



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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## Executive Director's Column

Well this is a pretty difficult column for me to write not only because we have lost our dear friend Bill Vits and Jeremy continues to spiral down from Alzheimer's disease, but this will be my last directors column as I am stepping down as Executive Director. I have had a lot of fun writing this column, sometimes factual, sometimes creative, but always with rhythm bones and the membership in mind.

Bill Vits was more than an exceptional musician, he was an exceptional human being. I think of our times together, how much I learned, how much I enjoyed his company, and how much I was always in awe, not only at his musical ability but how much he knew about so many things. But we must carry on and go forward, with his exceptional memory always in our mind.

We are so lucky to still have Jeremy with us although he's not the person he used to be. It makes

the smiles, laughter, and displays of his personality so much more important.

I've been so fortunate over the years to be associated with so many of you amazing rhythm bones players. Of course, Steve Wixson is certainly at the top of the list. His tireless energy, and attention to detail is what really makes the newsletter and the organization work, and for that I thank him.

Even in the midst of our difficulties, I'm still long for the old Bones Fest where we could hang out, play for each other, learn more stuff, and generally bask in the glory of our friendships.

I am very excited that Sky and Jessye have stepped up and offered to host Bones Fest back in New Hampshire next year. Reality is I don't know if I can go, but (Continued on Page 2)

## The Late, Great, Rhythm Bones Player, Bill Vits

An argument could be raised that Bill Vits was the best rhythm bones player in the history of the world. Can't prove it, but let us tell you about him.

This story is supported by Bill's Personal-Profile Page at <https://rhythmbones.org/player-profiles/vits-bill/> which has links to stories with more detail as well as all of the video links included in this article. His formal obituary is at <https://obits.mlive.com/us/obituaries/grandrapids/name/william-vits-obituary?id=36926304>

William Henry Vits was born in Evanston, IL on August 20, 1957 and passed away in Grand Rapids, MI on October 17, 2022. Bill started playing drums at age 7 and was performing at age 11. He received his B.S. in Music Education from Ball State University and M.S. in Orchestral Performance from the University of Michigan.

By age 22, Bill had two degrees and had performed at Carnegie Hall and the Montreux Jazz Festival with University of Michigan ensembles. Bill auditioned with the Grand Rapids Symphony in 1979 and won the job. He served as the Principal Percussionist for the Grand Rapids Symphony for 41 years. To read Bill's story in his own words, go to <https://localspins.com/beat-of-a-different-drummer-bill-vits-legacy-with-gr-symphony-the-concussions->

[more-local-spins/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kIbSRs-GMLU). To see a young Bill Vits go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kIbSRs-GMLU>. To see the Grand Rapids Symphony's tribute go to Bill go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxcZOW338wI>.

Bill performed with a surf rock band, The Concussions, and they released 4 CDs. They wore latex skull masks that became their tortuous trademark. They played together for 20 years and Bill said, "it's like driving a hot rod at full speed with my best buddies." We do not have video showing Bill performing with his symphony (Continued on Page 7)



Bill Vits in Symphony Uniform

## Editorial

How does someone honor and say goodbye to Bill Vits. I'm lucky as I get to write about him (which is something you can do in a Letter to the Editor).

As I look back at the people who had the biggest influenced my rhythm bones playing, I start with my father who taught me to play one-handed, Freeman Davis who I saw occasionally as Brother Bones on television, the Cowett family who exposed me to two-handed playing, Jerry Mescher who showed me high quality rhythm bones playing, Percy Danforth's instructional video, Aaron Plunkett's 'Bones From The Beginning' instructional video, Fred Edmonds who I go to know as I converted his Bones Unlimited instructional video to our website, and Bill Vits who showed me how a professional percussionist approaches rhythm bones in his many Fest performances and Workshops.

I learned about Grizzly Frank Metcalf in Beth Lenz's Master's Thesis. In this issue Frank tells the story of his four-beat rhythms and how rhythm bones became an important part of his life. It is significant he was one of a few full time bones players. The story begins on Page 4.

In-Person Bones Fests are back hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett. See preliminary information on Page 3.

A big welcome to Dean Robinson who was elected to the Board at the recent Zoom General Membership Meeting. His profile is on Page 3.

