



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 25, No. 2 2023

In This Issue:
An Irish Bones
Story

Bones Fest

Columns:
Executive Director

Editor

Executive Director's Column

These last few months have been incredible. Michael Baxter has outdone himself with the latest rhythm bones collaboration video. Michael garnered submissions from around the globe! The resulting video is expertly edited and a joy to watch. You can see it here: <https://youtu.be/rkM9tDKpDNI>. Mike has written a story about the project that will appear in a future issue.

I was fortunate enough to be able to get back to Ireland this year. Not only was I able to compete in the Senior All Ireland Bones Competition, but I was asked to judge the Junior Competition! There will be an article in a future newsletter based upon my experiences that I hope you will find interesting.

Tom Connolly has served up an amazing article on Irish bones for this newsletter that is truly intriguing and an excellent read.

Almost every year, for Memorial Day Weekend, I

head to Delfest. I go as a fan, but I look for late night jams. My partner Mary got to experience the full four days this year. Needless to say, we had a blast jamming. When you get to the point that you are metronomic, you're generally accepted almost anywhere. Of course, there are exceptions . . .

Previously, Mary had commissioned an art piece from a local artist named Lincoln Miller (he can be reached at nyokamillr@gmail.com). It resulted in the best gift ever! I can't help but share a photo. (See page 2.)

Here is the back story. At some point I had taken an online quiz that showed my Appalachian astronomy sign was a possum. Laugh all you want but that's what it showed. Mary got wind of this, and hired an amazing artist (Lincoln), who researched (Continued on Page 2)

An Irish Bones Story

[Editor Note: The Rhythm Bones Society (RBS) selected its name so that people would recognize our instrument as a musical instrument. The Irish and many other people just call it bones, and as an editor I change bones to rhythm bones in submitted articles. In this article by Irishman Tom Connolly, I've decided to leave it as the Irish say it.]

When I was asked to write an article about the history of bones in Ireland I was very excited. I expected to compile a rich dossier going back through the annals of history recounting Irish bone playing. I found however that very little has been written or recorded over the years about bones in the Irish context. I did do some research, but I hasten to say this is not an exhaustive trawl of the literature! I went and met Dr. Mel Mercier, a phenomenal musician and percussionist, former Board member of the RBS, and son of Peadar Mercier who was a pioneer of professional bodhrán and bones playing in Ireland.

Mel confirmed that there is indeed very little recorded history of the bones in Ireland. He provided several references to me, and I will summarise them and other bits of published information in this article.

Mel also suggested that it may be better to frame

the article around the contemporary players, going from the time his father came on to the scene, until the present day; and in particular comment about the differences in style between the Irish one handed style of bones playing and the American two-handed style.

I went with Mel's advice, managed to interview a few players, and dug deep into my own personal experiences to produce this article. And I hope that in future more research and more writing by more people will bring this fantastic instrument to a greater audience. This was not intended to be a scholarly article, but I will try to give the proper sources for every- (Continued on Page 2)



Irish Bones from irishbones.com

Editorial

This issue of the *Rhythm Bones Player* Newsletter presents a story from our new Board Member, Tom Connolly, from Cork, Ireland. His story titled, *An Irish Bones Story*, takes up the entire newsletter, a first for this newsletter. The Irish are important to rhythm bones playing, and I am not aware of any article that presents Irish bones playing in this depth. This article will be referenced in years to come.

We have published other articles about the Irish over the years. Check out the listing in the Museum (from Homepage click Museum, scrawl down and click History, and scrawl down to Ireland.)

I don't play in an organized group so my rhythm bones skills have diminished. I am practicing basics so I will be ready for BFXVII. Check out the column to the right for latest details, and look at a preliminary sketch of the BFXVII graphic. There are 35 signed up to date. How great to be back together in person again.

(Continued From Page 1)

the content and found William Sydney Mount's painting of "The Bones Player". She gave me a physical copy of the artist's rendering for Christmas.

Then we went to Delfest. As we wandered around the main field to look at the vendors, we came across a booth selling flasks with cool images. Mary being ever curious asked if they could produce a custom image. The vendor said yes, and after a bit of high tech back and forth, Mary was able to get the image to the vendor. We picked it up the next day. I think it looks even better than the



original drawing.

