



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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In This Issue:
Steve Wixson is
Passing on the Sec-
retary/Treasurer
Office

Under The Arch-
way in Bantry

Last Quarter's
Puzzler

The Jerry Mescher
Memorial Video
Online

Minutes of the
Board Meeting

Active Founding
Members

Val Cowett Passed

RBS Channel Stats

Boneability De-
fined

Columns:
Executive Director
Column

Editorial

Executive Director's Column

This October I had the good fortune to be invited to play at the Washington Folk Festival by the father son duo of Pearse and Willie Marshner, who now perform under the name Reynardine. They are both incredibly talented musicians and it was a real joy to be able to back them on rhythm bones and bodhran.

After the performance I was approached by a man named Greg Burrows. Greg is a drummer and band leader who has experience playing rhythm bones. (Side note: You can find his new album on Amazon, Ebay, and Bandcamp.) He had recently found 3 ebony Danforth rhythm bones in a thrift shop for the amazing price of \$5. Can you imagine? That find helped reignite his interest in the instrument. He had played drums with his band earlier in the day. When a friend asked if he wanted to sit in with a skiffle band that played right after me, he realized it was a great opportunity to put those rhythm bones to use.

We had a brief conversation and I lent him a pair of rhythm bones to use so he could get both hands involved. It was a really fun performance and I thought Greg did great. At some point in our conversation he asked me if I knew about the Rhythm Bones Society. He had been a member years ago and has even been to a Bone Fest, albeit before I started attending. We both laughed when I told him I was the Director.

What a wonderful connection. This instrument keeps introducing me to interesting, talented, friendly people. The Rhythm Bones Society has been a massive part of that, even when not directly involved, such as in situations like this. I feel blessed to be a part of this organization that does so much to bring rhythm bones players together.

The Rhythm Bones (Continued on Page 3)

Steve Wixson is Passing on Sec/Treas Office

I have served the Rhythm Bones Society as Secretary/Treasurer since it was organized in 1999 at Bones Fest III, and now I am stepping down so new leadership can take us into our future.

It is not a difficult or time consuming job and the duties as defined in Section 5.50 of the By-Laws that are shown below:

"The Secretary/Treasurer shall keep the minutes of the membership meetings and the meetings of the Board of Directors. The Secretary/Treasurer shall sign, with the Executive Director, those documents which must be signed by both officers (including all payment checks written on the Associations checking account), give notices as directed by those persons authorized to direct that notices be given, keep records of the names and addresses of the members of the Association, have charge and custody of and be responsible for all funds and securities of the Association, receive and give receipts for moneys due and payable to the Association from any source whatsoever, and deposit all such moneys in the name of the Association in banks, trust companies or other depositories selected in accordance with the provisions of the By-Laws; be custodian of the Association financial records and reports, issue checks, insure the compliance of the Association with

applicable laws, regulations and policies, and perform such other duties incident to the office of Secretary/Treasurer as may be prescribed by the Board of Directors from time to time."

The Minutes of Board and Membership meetings, after being approved by the Board, are kept in the Rhythm Bones Player Newsletter. As needed, documents are prepared in a word processing program. The names and addresses and other information about members is maintained in a Microsoft Access (Continued on Page 2)



Steve Wixson performing at a North Georgia Festival

Editorial

While Steve Wixson, the Secretary/Treasurer, is passing on his Office (See story on Page 1), Steve Wixson, the Editor, will continue as long as the Board grants me this privilege.

While Bones Fest XXIX is over and you can read about it from the Bones Fest Exhibit in the Museum on our website, one last hurrah to co-host Bruno Giles shown below in front of the The Bone Player painting.



Last Quarter's Puzzler



Here was the puzzler from last quarter's newsletter, "Notice anything noteworthy about the rhythm bones in the photograph that Marie Bruschi took of the The Bone Player painting. If you see it, let me know so I can recognize you as observant in the next issue of the newsletter."

The answer, which no one knew, is Clif Erwin, and this is from his profile in

the Vol 11, No 2 issue of the newsletter, "Ervin marks his wooden rhythm bones with a "V" pattern that he copied from a design he saw in a pre-Civil War painting of a bones player." *John DeWeese* [Quote used with permission]

The painting by William Sydney Mount is shown in the left column with Bruno Giles, and below it is a closeup overlaid with Clif's rhythm bones.

Minutes of the Board Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Skeffington Flynn in the Common Street Spiritual Center, Natick, MA, on Saturday, August 9, 2025 with all members present except Tom Connolly. The minutes of the last meeting as they appear in *Rhythm Bones Player*, Vol 26, No 2, were approved as printed. There was no Treasurer's Report.

The meeting was called to order as the Nominating Committee and all current members would like to serve for another year except for Steve Wixson who does not want to run for the position of Secretary/Treasurer. Since this office needs someone with certain skills, the Committee after considerable discussion decided to postpone the meeting until one or more qualified people can be identified. The Committee will then meet virtually over the Internet to nominate Board members for next year. The General Membership meeting was also postponed until the Nominating Committee can vote on a slate of nominees, and at that time there will a Virtual General Membership meeting using the Internet.

