of Carlino Penni, other players have made themselves known. For example, Claudio Vergari, still active especially during the traditional May Day activities in Grosseto and Arcangelo Alessandrini who has been a member of the Coro degli Etruschi for many years

**Corrado Barontini** (*Grosseto, 1948*) Since the beginning of the 1970s, in collaboration with Morbello Vergari, the popular poet of



Ido Corti, the most famous Tuscan castanet player in action during the 2007 May Day.



From the left: Ido Corti, Alessandro Casini and Eugenio Bargagli.

Maremma, Corrado has done research into song and music, and has become an authority in the tradition of his land. He was one of the first to study the nàcchere, describing their popular use based on the games of times gone by and also their exceptional capacity as percussion instrument well adapted for musical accompaniment. He himself has constructed various types of nàcchere following the instructions of Carlino Penni and the same Morbello Vergari. His collection of nàcchere counts many examples most of which were made by Ido Corti. He is a member of Coro degli Etruschi in which he accompanies some musical pieces playing the nàcchere.

**Alessandro Casini** (*Fiesole, Firenze 1993*) It was the evening of 30 April 2003. At the age of 10 it was the first time for Alessandro to partici-

pate in May Day festivities, this is a well – established itinerant tradition in the country around Grosseto in Maremma where people go from place to place to bring greetings of spring with music and songs. Corrado Barontini was the one who put nàcchere in the boy hands and showed him how to hit them following the rhythm of the music. Alessandro’s passion and particular predisposition worked wonders giving the impulse necessary to accompany the pieces.

With his good ear and interpretative ability Alessandro has become a master of the nàcchere in a short time.

**Ido Corti** (*Manciullles, France 1926*) Returned from France in 1939 to live in Maremma, Ido began to play the nàcchere as a boy but it has been in recent years that his talent and originality have emerged in full. Ido’s

entry in grand style among the Maremma players was like Jimi Hendrix’s in to the world of rock guitarists. In order to explain this curious statement, it would be necessary to experience and admire Ido during his performances, but we can without doubt say that his method of constructing nàcchere and his way of playing them have been a true revolution in the tradition. *Paolo Casini* Copyright 2007, Paolo Casini

[This article was excerpted from the liner notes to the CD mentioned on Page 3. The complete liner notes include more information about historic and current players, foot notes, and references.

The complete 24 page liner notes are shipped when you purchase the CD. Paolo Casini has made a great contribution to the rhythm bones/ nacchere world. Thanks, Paolo.]



From the left: Morbello Vergari and Tullio Barontini on accordion, Carlino Penni on castanets.

## Paolo Casini Biography



Ernie Duffy, Shorty Boulet and Sky Bartlett



Rob Rudin, ?????? And Constance Cook



Steve Brown's Regional Bones Fest group photograph with the Reiner Family Band . See article on Page 3. All photographs by Larry Ehrets

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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