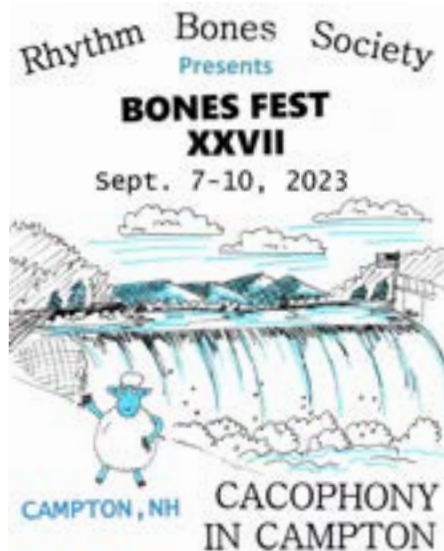
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www.newworldglass.com

What have you all been up to? Let us know here: <https://rhythmbones.com/contact-us/>

As we head into the heart of the Summer, I hope you can all stay cool.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*



Time to Register For BFXVII, BUT...

We are so excited to see everyone in person at Bones Fest XXVII in a few months! You still have time to Register, BUT do so at your earliest convenience. To Register, click on the Post on our Homepage titled, 'Registration Is Open For Bones Fest XXVII.' Thirty people have registered so far, so it is going to be a great???? Fest.

Most importantly, please book lodging ASAP - our region has heavy tourism and will book out months in advance. I recommend the Mountain Fare Inn where most RBS guests will be staying. Please call as soon as possible to reserve your room: (603) 726-4283.

The closest airport is Manchester, NH, and you need to rent a car for the one hour drive to the Inn whose address is 5 Old Waterville Rd, Campton, NH 03223. As time draw near Steve Wixson will send out an email to see if arrival times allow attendees to share a car. *Sky and Jessye*

Rhythm Bones Player

Rhythm Bones Society
Volume 25, No 2
Second Quarter 2023
ISSN: 1545-1380

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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

An Irish Bones Story (Continued)

thing. And it is just possible I may descend into slight irreverence at times, but it is all meant to give joy and have fun, so hopefully I won't offend anyone!

So here goes! I hope you enjoy reading this, and if you smile a few times during your reading, I'll be happy!

I believe bones to be the second-oldest instrument in the world, preceded only by the human voice. They have been around for a long time in Irish music, and many people believe they were one of the prevalent percussion instruments in Ireland for a very long time, simply because they were accessible to people. In the Irish countryside, families had small farms with cows, goats, and sheep that provided milk and meat. And in providing meat, the animals also provided the raw material for musical instruments.

The book Companion to Traditional

Irish Music is a detailed reference guide to Ireland's traditional music, song and dance – a 2,000 page compilation of the knowledge of two hundred contributors harnessed by Fintan Vallely. In the introduction, it says “Traditional music has been intimately associated with the rural poor and the politically downtrodden in the past – the greater part of the Irish population for whom it had been their major cultural resource ...” The contribution to that book by Mel Mercier describing bones includes a picture of bone flutes found in Dublin dating back to the 11th century. If flutes were being made from bone in Dublin that long ago, it is not hard to imagine bones being made in the countryside centuries before that. So by Sherlock Holmes-like deduction, it seems to me that rhythm bones could easily have been a common home-made idiophone, simply made from readily available materials, and rattled to accompany the music when people got together to celebrate, for many hundreds of years.

The earliest reference I could find to them was in The Fair of Carman poem in The Book of Leinster, c. 1160 AD, translated by Eugene O'Curry; “Pipes, fiddles, chainmen, Bone-men, and tube-players, A crowd of babbling painted masks, Roarers and loud bellowers.”

Conor from McNeela's Music told Steve Brown, long-time Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society: “Our website statement ‘bones are the oldest Irish folk instrument’ was written by a copywriter who has since left McNeela Music so I unfortunately I cannot ask her. However, in his book Traditional Irish Music: A History, musician and scholar Tomás Ó Canainn notes that bones were likely used in ancient Celtic music, and that they have been played in Ireland for centuries. Additionally, The Traditional Irish Music Education Society claims that while the specific origins of the Irish bones are not clear, it is likely that they were developed in Ireland sometime during the medieval period or earlier.”

According to Wikipedia “The technique probably arrived in the U.S. via Irish and other European immigrants, and has a history stretching back to ancient China, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. [The bones] have contributed to many music genres, including 19th century

minstrel shows, traditional Irish and Scottish music, the blues, bluegrass, zydeco, French-Canadian music, and music from Cape Breton in Nova Scotia.”

Christian Wenande of The Copenhagen Post agrees that bones go back a long way, and he comments on the one-handed Irish style. He says “The bones are reputed to be the second-oldest instrument in the world, next to the human voice. Though the bones technique probably got to the US via Irish and other European immigrants and went on to influence the likes of the blues, their history can be traced back to ancient China, Egypt, Greece and Rome.” Christian also agrees that “though there are different varieties and styles, the Irish tradition is particularly unique. For instance, while North American players typically use two hands, the Irish style uses just one hand.”