Also a big welcome to Tom Connolly who was elected to the Board at the recent Zoom Board Meeting (see Board minutes in the column to the right). Tom will serve until the next General Membership meeting. Tom's Profile is in a recent newsletter (<https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V24N3.pdf#page=3>).

Last but not least is a personal thank you to our retiring Executive Director, Stephen Brown. His contributions to our society are many. I eagerly await his editorials which are always on time. As Emcee at Bones Fests, he introduces performers as 'my friend' and means it. And as an editor, his many articles fill my white space with amazing stories. Many thanks, my friend! And still on the Board.

(Continued From Page 1)

we take things one day at a time, and hope that we are able to attend. Congratulations to Skeffington Flynn our new Executive Director, I know he will do a fantastic job. So with that I bid you all adieu. I will remain on the Board to throw in my two cents, but I want to thank you for being a member of the organization and contributing so much to it. May your bones be with you! *Steve Brown*

## Zoom Board Minutes

In the absence of Executive Director, Steve Brown, Executive Director Elect, Skeff Flynn, called the meeting to order at 7:15 PM using Zoom teleconferencing. All Board members were present except Steve Brown.

Sky and Jessye Bartlett volunteered to host Bones Fest XXVI in New Hampshire. The motion was made, seconded and approved for Sky and Jessye to host BFXVII subject to approval of their Fest Budget.

The passing of Assistant Director, Bill Vits, leaves a vacancy on the Board and a vacant Assistant Director position. As provided by our Bylaws, a motion was made, seconded and approved appointing Tom Connolly to the Board. Since the election of Board Members for 2023 has passed, Tom will serve until the next General Membership meeting. A motion was made, seconded, and approved for Kenny Wolin to serve as Assistant Director until the next Membership meeting.

We discussed how to remember Bill Vits. His Celebration of Life service will be in the Spring of 2023, and we will announce it and likely some RBS members will want to attend. A memorial video possibly using Bill's Pop Up and Percussion Discussion videos with member contributions edited in is one idea.

We received a request for help from Martin O'Donoghue for the 2024 All Ireland Bones Competition. The organizing committee is planning an Online competition with the winners receiving a voucher for airfare and housing to attend the event. They are applying to the Ireland Arts Council for funding, and the more people who join this competition the more likely funding will be approved.

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Players welcomes letters to the Editor and article on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

The RBS Board fully supports their efforts and will assist in any way we can. The initial effort will be to poll members and let Martin know who is interested.

The RBS Facebook page was discussed and it is under utilized. Skeff volunteered to manage it.

Kenny noted that James Yoshizawa lead a rhythm bones workshop at the prestigious Percussion Society of America Conference.

Our RBS brochure was discussed and it should be featured with a separate page on our website. Steve Wixson will add the page (this task has been completed).

The meeting was adjourned at 8:06. Respectively Submitted, Steve Wixson, Secretary

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XXVII**, September 7-10, 2023, hosted by Sky and Jessye Bartlett, in Campton, New Hampshire. See preliminary information on Page 3.

## **New Board Member Dean Robinson**

I am a retired attorney living in Bristol, Rhode Island. Since I was young I have enjoyed listening to all types of music. I attended numerous concerts, served as the editor of the music column in my high school newspaper and worked at the campus radio station during my freshman year of college.

Until seven years ago, however, I could not play a musical instrument. My wife Barbara gave me music lessons as a Christmas present that year which led me to learn how to play the guitar. I then became interested in Irish music and took up the bodhran.

In 2018 I attended the Craiceann bodhran school on Inis Oirr. While there I sat in on a workshop presented by Cormac Byrne on how to play the spoons and rhythm bones. I remember being fascinated by the sound of rhythm bones and decided then to learn how to play them properly.

When I returned home I bought my first pair of rhythm bones from Steve Brown and began taking lessons from Kyle Forsthoff, a percussionist and rhythm bones player here in Rhode Island. Since I learned how to play in Ireland I typically play one handed, although I use the two handed style on occasion.

It was suggested that I join the Rhythm Bones Society which I soon did. In my time as a member I have made many friends who have provided me with assistance and information on rhythm bones playing. I'm looking forward to serving on the Board of Directors.

I also decided to participate in the All Ireland Bones Playing Competition in 2020. It was canceled that year due to the pandemic, but I participated in the virtual Competition in 2021 and in May of this year competed live in Abbeyfeale.

