



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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Hello Good People!

I've been working on a joke, and I believe I have an amazing setup. Check this out:

25 bones players walk into a Chinese restaurant.

I'm still working on the rest of it, but man . . . what a setup.

Bones Fest 30 was held in Westport MA, August 6th, through 9th, 2026. Our hosts were Jonathan and Melissa Danforth, and Dean Robinson. Suffice to say, a good time was had by all! It really is extraordinary how much it feels like a family reunion with a family you didn't initially realize you had. It's a bit of a cliché at this point, but it's the truth.

You'll hear from our hosts in this newsletter so I'll save the detailed recaps for them. I'd like to talk business. Specifically I want to talk about what was discussed in the Board Meeting and the General Membership Meeting. I know, I know. In the words

of Tom Connolly, "you know Skeff, you're really no fun since you got into management."

The Board Meeting was held Friday morning. We learned just before we met that Jonathan Danforth was willing to take on the open position of Secretary/Treasurer. This is fantastic news. Jonathan is incredibly bright, clearly able to organize and manage people, and he's intimately familiar with the organization. This also solves a serious problem for the Rhythm Bones Society. If we didn't fill the Secretary/Treasurer position, we would lose our ability to write checks, which would make it nearly impossible to continue.

Relieved to know that the Secretary/Treasurer position would be filled, we turned our attention to membership. Bones Fest seems to routinely draw about (Continued on Page 3)

Highlights From Bones Fest XXX

My wife Melissa, Dean Robinson, and I started planning Bones Fest XXX around the beginning of the year. By April, after a lot of phone calls and emails, we had a decent idea of where we would hold the Fest itself: Westport Middle-High School, a spacious, modern building with a gorgeous auditorium. We then lined up reservation blocks at two local hotels. We also worked hard at creating the design that would go onto the t-shirts and programs, finalizing it just in time. By August, we ended up with 44 paid attendees, which is not bad considering that we didn't open up registrations until the end of April.

After greeting early arrivals at one of the hotels, the fun began on Thursday evening, August 6, at a little eatery in Westport called Backyard. We ate, drank, chatted with old and new friends, and rattled along with some fiddle and banjo music.

Friday began our time at the Fest in earnest. Steve Brown headed up the Bones Marketplace, and we set up a number of interesting pairs of bones and bones-related paraphernalia in the "Bones Museum" across the hall from it. Local artist Ed Rooney installed a gigantic pair of hands holding bones, and many of us posed with them in selfies throughout the weekend. Melissa headed up the registration table and kept

everyone well fed and watered.

While the RBS board had their meeting, most of the rest of us spent some time talking about beginning techniques, intermediate techniques, and teaching practices. Then we expanded our tradition of "pass-offs" and tried to stretch our abilities as we coordinated our playing along with music in 7 beats, tunes too fast to follow, ambient music without any perceptible beat, and the ever-shifting meters of Philip Glass' seminal minimalist opera *Einstein on the Beach*.

(Continued on Page 6)



Bones Fest XXX Graphic

Editorial

In 1998, I bought a pair of black plastic rhythm bones with the words 'rhythm bones' embossed on the back side (later learned they were made by the late member Joe Birl). An Internet search found a website announcing a bones gathering hosted by the Everett Cowett family in Greensboro, NC. I attended as a one-handed player and discovered everyone there played two-handed. There was talk of starting a organization for bones players.

I retired from the University of Alabama Medial Center as a Biomedical Engineer and had internet skills, and went home to my computer and did several searches with musical bones words finding about 100 relevant websites (go to <https://rhythmbones.org/documents/InternetResearch1999.pdf> if you want to see what it was like back then).

In 1999, 34 people attended a gathering that we now call Bones Fest III, and organized the Rhythm Bones Society (RBS). If you ask Google AI for the number of hits you get searching for just "rhythm Bones," it says 70,000 to 110,000 globally. While partly due to the growth of the Internet, the Rhythm Bones Society has made a difference, and 'rhythm bones' is part of today's lexicon.

Look at us now. We host a website with the largest collection of rhythm bones information in the world, publish a newsletter that is housed and cataloged in the Library of Congress and are celebrating the best of rhythm bones playing at Bones Fest XXX hosted by Jonathan and Melissa Danforth and Dean Robinson. This newsletter is all about that Fest.

The number 30 frequently marks a vital transition point into a position of major responsibility, spiritual awareness, or public service. RBS is at a turning point with lower membership numbers even though attendance at Bones Fests is holding at about 40. I as Secretary/Treasurer should have stepped aside years ago so that younger members could lead us into the future, and I am excited that Jonathan Danforth was elected as Secretary/Treasurer (he previously served on the Board and also as Webmaster).