In 2011, Mel Mercier wrote in Companion to Irish Traditional Music: “While the bodhrán holds pride of place as the principal percussion instrument of Irish traditional music, the bones, although much less frequently heard, provide the distinctive idiophonic component of the sound of that tradition. In terms of their playing technique the bones have often been confused with the ‘spoons’, and the sound they produce is, at times, likened somewhat inaccurately to that of the Spanish castanets. The bones, as played in the Irish tradition, are in fact unique both in terms of the technique used to play them and the timbral palate and rhythmic constructions they offer to the traditional percussionist.”

Aaron Plunkett, a renowned percussionist, played bones one-handed in the original movie The Titanic, for a scene down in the hold where the Irish immigrants were having a session. I think maybe some of us believe the bones came to America via Irish emigrants because we saw that scene in the film in 1997!

2.5 million years ago, according to Aaron, rhythm bones were one of our first forms of musical instruments. Similar styles of playing music using bones, wood and even stone are found all over the world stretching from South India to Mongolia, to the six Celtic regions of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England,

Bretagne, France and Asturias, Spain. Aaron is well versed in percussion all over the world. He completed a two-year, 48,000 mile world tour including Ireland, Iran, India, Indonesia, the Balkans, Turkey, Egypt, and Ghana, Africa.

Bone playing in Ireland is mentioned by the famous Listowel writer John B. Keane in his book The Bodhrán Makers published in 1986, where he describes a band of musicians, including a group of bones players, making the traditional Wren Boy tour of their locality on St. Stephen's Day, going from house to house and stopping at crossroads giving impromptu concerts, collecting a few shillings from happy listeners to fund a “Wrendance” later in the month. The book was set in 1950's Ireland, and I confirmed in June this year with percussionist Dwayne Kiernan from Cavan that bones were indeed prevalent in the 1940's. I'll tell you that story later on.

Sean O'Riada in the 60's developed Irish traditional music from its context as dance music to a much richer status as music to be listened to, with beautiful arrangements for a range of instruments including bodhrán and bones. The fabulous Chieftains brought this re-imagined music to the wider world and the man who brought the bones to the Chieftains early line up was Mel's father, Peadar Mercier, who was the original bodhrán player with the revolutionary Ceoltóirí Chualann. We all owe Peadar Mercier a tremendous debt of gratitude. He was the first to bring the bones as played in Ireland to international attention.

Now a few words from and about some contemporary players (with my apologies to the many I do not know!). These include Mel Mercier, son of the great Peadar; Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh of Galway; the late Martin Fay and Ronnie McShane of The Chieftains and Ceoltóirí Chualann; Roscommon's own Cathy Jordan of Dervish; from Sligo the brilliant yet gentle Junior Davey; the late Paddy “Sport” Murphy of Abbeyfeale; Dave Murphy, Paddy O'Donovan and the young John Forde and Sarah O'Donoghue of Abbeyfeale; Dublin-born Rossa O'Snodaigh of the band Kila; percussionist extraordinaire Tommy Hayes from Scariff, Clare who played with the renowned Stockton's Wing; and I will finish off with an interview with the

less well-known but truly inspirational Dwayne Kiernan from Cavan.

Mel Mercier has been playing bones for over 40 years, he told me, and is very proud of his collaborations with the late great Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin. Mel wrote the first ever PhD on the bones and he tells us of playing with his dad Peadar. I think Mel's own words in his PhD cannot be bettered, where he gives us an informative and touching account of his style and his time playing with his dad Peadar:

“... I learned how to play the bones from my father when I was a boy. Like Jerry and Bernie [Mescher], the foundations of my musicianship were built in the courses of my musical relationship with my father, Peadar Mercier. I was about ten years old when I began to imitate his bodhrán and bones playing and I have been playing the bones and the bodhrán ever since. My father played the bodhrán and bones with some style. He always seemed to me to be quite self-conscious in his playing, concerned as much with the visual communication of an aesthetic as he was with its sounding. I believe that he passed that appreciation for a combination of the visual and the sonic dimensions of performance style to me. His playing also gave me an appreciation of the importance of precision and groove, defining characteristics of his own playing which he developed in response to the challenge of integrating the bodhrán and bones into the new Irish traditional music ensemble aesthetic first formulated by the Chieftains and Ceoltóirí Chualann in the 1960s. For many years, and on many occasions, before my father passed away in 1991, I had the privilege of duetting with him. Making music together, we yielded to the same pulse and shared in the same groove. This shared entrainment to the communicative eloquence of musical sound had a profound influence on our relationship and was formative in the development of my musicianship and the emergence of my identity as a musician.”