It was a wonderful experience and quite a thrill for me. I enjoyed the Competition itself meeting some of the great Irish rhythm bones players and sitting in at the nightly sessions in the pubs with the many talented musicians from the area. The people of Abbeyfeale were very welcoming and I hope to return there soon.

I am fortunate to live in an area with a flourishing Irish music scene. There are Irish music sessions held at various times and locations in Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts, and I currently play in two sessions every week. I also conduct rhythm bones workshops at the Blackstone River Theatre in Cumberland, Rhode Island on a regular basis.

In addition, I am a member of a band called Turas which features Irish music. Even though my primary instrument in the band is the bodhran, I make sure that I play rhythm bones at every show and concert. I have a collection of real and wooden rhythm bones made by Steve Brown that I use at the sessions and shows. *Dean Robinson*

## **Sandor Slomovits Wheatland Festival Rhythm Bones Workshop**

My daughter, Emily, and I played at the Wheatland Festival this past weekend. Gave two workshops for rhythm bones - one for kids and one for grownups. Wheatland provided free rough hewn rhythm bones to the kids and I sold mine for the grownups.

When we got to the Fest we asked where to find the rhythm bones for our workshop, and were directed to a small building in the kids area where they kept all the supplies for kids activities. No rhythm bones. Several phone calls later someone knew - said to look in the freezer in the kitchen. Sure enough, we found a cardboard box labeled "bones," filled with 75 pairs of wooden rhythm bones in the freezer. They were cold and fresh for our workshop! We had about fifteen people, and one dad and his fifth grader really got it and several others were on the cusp by the end of the workshop. Be Well, *San Slomovits*

## **Gerard Arseneault Obituary**

In the 2014, No. 4 RBP newsletter, Steve Wixson wrote, "Gerard is a warm, friendly man." This description captures the spirit and heart of Gerard. His smile was ever-present and inviting.

Gerard was born on September 9, 1927, and passed away on February 15, 2021.

He was from the Quebec City area of Canada. The RBS first met him at Bones Fest V, where he was hesitant to perform until he saw others perform and realized he was a good player.

Prior to the 2014 Grand Rapids Bones Fest, Gerard and I had corresponded about the possibility of his attending the Fest. At first, he did not think he could attend, but eventually he decided to attend. Once plans were final, Jerry and I had the pleasure of picking up Gerard at the airport.

Gerard's smile and friendly nature was infectious. Watching him play rhythm bones, and having the opportunity of being around him, was a gift.

Gerard's profile can be found at <https://rhythmbones.com/player-profiles/arseneault-gerard>. *Sharon Mescher*

## **Bones Fest XXVII Preliminary Information**

Hi Bones Family!!

We are so excited to be hosting Bones Fest XXVII, so please go ahead and mark your calendars for September 7-10, 2023!! For anyone who attended the 2018 Bones Fest we hosted in Lincoln, NH, please note that this will be an entirely different Bones Fest in regards to location and venues. It will still be centered in the lovely White Mountains of NH, only this time in Campton.

We chose September in part for the beautiful weather this time of year. Playing venues will include our own historic mill building, the local historical society building, and hopefully an old Popsicle stick factory turned into a restaurant/inn

Our hope is to offer a reasonably priced Fest that offers lots of opportunity for re-connecting, jamming and general merriment. We have access to two large farmhouses for accommodations, one of which will be designated for late-night jamming. There will be other accommodation options as well. We will be putting more details together these next few months, so please stay tuned!

Can't wait to see you! *Sky and Jessye*

## Grizzly Frank Metcalf

[Many of us first heard about Grizzly Frank Metcalf in Beth Lenz's Master Thesis titled *Bones in the United States* (see link to it in RBS Online Museum History Exhibit or Beth's Player Profile Page), or in the newsletter story on Benoit Bourque, Vol 7, No 4, Page 6 (see link on Benoit's Player Profile Page). Be sure and look at another version of this story with more rhythm bones details on Frank's Player Profile Page. To find a Player Profile Page, click Museum on our homepage, scroll down and click Player Profile Exhibit, then scroll down and click the player's name).]