Old Business. There were items that are not relevant now and were dismissed.

New Business. Jonathan Danforth volunteered to host Bones Fest XXX next year. The Board asked him for a formal proposal.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:15 PM. Respectively submitted, *Steve Wixson*, Secretary

(Wixson continued from Page 1)

Database that could be transferred to a another similar database. A local bank is used to handle funds. A copy of each financial transaction or document is made from which the annual Treasurer's Report is prepared. A copy of the Treasurer's Report and support documents

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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

are sent to the Executive Director as an audit check on the Treasurer. No formal Audit has been done. The IRS requires a 990-N Form to be submitted annually to keep our 501(c)(3) non-profit status. That also lets us file with the State for Tax Exempts status.

RBS income is our annual membership dues of \$20. The annual Bones Fest Budget with its Registration Fee is calculated to break even though in some years there is a profit and other years there is a loss.

RBS expenses include printing the Newsletter for members, hosting rhythmbones.org, postage, and small miscellaneous expenses. The Board has authorized the Treasurer to pay for these expenses and is reimbursed for them. Any other expenditure must be approved by the Board.

Since RBS is a small organization, these duties are not time consuming. Also since our funds are minimal, no Bond has been required for this Office.

(Exec Director continued from Page 1)

Society is the only organization dedicated to showcasing, sharing, and preserving these unique perspectives. Our annual Bones Fests are typically the largest gatherings of bones players in the world. Similarly, our website is almost certainly the largest repository of information about rhythm bones and rhythm bones players. (If they're not, let me know what is.) A copy of every newsletter is sent to the Library of Congress. The Rhythm Bones Society is a steward of the history of rhythm bones.

That history is alive. We all help to make it. We all help to preserve it. We all help to celebrate it.

Steve Wixson notes in this newsletter that there are now 4 active founding RBS members. That's pretty amazing considering that we're talking about being active for more than 25 years. But things do change and people do come and go. Steve has decided to hand over his role as Secretary / Treasurer. He will continue to maintain the website and edit the newsletter for the foreseeable future.

If you are interested in either role please let us know. If you'd like to do more to help make sure that RBS continues to be a vibrant steward of rhythm bones history, reach out. We have volunteers to organize next year's Bones Fest but we'll need volunteers to host in 2027. Could that be you?

So once again, I'm thankful for each and every one of you. I'm thankful I found rhythm bones. I'm thankful I found the Rhythm Bones Society. And I'm looking forward to making music with you all, or as many of you as possible, in 2026. Happy Holidays and may your bones be with you.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*

Boneability Defined

Boneability: possession of the means or skill to play rhythm bones. Use 'Boneability' in your writings and someday it will be in dictionaries. [Coined by friend John Agan.]

RBS Channel Stats

Now that we are [finally] uploading most new videos to YouTube, we can see how many people watch them. Below is a summary as of December 1, 2025, and look what is number 1. Note these are in chronological order from when they were uploaded, newest to oldest, and like a fine wine, the numbers improve as they age.

Jerry Mescher Memorial - 29

BFXXIX Highlights - 65

BFXXIX Kenny's Latin Bones - 51

BFIII Highlights - 99

BFXXII Vgo's Blues History 1 - 39

BFXXVII Vgo's Blues History 2 - 30

BFXXVIII Highlights - 94

BFXXVIII Irish Bones - 225

BFXXVII Highlights - 191

BFXXVII Flash Mob - 372

Active Founding Members

And now there are four, and three were at Bones Fest XXVIII. That is Founding Members who are still active, and that includes Mel Mercier, Spike Muhrer, Parker Waite and me your Editor.

Inactive Founders are Deborah Brower, Bonnie Chase, John Cowett, and the following who we have lost contact with, Charlie Breeland, Sally Carroll, Kevin Dunn, and Tom Rice.

Several Founders have died, Joe Birl, Dave Boyles, John Cahill, Terry Carroll, Everett, Dan, and Tommy Cowett, Vivian and Ed Cox, Russ Myers, Matteo Vitucci plus many others who were members, but not Founding Members. *Steve Wixson*

Val Cowett Passed

During the week when I was editing the above, I received a note from Steve Brown that Valentine Cowett passed on October 31 at age 93. Her formal obituary is at <https://www.forbisanddick.com/obituaries/Valentina-Cowett?obId=46259479>. She was the wife of Everett Cowett whose we think of as the father of the Rhythm Bones Society, and the mother of a covey of five rhythm players, Al, frequent Bones Fest MC, Dan, sound engineer, Martha, MC for one Bones Fest, Tommy and John.



The Cowett Family, from left to right, back row, Val, Martha, Everett, John, Tommy, and kneeling, Al and Dan.