Mel goes on to discuss some differences between Irish and American bones playing:

“The typical American style of bones playing and the typical Irish style of bones playing are very different in several important respects. In Irish traditional music, with few exceptions, only one

pair of bones is used. This one-handed technique is used by all of the prominent Irish bones players, including Tommy Hayes, Johnny ‘Ringo’ McDonagh, Cathy Jordan and Junior Davey. Irish bones players usually sit when playing, in sessions and even in concert performances, and they must negotiate the aesthetic of quietude and reserve that typically prevails in informal and formal music making. As a result, the inherent kinesthetic potential for extrovert display is typically muted. By contrast, American bones players typically play with two pairs of bones, one pair in each hand, and consequently they have the potential to produce more sound than their Irish counterparts. Most American two-handed bones players that I have seen stand when they play and the intrinsic physicality of bones playing is un-attenuated in their performances. In general then, American two-handed bones playing is today characterised by the same extroversion in performance as that displayed on the minstrel stage by Brother Bones in the nineteenth century. Today, this relative freedom of individual musical expression is amplified when American bones players perform with recorded music rather than live music.”

Continuing to other contemporary players - I met Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh a few times over the last 10 years. I remember him but I am not sure he remembers me! On one occasion he cautioned me that you should only really play bones when there are a few fiddles in the session. He said “Most other musicians don't like them” and asked me not to join in. The next time he gestured to me to sit down when I asked if I could play the bones and welcomed me into the session. Then he tried out my bones himself and said they were a great pair and I should learn to play them properly. The last time I encountered him he was a judge at the All-Ireland Bones Competition in Abbeyfeale in 2019. I couldn't go due to work commitments, but I watched the recording online, and saw Johnny explain how he had made his choice. “I just picked the best one!” he said. Ringo is an exceptional player, both of bones and bodhrán, and his genius in my opinion lies in how simple his style appears to be – until you try it. He plays one-handed, with a great sensitivity to the music,

which implies that you need to know each tune. In my opinion that is one difference between the Irish and the North American style – the Irish players I meet and hear seem to “follow the music,” while the North American style tends to lead the music with a confident rhythm. In my conversation with Mel Mercier on a sweltering hot day in Cork at the end of May 2023, we both agreed that many Irish players tend to sit at the edge of the session, almost apologising for making noise, while North Americans take centre stage and run the show. In general!

The late Martin Fay of the Chieftains played fiddle and bones. If you listen to Track 6 of the Chieftain's album Chieftain's 8 from 1978, with Martin Fay on bones and Kevin Conneff on bodhrán, you can hear his simple style. Sometimes I've had batches of bones drying out in the kitchen and have had to move them to make room for necessities like preparing dinner. They tap against each other gently as I gather them up and, all being at different stages of drying out and hollowing out, they give out a soft melodic wind-chime-like pattern of sounds that invariably makes me stop and just listen. A few years ago a visiting friend (for whom we were cooking dinner and therefore had to move the bones out of the way) stopped in mid-conversation and said “Wow. That sound reminds me of ancient times”. My memory of Martin Fay's playing was exactly that, though he had a simple style. In fact he came late to the instrument and he used to be visibly tired at the end of a vigorous bone-playing set. But he was able to get that sound that I think rings in the depths of all our memories. In the Irish style you can often get that kind of hollow sound.

In contrast to Martin was the late Ronnie McShane, whose exuberant style can be heard on Chieftain's 5 (1975) and Chieftain's 6: Bonaparte's Retreat (1976). As Mel Mercier told me Ronnie “did play a few times with the Chieftains, as you mention, but to my knowledge he was never a member of the group. His more significant contribution was with Ceoltóirí Chualann. And he was very much a flamboyant performer and character – very different to Martin Fay.” Steve Brown and Steve Wixson interviewed Ronnie McShane in Rhythm Bones Player Volume 7 No. 1

2005. Ronnie passed away peacefully in 2017 and Peadar O’Riada, had this to say about him on the Rhythm Bones Website obituary: “Ronnie started out as the props manager at the Abbey Theater and my father was putting a group together to play for Brian McMahon’s play ‘The Honey Spike.’ They wanted to have rhythm bones in it and Ronnie went down to the butcher shop and got some bones and put them up on the roof of the house to weather them. And that’s how he got the really nice hollow sound to them. He had a very sharp beat, very clean, like my father’s bodhran playing, on the beat, on the pulse. Looking back they were so definite, with the beat of the music, whereas today a lot of bodhran and bones players are too complicated, ornamental, getting away from the pulse really at the expense of the music.”