In 1980, more than half my lifetime ago, I first heard of the rhythm bones and Percy Danforth from the wacky and wonderful musician Ken Bloom, who was one of the handful of touring professionals hired to help kick off Yellowknife's first Folk On the Rocks pan-Arctic folk festival. Ken was billeted on the floor of my little shack in in the city's Old Town, the original lakeside shanty town housing the gold miners and prostitutes who soon arrived after Yellowknife's founding in 1934. The shores upon which the town was built are those of Great Slave Lake, the tenth largest lake in the world and the deepest lake in North America. In 1976, four years before meeting Ken, I had arrived in Yellowknife from a Manhattan suburb to which I had moved after a nightmare family tragedy at my Green-

wich Village apartment. My academic background--two degrees from Harvard, with ongoing PhD studies at New York University--was all well and good, but another large slice of my background--remote taiga and tundra canoe trips in Canada's Northwest Territories--had won the upper hand in my emotional life, and so I eventually heeded the call of the wild.

That call had been sounding ever since an epic YMCA canoe trip in 1960 had taken me, as a teenager, 1200 miles down the Mackenzie River from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Ocean. But the call became a roar in the autumn of 1974 when Canada's

National Museum invited me to work as an archaeological field party leader for two summer seasons of cultural exploration by canoe in the headwaters region of two great rivers of the Far North, the Dubawnt and the Thelon. By that time I had already made two canoe trips down the Thelon, the first one from source to mouth in 1973, and the second one as leader and organizer of an educational trip sponsored by the Science Museum of Minnesota, my home state. I had written to the National Museum in Ottawa as a courtesy before the 1974 trip, and the leading Subarctic archaeologist had replied by asking me to do an archaeological survey of the Upper Thelon. Naturally I was

thrilled and honoured by the request, so I replied saying yes, but I know nothing about field archaeology. Ottawa then invited me to come study and learn at the National Museum. That sealed the deal, and I was hooked. The 1974 Science Museum of Minnesota canoe trip was successful archaeologically; we did it by the book, repatriating all the many artifacts to Ottawa after a display in Minnesota; and then came the fateful invitation to lead field parties for the Queen during the next two field seasons. After those two mind-blowing summers of exploration back and forth across the Arctic treeline, something had to give. In the end it was goodbye to English Literature, my family, and my complicated New York decade after Harvard; and hello to Yellowknife, Old Town, skid shacks, Ken Bloom, and the bones.

As a colourful aside, there's a photo on my website of me setting off on portage, having just flipped a canoe onto my

shoulders. My party of two was leaving Firedrake Lake, in the Dubawnt headwaters, to portage north across the treeline to the Thelon headwaters. What we had no clue about at that time was the fact that a Dene hunting party was setting out on Firedrake to hunt and kill me because they'd become crazily convinced that I was Bigfoot. I could scarcely believe it myself, later on, but my copy of a 1988 Smithsonian Institution book titled "The Transformation of Bigfoot" makes the case. My huge footprints wandering apparently aimlessly through sandy blowouts, with the odd hole dug here and there: very suspicious! I've often been gently teased about my size 15-6E feet, but this was really quite over the top.

The bones had serious company in my musical life. My brother was a brilliant New Orleans and Dixieland jazz cornet player and bandleader before his tragic death in 1959 at age nineteen. I was seventeen at the time, and was steeped in traditional jazz and awed by my brother while fooling around on various small stringed instruments and the white plastic flutophone. It was a rather odd childhood in that I began flying light aircraft at age 14 and soloed at sixteen, the same year that I could legally drive a car. At age 15 I was flunking Latin, which greatly vexed my mother who was a Classicist. She made a deal that if I passed Latin, she would take me to Europe to follow Julius Caesar's battle campaigns, guided by his Gallic Commentary in its original Latin. By a miracle I did pass, and my life of European travel began, culminating in my long walks across Spain and France with my wife Mary starting 44 years later. Another benefit of the trip was that it helped motivate me to become my school's best Latin student and to get into Harvard. But the major benefit of passing Latin was buying my first-ever harmonica in Switzerland, and learning how to play it during the endless hours in a rented car.

From its lowly public start with bones, jaw, and spoons in my festival act, the harmonica finally became my supreme instrument, as a good listen to the Headbenders blowing the doors off of Ragtime Annie on the Three String Night video, from about minute 50 to 58, will confirm. After that tune, the video has some nice band shots of the wild piano player, the

demonic fiddler, and the steam-engine harmonica player driving the hypnotic tune Dancing Bear toward the end of the evening about a dozen minutes later. The video's title is accurate: the fiddler broke three strings that night. We wore headbands to play our dances because otherwise we were soaked and couldn't see. The harps took me beyond the bones, and a good look into the fire pit will show you why.