I will continue to serve as Editor of the *Rhythm Bones Player* newsletter as long

as the Board lets me. It is something I am very proud of, and I thank those who contribute to it (wish there were more of you). We know a lot about rhythm bones since the 1840s but not so much pre-1840, and that is my next research project. Would you like to help?

I am the webmaster for our website, and someone more familiar with the latest tools needs to take it to the next level. Is that YOU? *Steve Wixson*

Letter To The Editor

Unfortunately I will not be able to attend again this year. I will be on a fishing trip to NW Ontario with my brother-in-laws from August 7 to 17.

Rev Robert & DaBonesMan will be doing a 3 week UP of Michigan tour as soon as I get back. Why does everything good always happens at the same time? I hope to get to another Bones Fest sooner or later. Peace, love and a whole lotta bone shakin' goin' on to all my bone rattling brothers and sisters. Always, DaBonesMan *Randy Seppala*

Board Meeting Notes

The Board met informally on August 7, at 10:18 AM, and all members were present with Tom Connolly joining via Zoom. Skeff Flynn announced that Jonathan Danforth volunteered to be the new Secretary/Treasurer, and he will be nominated from the floor at the General Membership Meeting.

Most of the meeting was a discussion the future of RBS, and Skeff Flynn's Executive Director Column presents a summary of the discussion.

The last item was finding a host for Bones Fest XXXI, and Maggi McCabe who attended Bones Fest XXVIII is interested in hosting it in Detroit. Skeff and Kenny will follow up with her.

Minutes of the General Membership Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Skeffington Flynn on August 8 at 10:35 AM, and a quorum was members present. He explained the unusual circumstance where last year's meeting was not held due to no one being willing to serve

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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

the Secretary/Treasurer office previously held by Steve Wixson.

Skeff opened the Election of Board Members for 2026 and 2027, and the following were nominated from the floor; Skeff Flynn, Executive Director, Kenny Wolin, Assistant Director, Jonathan Danforth, Secretary/Treasurer, and Board Members at Large, Ron Bruschi, Tom Connolly, Dennis Riedesel, and Dean Robinson. The motion was made and seconded to close nominations and elect the nominees by acclamation and the motion was approved. Dennis Riedesel moved that outgoing members, Steve Brown and Steve Wixson, be Emeritus Members of the Board, and this motion was seconded and approved.

The rest of the meeting was a discussion of the future of RBS, and several ideas were presented. Ernie Duffy said we need a RBS business card. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 11:15 AM.

Respectfully Submitted, *Steve Wixson*

Continued From Page 1

40 or so individuals. We are aware of far more bones players than that both here and abroad. Membership has reached or eclipsed 100 people at times, it currently sits at, or a little below, the average number of Bones Fest attendees.

It's tempting to think that there is an easy answer to the dilemma of low membership. We talked about making the renewal button easier to find on the website (which has been done). We talked about members only content on the site. We talked about the need to physically mail out the newsletters - which in my mind was one of the biggest membership benefits in the pre-covid era. But to me, there's a bigger question.

Why would anyone want to join the Rhythm Bones Society?

What is the value proposition? I have a friend who puts on an old time music festival in the WV/MD/VA area each fall. He has literally stopped charging admission. His festival offers so much value, that attendees voluntarily donate more money than what it costs to put on the event.

The value proposition of the Rhythm Bones Society is community. In his editorial, Steve Wixson mentions that the number 30 "frequently marks a vital transition point into a position of major responsibility, spiritual awareness, or public service." I love that. Spiritual Awareness and public service. The concept of building community should inform everything that we do.

Our primary physical meeting is the annual Bones Fest. During the Covid pandemic, we met via Zoom. Any interaction in the physical world generally trumps an interaction online. That said, there are certainly advantages to Zoom. You don't need to travel and can join from anywhere. We're very interested in hosting more Zoom events throughout the year. We've got a few ideas already, but we're always up for input. If you have an idea that you think would make for a successful Zoom Bones gathering, let us know.

I'm huge on the concept of Bones Ambassadors. A Bones Ambassador is someone who reaches out to the people around them to spread awareness of the bones and bones playing. Bruce Strong has already reached out to a folk

festival he routinely attends to see if he can get a booth for RBS. We'll see what happens there. But what might you do? How can the RBS support you? We have a flyer available for download (<https://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBSBrochure.pdf>), and it was suggested that we print business cards for distribution. What else can we do to support our Bones Ambassadors?

We also talked about expanding our social media presence, finding ways to sell RBS merchandise, and redesigning the website. All of these will take time and effort. If you have input, or enthusiasm, for any of these projects, please reach out to us through the website.

The General Membership Meeting was amazing. We had some really good discussions about the ideas I just shared, and we were able to take care of business. We formally elected our board for the coming year. What should not be lost in the wake of this good news is that we also added a new Board Member at Large.