Listening to the North American style I am always amazed by the intricacy of the rhythms, and it has been my privilege to have personally seen the late Bill Vits conjure up his wizardry at BonesFest XXII in Lincoln, New Hampshire in 2018. Bill was certainly the best two handed bones player I have ever heard in person, and I was always left wondering “How did he do that?.” I’ve heard many two-handed players get tremendous variety of pitch. But so far I have only heard that hollow evocative sound in one-handed Irish-style playing.

A great Roscommon player - Cathy Jordan, lead singer of the brilliant band Dervish, joined the Rhythm Bones Society in 2002. In her letter to the Editor at the time she said: “Yes indeed you have found another female bones player and I have played for eleven years or so now. My teacher was another female bones player, the mighty Monica Sullivan. In fact here in Sligo (Ireland) I know another three female bone players which is very healthy for the tradition. I play bones at every concert and try to have them on every album. They are featured a few times on the Live in Palma album. Now I’m going to rest my weary bones. All the best. Cathy Jordan”. Cathy has been into all sorts of music all her life and doesn’t feel restricted to any particular genre.

I managed to catch up with Cathy by phone in July 2023 even though she was in the middle of a hectic gigs sched-

ule as well as attending a funeral that day. Growing up in Scramogue County Roscommon in the 1970’s, Cathy told me she had very little exposure to live musicians – a lot of singers, but very few musicians. Her sister arrived home from college for the weekend with Monica Sullivan, a Sligo-born wizardress of bodhrán and bones. Monica taught Cathy the bodhrán using an empty cornflakes box, and the bones with her own homemade pair. According to Cathy “To this day Monica rarely leaves the house without a pair of bones”. Cathy was hooked. The following week when Monica returned they went down to the local butcher and gave him explicit instructions on the bones they wanted. Cow ribs, one being a good “grippy” one for holding firm, and a nice slightly convex one to hold loosely. “We took them home and boiled them for days” said Cathy “then we buried them for months”. I gathered that the acid test for fully seasoned rhythm bones is that the dog no longer has any interest in them. “They were rudimentary” Cathy continued “but isn’t that the beauty of the bones? Accessible to people in poorer times, when they had to make do with what they had. And she does not believe in cleaning or “shining up” the bones too much. “The ribs have a certain sound, kind of hollow, when the marrow really dries out. If you shine them up too much they get ‘clicky’. Like shins – shins are too clickety for me, I like the more hollow sound”. I agreed in general but I did say some of the shins I make have hollow sounds – now I have to prove it by making a pair for her! [Cathy still has her first pair of ribs, and we hope to get a picture of them for a future edition of RB].

Cathy can play with both hands and likes to do that as it enriches the sound, but modestly maintained that really her left just does a poor imitation of her right. “Not like Rossa (O’Snodagh) who can play both hands with complementing patterns”. But she does play with four bones in one hand. “It’s like trotting horses” she grinned “but I don’t go too fast – maybe stick to the hornpipes for that”. In her one-handed play she has three fingers between the bones. Although stating that she cannot really analyse her own style, jig is her favourite rhythm. As she puts it “There’s more meat on the bone if you pardon the pun. You can add a lot of stuff into the tune and complement it without

overpowering it. Sometimes a strong reel beat can interfere a bit with the melody. I like to enhance the music rather than dominate it.”

Cathy Jordan told me she gave Junior Davey his first pair of bones.

Which brings us neatly on to Sligo, home of Junior Davey, bones and bodhrán player extraordinaire, who told us this year in Volume 25 No.1 of the Rhythm Bones Player that he learned how to play from listening to Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh (p.s. a Galway man!) in 1989, who played in the band Arcady at that time and went on to be a founding member of De Danaan. Junior generously teaches many kids to play bones and his progeny are doing really well at the All Ireland Bone Competition hosted annually in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick. I wonder is it the Sligo style that he teaches, or the Galway style, or has he adapted to the unique Abbeyfeale style in order to go back to the North West with their trophies?