A small banjo ukulele was one of my boyhood instruments, but I don't recall when I first owned a full-sized banjo. I was home in St. Paul on holidays from my Connecticut boarding school when a friend told me about a really cool banjo solo in the Kingston Trio's song about Charlie on the MTA. I wanted to learn how to play it, but that solo was far beyond my slender banjo skills. So I wrote to Pete Seeger, asking him how Dave Guard learned how to play the banjo. When I think of it now, all I can say is what a flaming little jerk I was. But Pete, bless his heart, graciously replied on the back of one of his family's homemade New Years cards, saying that Dave G "learned how to play out of this same book, enclosed." I was blown away that Seeger sent me his famously motivating book, "How to Play the 5-string Banjo." The New Years cards arrived until I graduated from South Kent School.

But a sharper reply came back when I wrote to ask Pete if he happened to know of any banjo players in my area of Connecticut. Pete's tart reply (see my website) was a little unfair because I was almost literally locked into a very small, Spartan school isolated on a rural hillside with strict rules and punishments. Students could have no food, money, or permission to leave the school grounds except for walks on Sunday after compulsory Episcopal chapel. I spent five long years there before eagerly arriving in the fleshpots of Harvard in the autumn of 1961 during the dawn of the great folk music revival. As an avid banjo player I quickly got a banjo teaching job across the street from the Harvard Yard. The iconic Club 47 folk coffeehouse was only a few short blocks away. There were girls. I could drink. I was in heaven.

Skipping forward five years to the summer of 1966, I entered the Appala-

chian Volunteer program of VISTA, the domestic Peace Corps as it was thought of in those days. I chose Wolfe County, Kentucky, for my summer of field work because it was said to be the poorest county in the USA. I had a Masters degree by then, and I could easily see that the program, although well-intentioned, was completely daft in that it expected the Volunteers, who were college kids, suddenly to act as "community organizers" parachuted into the ancient hills and hollers of Appalachia as a sort of "summer abroad." To this day I hate the sight of a twerp with a clipboard. I knew of a famous singer and banjo player, Clarence Ashley, who lived in Mountain City, not too far from the AV training base at the university in Johnson City, Tennessee. So I visited him, got to know him a bit, and drove him down to Johnson to give a concert for my fellow Volunteers, who were supposed to be steeping themselves in Appalachian culture. The concert was great, and my fellow Volunteers loved it. But the next day the spit hit the fan for me, due to the fact that I had taken the initiative to do something constructive. The Dear Leaders didn't know Clarence Ashley from Sweet Fanny Adam. I had rattled their clipboards, and they were distraught.

The training then shifted to an abandoned coal camp in Breathitt County, Kentucky, where things went much better. The Volunteers were trained how to meet and be accepted by all the families in their assigned areas, however remote and forbidding the homes and "hillbilly" mannerisms seemed to be. This training was spot-on correct, and someday I'll write about this most colourful and interesting adventure. But for our purpose here, what I took from my summer in Bloody Creek was a feeling of deep respect for the folks I got to know, however different from me they looked or sounded. I promised to return for Christmas, and when I did, folks came from miles around to hang out and say hello. There wasn't much music in my community, but the culture underlying the Appalachian fiddle and banjo tunes that I loved was thick in the air. I remained so attached to Appalachia that for the honeymoon of my first marriage, in 1969, I brought my wife down to Southwest Virginia to meet the

famous old banjo player, Wade Ward, on Peachbottom Creek near Galax. She was a collector of old banjos, and had dated a member of the New Lost City Ramblers, so she enjoyed the trip. My attitude in Bloody Creek served me well later on among First Nations people in the Northwest Territories. And when I talk about clawhammer banjo rhythms on the bones, you can see why the subject has a special resonance for me. My legacy as a skilled clawhammer player is the "Frank and Dave, Banjo, Fiddle, Mandolin" entry on my website. The instruments track very closely on a wide range of classic Old Time tunes, but when you hear a slide, a chuck, or a bell-like tone, that's the banjo.