The Jerry Mescher Memorial Video Online

The Jerry Mescher Memorial Video is finally online. Jerry passed in 2015 and this video was produced then, but it could not be uploaded legally due to the copyrighted background music played by ragtime piano player Jo Anne Castle. By uploading it to our YouTube Channel, the copyright holder lets us do that as long as it is not monetized something we never do anyway.

Credits for the video go to Mel Mercier for narration, additional narration by Sharon Mescher and sister Bernie Worrell, still photographs from Sharon Mescher, video from Steve Wixson and Sharon Mescher, background music using Jo Anne Castle recordings, and Steve Wixson for video editing.

The video includes highlights from his early life, scenes from his association with the National Traditional Country Music Associate and its Bones Workshops, and performances and more from Bones Fests. Remembering that Jerry was an Iowa corn farmer, the last scene is touching.

To play the video, go to the RBS website, click Museum, click Player Profiles Exhibit, scroll down and click on Jerry's name, and select the video. *Steve Wixson*

Under The Archway in Bantry

In 2019 I got a beautiful pair of rhythm bones (shown below) from a West Yorkshire man called Stephen Thorp that belonged to his grandfather Charlie, who played them to entertain the troops of the 1st Battalion Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the trenches of World War 1 in Singapore, France and Greece. Charlie's son (Stephen's dad) Jack Thorp carried these rhythm bones through World War 2 when he served in 1805 Platoon of the Royal Army Service Corps in Italy, North Africa, Holland, Belgium and Germany. Read that story at <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBP/V21N1.pdf>



Charlie Thorp's Rhythm Bones

Imagine my surprise when I discovered early in 2020 just before the pandemic that my neighbour Jack Callan who lives three doors down from us had an identical pair of rhythm bones that he played in his college days in 1956/57! I was very excited and wanted to get together with Jack, hear the story of his rhythm bones, and compare the two pairs side by side.

But the Pandemic happened, and we couldn't meet for many months. Then Jack's lovely wife Frances became ill so we couldn't meet during the breaks in lockdown. My abiding memory of Frances is one day she was out for a walk with her carer and we were at our gate just back from our own walk. We chatted for a few minutes then despite the regulations for keeping our distance she came

over to me and gave me a big tight hug. That was the last time we saw Frances and I am sure she is at peace now RIP.

Because Jack is away quite a bit and I am busy too, we didn't get together until this month – November 2025!!! And by that time I had sold the WW1 rhythm bones to the fabulous multi-instrumentalist Clare musician Ger O'Donnell <https://gerodonnell.net/ger-o-donnell-biography>

I spent a lovely few hours with Jack talking about his rhythm ones, and we also strayed into swapping stories! He told me of his late sister Dorothy Tigg, who sponsored a talented young pianist from Somalia and gave her a place to live in her house in the UK, in return for piano lessons. That girl went on to become a professional concert pianist, and in February this year gave a private



Jack Callan's Rhythm Bones

concert at a remembrance get-together in her house in Kensington. Jack showed me some videos of the music and it was magical.

Dorothy lived in Bantry for a while in a beautiful home overlooking the sea with gardens designed by her architect husband Peter. One feature that Jack pointed out was an archway joining two sections of the gardens. There was a wrought iron gate in the archway, but the colour was deliberately neutral so that you wouldn't notice it and your eye would be taken through the archway to the view of the garden beyond. Under that archway lie Dorothy's ashes, placed there so that if you walk in the gardens you have to pass by her to go from one part to the next. I thought that was a

lovely touching gesture. Anyway I digress! Back to the rhythm bones.

Jack told me the story of his rhythm bones (shown in the middle column). He said they belonged to a pirate captain who perished in a battle on his boat in 1760. As the crew shared out his belongings they discovered the rhythm bones. Rumour had it that the rhythm bones were in fact human, from one of the many old sea dog's enemies, and that whoever took them would be visited by the ghost of that man.

It's a chilling story – but as he finished it Jack burst out laughing!

Jack actually got his pair of rhythm bones from a musician friend called Ronán Ó Riordan who played fiddle and piano. Ronán got the rhythm bones from a friend of his who could play two-handed. Jack and Ronán formed a skiffle band, playing rhythm bones and fiddle, with two other college friends playing washboard and a bass made from a tea chest and a length of wood with one string. They used to play in tennis clubs around Dublin in 1956 and 1957.

Jack told me he managed to hold on to his rhythm bones since those days even though he was on the verge of throwing them out a few times. Sometimes his beloved Frances would ask him why he was keeping them – “They're not even good for making broth, not a bit of meat on them!” she would say, half in jest I suspect.



Pictured is Jack playing his rhythm bones, and a comparison of the two pairs.

As always with rhythm bones, it is not just the instruments themselves that bring me joy – it is the characters I meet and the stories I hear that enrich my life, and I hope you enjoyed the ones in this article. *Tom Connolly*