Paddy “Sport” Murphy was a giant of Irish bones. Single-handedly throughout his life he championed a tradition of bones playing and as a result we have a fabulous annual All Ireland Competition in Abbeyfeale. I never had the pleasure of seeing Paddy “Sport” Murphy play but I did see his nephew the great Dave Murphy play when he won the Abbeyfeale All-Ireland contest in 2012 – one of his five victories. Mel Mercier wrote in Companion to Irish Traditional Music: “It is not uncommon...to see the more flamboyant performer allow this free hand to be swept into spontaneous movement, bringing both hands into an eloquent dance born of the exhilaration, and the frustration of a body caught up in musical motion. Music becomes dance

becomes music.” For me, that perfectly describes Dave Murphy’s style. He plays with one hand and cannot seem to contain the other one as it draws looping shapes all around him. I played with him at the session after that 2012 competition and got to talk to him afterwards. I asked him how Sport had taught him. Dave took up his bones, described a huge arc in the air that erupted into a madly energetic rolling triplet, and said: “He did that, then gave me the bones and said ‘Go home and do that! And if you can’t do it keep trying until you can!’”. I can vouch for the fact that Dave can definitely “do that”! He is a joy to watch as well as to listen to – in fact to get the full experience you need to do both. And as the venerable Steve Brown wrote in his Executive Director’s Column in Volume 14 No.1 of the Rhythm Bones Player in 2012, like Junior Davey, Dave Murphy is incredibly generous with his time teaching local kids all he knows. Steve said: “David not only exhibits the finest bone playing, but he works tirelessly with the local children to ensure the tradition of bone playing in Abbeyfeale continues in fine style.” And I have to mention Paddy O’Donovan here – also an Abbeyfeale winner, who has a smooth but most intense driving almost hypnotic rhythm when he really gets it going. And John Forde, a lovely young man who I have never met but who I have seen playing live and online, and I have seen him develop over the years. John won his first Junior competition at the age of 4 and has taken multiple Junior titles - his last one being in 2017, as well as winning second place twice in the senior competition - which his dad Pat won in 2018! My personal opinion is that John’s style is like a mix of Paddy O’Donovan’s and Dave Murphy’s.

In 2023 the Abbeyfeale bones competitions was won by Abbeyfeale native Sarah O’Donoghue. Sarah has a beautiful style that sort of sneaks up on you. It seems basic and simple at first then it insists on making your foot start tapping. Brilliant. I also talked to Sarah in July 2023. Sarah told me she started to play the bones when she was 5 years old! She learned from her uncle Dave Murphy who learned from Sport Murphy and who also taught her cousins John Forde, Adrian O’Leary, Jackie Murphy and David Murphy and her sister Laura. Sarah’s favourite rhythm is the jig, played as a rolling triplet as it was taught to her that she says is different to how she has heard it played by people not local to Abbeyfeale. Bones was Sarah’s first instrument, and she

won the Junior Bones Competition in 2006 – the year that Gail Brayden from the USA became the first female winner of the senior competition. Sarah sent us a lovely photo of her playing in the competition, she does not remember the year!

Rossa Ó Snodaigh is one of the rare breed of Irish two handed players. But Rossa is a rare breed anyway! A fabulously talented multi-instrumentalist with the legendary band Kíla, Rossa, the youngest of 6 boys, was brought up in an Irish speaking household in Dublin in the 1970’s and ‘80’s by parents publisher Pádraig Ó Snodaigh and artist Clíodna Cussen, and was taught the tin whistle along with his primary school class by a teacher who was unable play the instrument herself. In secondary school he started the band with his schoolmates and his brother Rónán, (his other brother Colm joining some years later) and they began to experiment with different instruments, rhythms, melodies and genres. Kíla have created a unique type of music best defined as Trad fusion, due to the differing musical backgrounds of traditional, classical, rock and funk and the variety of instruments such as whistles, fiddles, Uilleann pipes, mandolin, bouzouki, guitars, bass, bodhrán, bones, djembe, darabuka, cajon, congas, drums, and a whole plethora of other wind, skin and stringed instruments.

Rossa’s style on bones (as on all his instruments) is organic, passionate, energetic and imaginative. He kindly took my phone call in early July 2023 whilst on a train journey home. He told me that at one time he busked with his bones in the echoed corridors of London’s tube stations and would sing tunes in his head to play along to. He also said that he’s developed a way to step dance and play the two handed bones at the same time. He has even further developed that and now he can whistle tunes with two fingers in his mouth, play a pair of bones in the other hand, and get both feet treble stepping to the rhythm!

It was in the late ‘70s that Rossa learned the bones from his brother Rónán who learned it from Colm who learned it from their eldest brother Fergus, (the other two brothers didn’t show an interest). He told me two intriguing things about his two-handed style.