Now let's get down to the specifics of the bones-playing style that I developed from 1980 to 1982 in Yellowknife. So far as I could tell, it was a new style of play, and that in itself was exciting. It fulfilled my lust for musical adventure, which the bones later gave me in spades on the folk festival circuit until a more sustainable adventure opened by playing harmonica in contra dance bands. But all during my dance band years I was still performing with the bones in my contract "street entertainment" act with Cameron Stewart. A look at our pro photoshoot images on my website will give you a sense of our mischief, as well as a good look at the hand positions of my playing style.

I had my own style, my own act, and I was a trouper and showman with the bones for a couple of decades. But one thing was always a mystery to me. Since the bones so obviously had four clicking positions, why did even my friend and mentor, Percy Danforth, only know about three of them?

This question may have some good answers, but at this point I've moved on to the fiddle, and I'm thrilled by the great things that modern bones-players can do. What I created for myself in my skid shack near Ragged-Ass Road in a gold mining town on the shores of a giant lake at forty below zero was just what it was and nothing more. If others enjoy my story, and care to check out my careful study of the bones-playing possibilities in my style of play, that would be great. One final, obvious point is that in order to be a good bones-player, try to be good at playing other instruments too. It's all

just music, and if you're a musician, the results will flow from any instruments you play with intention. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of any help or inspiration.

For some reason I still get a kick out of the manner and style of my final leave-taking from Yellowknife in the summer of 1985. I had flown across the North Arm of Great Slave to White-beach Point to poke around a spectacular sequence of raised beach lines caused by isostatic rebound from the weight of the glacial ice. As usual, the pilot was no help while I unloaded my gear up past my waist in a mixture of freezing water and ice cubes. The deal was that he would return the day before I was due to begin my trip from Vancouver to Rome with Les Danseurs. That day came, a bush plane appeared, but then it flew away again because a strong wind from the south had blown the big lake's ice floes tightly against the shore. Oh oh. Fingers crossed they remembered the chopper. A long, nervous wait, eyes on my wristwatch, ears in the sky. At last came the chopper sound, an easy landing in a convenient blowout, a quick getaway, and I was finally on the road to Rome. The warm and racy remarks by my travel companions in the margins of the Danseurs' group portrait, on my website, show that the trip was truly special. Elsewhere I've written about how a tussle over the bones was how I met Mary. She and the Danseurs were the best of all of the life-changing adventures given to me by the mere table scraps which Ken Bloom and Percy Danforth had encouraged me to play nearly half a century ago.

If the reader is curious about my playing style, my website at [frankmetcalf.com](http://frankmetcalf.com) is the place to look. Along with my RBS Player Profile, which is linked on my site, there are two or three other essential documents to read, one video to watch, and, for the clearest sound of the bones, the audio of a festival performance to listen to. That's all, and it's not a whole lot.

1) The short video is titled with the band name, *Tempus Fugit*, followed by "Grizzly Frank Dance and Bones Demo (Minute 7 to 16)." It was filmed very low-tech at a community hall on Saltspring Island in 1991. The intermis-

sion bones and spoons cameo follows some step dancing by my talented bandmates Cameron Stewart, the caller, and Helga Sermat, the fiddler. I did my bit in a hurry because the dance was due to begin again, and it was a band gig, not a solo act. But I do play the bones with my basic four-beat Grizzly roll interspersed with the Grizzly shuffle and the odd taps and ruffs. The hall is echoing, folks are laughing, and I'm hamming it up and yelling, so the beats are somewhat obscured. Then when I play the wooden spoons together with the bones, all clarity vanishes, but it's a lot of fun. At least you can see the hand movements and the potential velocity of the four-beat roll.

The brief remainder of the video is a tribute to my dear friend and duo partner,



Grizzly Frank Metcalf and Cameron Stewart

Cameron Stewart, whose life was far too short. There are nice shots of the band playing some sweet tunes until Cam leads a grand march which is visually interesting and even beautiful in its humble way. The video concludes with a pan across the now-empty musicians' chairs until it dives down into my harmonica box and that's all.

2) The audio is my whole act at Folk On the Rocks, Yellowknife, in 1983. Some of it is plagued by mic trouble, and at one point the presenter, Cree Elder Winston Wuttunee, backs in so I can bounce the wooden spoons between his backside and mine, while at a later point he creeps up with a big hook and drags me offstage while the audience howls. It's all quite raw and crazy, not polished

at all in those early days, especially in terms of my verbal patter and the harmonica. But you can hear the bones quite well during the initial bones demo, and toward the end there's a useful demo of the electric moose ribs.

The second half of the full audio file consists of three radio pieces: first a story about NBC's Real People filming me, and then two good CBC radio interviews, Basic Black and As It Happens, as I recall. My more scholarly side peeps out from behind the clouds of gonzo showmanship.

3) "Learning the Hand-Dance" is the best and most readable brief description of my bones techniques and journey. It was written for the Folk on the Rocks festival guidebook in 1982. An advertisement begins with a massive "GET LOST" so it's easy to find on my website :) The basic licks are condensed into the separate "Lick Chart" which I handed out to participants in my bones workshops.

4) "Frank's long letter to Percy Danforth" of 1982. This is the nitty-gritty Bible of my bones-playing style. At 26 pages long, it contains lots of my own invented bones tablature, and it's the real deal. Plenty of training drills to be tried out, including the 29-beat Deadhand Roll. There's even a cheery weather report at the conclusion, if 50 below zero can ever be truly cheery. My style, as portrayed here, soon evolved toward greater simplicity as the reality of stage performing took hold. Playing bones and harmonica together dumbs down both instruments; adding spoons or moose jaw to the mix dumbs it all down still farther, but adds a spectacle factor, the "Gosh, Mabel" response. The sight of moose-tooth fragments flying across the stage tends to excite an audience. At any rate, my letter to Percy Danforth should become a museum piece because it may be unique in the bones annals for being a sustained description, with examples in tablature, of all the technical possibilities that a single overcooked mind can dream up in the dark of an Arctic night. *Frank Metcalf* [frank.moosebones@gmail.com](mailto:frank.moosebones@gmail.com) [frankmetcalf.com](http://frankmetcalf.com)

[Editor's Note: In addition to developing four beat rhythms, Frank, for a time in his life, is noteworthy for being one of a few professional rhythm bones players, e.g. Ted Goon and Percy Danforth.]

(Continued From Page 1)



(see photograph above), but you can see his skills in a drum solo on a Concusions video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVPsqyz9p\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVPsqyz9p_U) (solo starts at 1:15).

Bill met Percy Danforth in a Master's Class at the University of Michigan. Percy played with their ragtime ensemble and gave all the players a lesson on the rhythm bones. Bill had never seen or heard of rhythm bones, but was very interested and bought two pair! His rhythm bones playing improved slowly, and it took a couple years before he learned to relax and get both hands under control.

Opportunities to perform with rhythm bones with the orchestra have included Mahler's 5th Symphony. In ragtime numbers, like Xylophonia, Bill would often play the breaks on rhythm bones. He also performed Morton Gould's Tap Dance Concerto using rhythm bones instead of tap shoes. All the tap rhythms are written out, and he embellished many sections using his best rhythm bones hot licks. There is a video of Bill warming up for a symphony performance at <https://rhythm-bones.org/video/Demo-VitsBonesBackstage.mp4>

The Grand Rapids Symphony did a pops weekend with Natalie MacMaster, fiddler and step dancer, and she invited him to play with her. Natalie remembers, "Bill Vits was a dandy!! It's been so many years, but his smile brings me back to a memory in my life when I met a very pleasant and welcoming human being with a shared interest in traditional percussion. Bill, you were vibrant and I will always remember my brief encounter with your generous spirit. Thanks for the tunes. Rest In Peace."

Member Sandor Slomovits and his brother, Laz, performing as the duo Gemini, played a concert for children and families with the Grand Rapids Symphony. Sandor remembered what it was like to share the stage with fellow

RBS member and rhythm bones player extraordinaire, Bill Vits.

On this occasion, they added a tune, and invited Bill out from the back of the orchestra where he usually stands, surrounded by his wide array of percussion instruments. Sandor and Bill played a rhythm bones duet with Laz accompanying on fiddle, and the two snapped, rattled and rolled the bones, traded phrases back and forth, piannissimoed, fortissimoed, and the audience loved it all rewarded them with a huge ovation.

Bill discovered the Rhythm Bones Society while searching the Internet, and joined in late 1999. He was elected to the Board of Directors in 2010 and within a year became Assistant Director. He attended 14 Bones Fests performing and leading workshops. He and wife, Stacey, hosted Bones Fest XVIII which was special in that it honored Legend Percy Danforth who taught Bill how to play. There is a link to Bone Fest XVIII Highlights on Bill's Player Profile Page.