The first was that although he is right-handed, he was only able to learn the bones “properly” with his left hand, and then in his words “The left taught the right how to play!”. I guess this is one instance the left hand did know what the right hand

was doing? Secondly, he discovered much later into his bone-playing journey that Fergus and Colm played the bones “the other way around” that is, the bone between thumb and forefinger tight and the other bone loose. I asked him what his “normal” way was and he said “Hold the bone between thumb and forefinger loose, with the other one tight” - which is the opposite to what I had thought! On reflection that reminded me of a joke I heard years ago: A man walks into a bank and when he gets to the teller, he surreptitiously points a gun at her and says quietly: “Put all the money into this bag, hand it over to me, and act normal”. She looks at him and says “Define normal”. Personally I think each bones player has at least one unique playing style, there is no “right” way and there is certainly no “normal” method. For instance the great percussionist Tommy Hayes showed Rossa how to play with three bones in one hand while doing an ad for Hersheys Mousse where they played the spoons. In Varnasai during the filming of TG4’s Ceolchúairt Rossa saw these “really long bones” called ‘Khartals’ being played in both hands in a kind of clicked manner. In the same programme they played with drummers who wrapped the ends of their drumsticks with cloth, dipped them in paraffin, lit them and gave an extraordinary performance of sound and light. Of course, Rossa had to try that with the bones. “How did that go for you?” I asked. “I got through half a tune before I burned me hand!” he replied. In Canada where bones and spoons are played to Quebecois music, Rossa loved the spoons carved from single pieces of wood, which are played with concave facing in or facing out. He has a pair of both types.

Rossa made his own pair of bones in the early days from butcher bones his mother got to make broth. He would choose likely candidates and leave them outside to “season” for a few months. People advised him to leave them “behind the chimney” for six months, or to bury them in the soil. But he found leaving them out on a windowsill did the trick for him. Although he still remembers one beautiful bone that the cat knocked off the sill to the delight of the dog...

He has tried many different materials including bronze – which were too heavy, and slate which he loves and still uses. He says he can teach anyone to play bones within 5 minutes and has taught loads of people over the years – including Michael Flatley - but the only one who has continued to play them is the brilliant sculptor Séighean Ó

Draoi.

Rossa's techniques are self-taught and to progress his abilities he would imagine what a better bones player might do and would attempt to better them. He loves varying the rhythm patterns, and altering which hand plays the basic beat while the other one syncopates. But amazingly despite learning the whistle and céilí dancing he initially didn't know the names of formal rhythms of traditional music – he said to me “I just kind of ‘knew’ the rhythms and followed the tune.”

He plays the bones as an instrument in their own right. An encouraging older musician took him aside in the Béal Bocht pub and told in no uncertain terms that he should never yield to other people's idea of how he should play the bones. This did however land him in trouble in sessions a number of times. He has been stared out of it, criticised for being too loud, too fast, too busy and even asked to leave sessions as a result. In many situations the melody players expect uncomplicated percussive support to their music and find intricate bones playing challenging. But for him he notes that because the Irish trad tune is solid the accompanimental rhythms can have grand variations whereas in rock music it's the drums that provide the backbone with the music providing the variations.

Rossa noted that traditionally Irish music was really meant for dancing to. Then Seán Ó Riada and Peadar Mercier and the Chieftains brought it to another level, creating harmonious arrangements for all instruments including bodhrán and bones in the 1960's. They created ensemble Irish music to listen to. Rossa has a view on the Irish music played in pub sessions that emerged during the Irish music revival in the '60's and '70's which continues to this day. “... it's magnificently informal, can accommodate any amount of instruments, but essentially it's music to drink to” he says. I hasten to clarify that Rossa is not being derogatory or sanctimonious here – he loves a good session; he is bemoaning the fact that there are not enough public fora for great musicians to display their skill, between the formal settings of arranged music and the aurally challenging session environment. In my recent experience this is changing a bit for the better and you can find some lovely musical sessions in some pubs. You do still have to look hard.

I have not yet met Tommy Hayes in the flesh but I have heard him play many times and during the pandemic I heard him speak

online about bones. For this article Tommy made time for a phone call late one Sunday evening in July 2023. Tommy Hayes has rightfully earned a reputation as one of the greatest bodhrán players of all time. In his career spanning more than 40 years Tommy has played with Stockton's Wing, Puck Fair, Altan, Liam O Flynn, and Eileen Ivers. He was the original percussionist with Riverdance and has performed on more than 400 albums.

In the year 2000 The Irish Times called him “An intricate texturist on a baffling variety of instruments”. As well as his beloved bodhrán, Tommy plays spoons, bones, the djembe, shakers, bongos, and many other instruments.