Bill had a degree in music education, and Board Member, Dennis Riedesel, with an educator background has these thoughts.

"It is rare to observe a person like Bill Vits who probably was a percussion prodigy but also had the knowledge to teach many various percussive skills to others. As I told my brother-in-law, "You might be a very, very good welder but it is not a given that you can teach welding to others." I watched Bill over the years impart his skill of playing the rhythm bones to many beginner rhythm bones players as well as his percussive methodology of rhythm bones playing to intermediate and advanced rhythm bones players. In each presentation, he chose a teaching technique that was a good fit to the setting and playing level of his audience.

"Take a look at Bill's videos where the audience includes children. Bill had the children actively engaged which is a mainstay in the learning process. He either had an innate teaching ability or had learned well from his university classes in "Music Education."

Here are links to his children videos, and Bill always included rhythm bones in his teaching. The first is an article at <https://www.schoolnewsnetwork.org/2019/11/22/third-graders-learn-to->

[listen-with-help-from-drums-other-noise-makers](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW-Gzz7JFHu8). Bill did a series with school children in Western Michigan schools called "Percussion Discussion," and it is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW-Gzz7JFHu8>. Last is a video made for 3rd grade students at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNP19gT9F-o>.

Board Member, Kenny Wolin, percussionist with the President's Own Marine Band, noted, "Bill was a prolific soloist on the xylophone, and his passion for the rhythm bones gave him a rare opportunity to be the first and only musician to perform Morton Gould's Tap Dance Concerto on rhythm bones.

"Bill studied under legendary performer Charlie Owens who was the mallet soloist with "The President's Own" Marine Band and later the Principal Percussionist with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

"Bill's unique style of rhythm bones playing came from his formal percussion training by holding the bones with a timpani French-grip technique. This allowed him to play many snare drum rudiments, especially single-stroke rolls and paradiddle variations, at an amazingly effortless speed. He was an incredible innovator and creative soul."

One of Bill's Bones Fest Workshops was titled "Bones and Drum Kit," and he demonstrated how to incorporate rhythm bones into the drum kit using many drum rudiments such as a par-a-diddle. He demonstrated using a brush in one hand and rhythm bones in the other hand. He stressed the importance of keeping a steady pulse, and noted you can do most anything on top of that. He talked about when to play and when to sit out. He encourage getting out of your comfort zone and experimenting. There is also a bit of his personal experience as a musician. The workshop video is at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taxOrC\\_VkQ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taxOrC_VkQ0).

Bill noted, "I often teach my percussion students rhythm bones to help their ambidexterity."

Bill talked about his 'Rhythmic Vocabulary' which was stored in his brain, and put there with lots of practice and repetition. All Bill had to do was think it and his hands would do it.

The Joy Express Club was a band on bicycles with a piano on a bike trailer, and when they were in Ann Arbor, Bill would ride with them and accompany

songs with his rhythm bones.

Executive Director Skeffington Flynn said this, “Bill was a great encourager. A teacher who not only imparted concepts and techniques, but a love of learning for its own sake. Almost certainly the best percussionist in any room he was in, he always put music and community first. He knew just how to support the groove and the people around him. His curiosity, rhythmic sensibility, and his smile were infectious. As Carsie Blanton said in her tribute to John Prine, ‘Tonight in heaven it’s a happier place.’ Rattle in Peace Bill.”

Board Member Tom Connolly said it this way, “I thought Bill’s playing was mesmerizing. His bones were alive and creating rhythms I could only dream of making. He also had an air about him when playing that I only ever saw in three other people - elite musicians that I was lucky enough to see performing live - Arty McGlynn, Andrea Boccelli and Leonard Cohen. And best of all, though I am sure he knew how good he was, he did not flaunt his genius. He tried to teach us every chance he got.”

His wife, Stacey, tells this story. “Up until about a week before Bill passed he would go out to their porch, find a place with sunlight, and play his rhythm bones. After that he was pretty knocked out with drugs, but two days before he passed he asked to play with his ‘toys.’ Our son, Tabor, placed rhythm bones in his right hand and he played them good as always as he did when Tabor put rhythm bones in his other hand.” An amazing love of our musical instrument. *The Board of Directors*



Grizzly Frank Metcalf playing harmonica, rhythm bones and jawbone.  
See story on Page 4

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*