“I probably saw someone playing them in a pub” he said when I asked him how he had discovered the bones. He honestly did not remember. He had cousins who played spoons as well as bodhrán, but I was fascinated to learn that Tommy taught himself bones over a six month period without any help from tapes, records, radio or live music. He literally figured it all out by himself. He plays one-handed and having a huge curiosity and adventurous approach to percussion, he very quickly added a third bone. “I just preferred the sound of three bones” he said and went on to describe how, when recording with Stockton's Wing in the late 1970's, he was often asked to record “in the studio toilet” where the sound would be amplified and enriched by the hard surfaces. “And the third bone helped that too” he grinned.

He knows very few other players and fewer still who exclusively play bones – and he said contemplatively that there is a difference between “pure” bones players and people like himself (and Johnny Ringo McDonagh) who are primarily bodhrán players. “You can hear the bodhrán in our bone-playing” said Tommy. He mentioned the late Ronnie McShane (a former member of the Chieftains who played marvellous bones in 1975's The Chieftain's 5 and 1976's The Chieftains 6: Bonaparte's Retreat) as one of those “pure” bones players. (Check out the note below to read what Sean O'Riada's son Peadar had to say about this). Tommy is familiar with the late Paddy “Sport” Murphy's playing and said “He had a real driving style”, agreeing that the Abbeyfeale style in general is driving and energetic. “But I love all rhythm” he said, “and I love listening to the two handed bones players in America, the likes of the Carolina Chocolate Drops. In Riverdance where I

played bones 8 times a week, I managed to get good at them, and loved playing in 7/8 and even 11/12 rhythm.” He commented on the Indian style of bone playing and remembers watching a film on gypsies from India moving into Europe and bringing their bone playing with them.

Tommy finds that the hardest rhythms to play are reels with no triplets and jigs played slowly in 3/4 time.

At the end of the call Tommy asked me if I ever heard anyone playing the tongs – the simple fireside tool. He mentioned a documentary somewhere featuring Eugene Lambe, the piper, and a Late Late Show episode featuring the late great Micheál Ó Súilleabháin...I feel another article coming.....!

And now I want to finish by telling you about a less well-known contemporary Irish bones player. And in the telling, I think many of us who love the rhythm bones will relate to the feeling that bones give us. Playing bones has a therapeutic aspect, and when bones players meet, it is friendship first, playing music second. The instrument



is so simple, the sound is so pure, but to really master it you have to stop everything else and concentrate on it. Much like friendship.

The player is Dwayne Kiernan. Now in his mid-thirties, Dwayne was an accomplished professional rock drummer for 15 years until he was struck down by a neurological condition 8 years ago that paralysed him physically, traumatised him mentally, and ended his drumming career because as he told me, you need your feet for drumming as much as your hands, and although he recovered from the paralysis, he lost some of the co-ordination in his legs. Dwayne had never really listened to traditional Irish music but became inter-

ested as he explored hand percussion. He now plays bodhrán, bones, spoons, Indian kanjira, cajon and a number of other instruments. Six years ago on his honeymoon in Dingle, County Kerry, he bought a bodhrán. Then he got a pair of bones. Then he listened to a DVD by Tommy Hayes. And he practised and practised. He told me it took ages for him to get the triplet. And then ages more to get single and double clicks. But in his own words – “I’m stubborn!” And now if you heard Dwayne play you would be amazed - his clarity and variety in my opinion is honed from his years of drumming. I interviewed Dwayne for this article. Dwayne’s perspective on the Irish one-handed style of bone playing is that it “flows with the music” much like the Indian kanjira style. I could never play fast polkas until this year I accidentally discovered that I could, with very short bones! I somehow thought that was my own limitation, but Dwayne taught me that for different rhythms, you need different bones. I discovered his grandfather used to play spoons, and when I

asked him how far back he thought bones went, he reckoned they go back “a lot farther than we think”. Then at the end of the conversation, Dwayne mentioned his grandmother commenting on his various instruments. When he took up bodhrán she told him they used to call bodhrán players “flickers”, describing them flicking their fingers on the skin. She is 86 years old, her name is Nuala Smith, and she is from Ballymote County Sligo.



When Dwayne showed her the bones, Nuala told him she remembers neighbours making and playing bones when she was a young child in the late 1940’s. The impression I got listening to Dwayne recounting these conversations was that bones were played a lot at informal gatherings and dances. They were easy to make from readily available materials.

“Shur you’d make them yourself!” Nuala said to Dwayne. And maybe grand-

mothers in Ireland have been saying that for thousands of years.

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With special thanks to Mel Mercier for his guidance and patient correction of facts, and Dwayne Kiernan for his open and very personal interview

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