Ron Bruschi raised his hand when the call went out that we had an open spot on the RBS Board. Ron may have the softest touch on the bones of anyone in the RBS. If not it's a close contest. That's important. The easiest thing to do with the bones is to play fast! And Loud! And drive everyone around you crazy! It takes time, practice, and mindfulness, to develop a style like Ron's. I'm really looking forward to working with him. I think he may be able to offer some fresh perspectives.

I also need to recognize the insight and efforts of Dennis Riedesel. Both Steve Wixson and Steve Brown stepped down from the RBS Board. Dennis recognized that this could result in a huge loss of institutional knowledge. He came to me with the idea of making them Board Members Emeritus. When I agreed, he sought out every other Board Member individually to get their buy in. During the General Membership Meeting he was able to propose and get the votes for this idea.

I think that's enough business for now. I'll pivot to a few highlights before wrapping up. Jonathan Danforth may be too modest to say it, but getting to hear him and his band "The Jethros" doing their original composition "Shake Your

Bones" was easily a top highlight of the festival for me. First class musicians. What a treat.

During the Sunday jam at the Danforths' house we were complimenting James Weitlauf on his banjo playing. He looked at us and said (with no lack of sarcasm) "you just want me to come back. Building community, pft!!!" Hilarious! And yes, we want you to come back James.

I have to give a shout out to Jeff Keller. Westport is a bit of a sleepy coastal town where they roll up the sidewalks at 9pm. On Friday, some of us wanted to keep going after we left the school. The lobby of the Best Western was accommodating, but they enforce quiet hours after 10pm so that didn't leave us much time. Jeff was adamant we needed to find a venue for Saturday night jamming after the public concert.

I called the Chinese restaurant across the street from the hotel. I explained that we were part of a music festival and that from 9 pm we were looking for a place to continue singing and playing music and that we would gladly order some food. "I don't see why that would be a problem", came the response from the other end of the phone. Yes! "What was your name?" I asked. "John."

Mary and I arrived at the restaurant ahead of the other festival attendees. "We're here to make some music!", we said. We were met with a look of horror and confusion. "What was your name?", I asked. "Harry", he replied. "Well Harry I talked to John earlier . . .". Soon enough, Harry was on board. Roughly 25 bones players showed up not long after. We ordered appetizers. We played and sang. As Harry brought out the first plates of food he had a big smile. We passed the hat for him and his co-worker and we got out of there right around closing at 11pm. Mary thanked him for allowing us to make music there and he responded that we had made good music and that it was a good night for them.

So the punchline to that joke I've been working on - 25 bones players walk into a Chinese Restaurant - the name of the restaurant was "Good Friends". It was really wonderful to see you, my good friends.

Your friendly neighborhood bones player, *Skeffington Flynn*



Rhythm Bones Museum Table



The Bones Marketplace



Thursday Night Meet and Greet



Jonathan Danforth and the Jethros



Friday Night jamming



The Pass-Off at the Farmer's Market Flash Mob



The food was terrific



Saturday Night Group organized by Jeff Keller



Friday Lunch

Bones Fest XXX hosts Melissa and Jonathan Danforth, and Dean Robinson. Photographs taken by Bruno Giles, John Meciell, and Steve Wixson
Jerry Bryant is on Page 7



Kenny and Teri Wolin



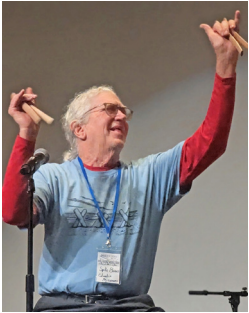
Melissa Danforth



Jonathan Danforth



Dean Robinson



'Spike Bones' Muhrer



Bruce Strong



Evan Lattimore



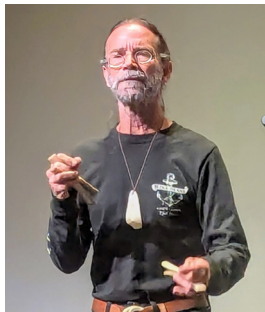
Skeffington Flynn



Mary Gunderson King



Gerry Hines



Tim Reilly



Lissa Michalak



Wally Jakubas



Ron Bruschi



Rowan Wallace and Joy Grimes



Ernie Duffy, Hank Poitras, Mary King, Tom Poitras, James Weitlauf



Bruno Giles, Cliff Teixeira, Hank Poitras



Rob Rudin



Rowan Wallace, Dennis Riedesel, and Steve Brown



Conga Line Finale led by Steve Brown

Continued From Page 1

After lunch, we held more workshops: Dean Robinson led a bodhrán seminar (see summary on Page 6); I led a session on bones-playing exercises for strength, endurance, elasticity, and body awareness (see upper photograph on Page 7). I also led a workshop with pass-offs to boundary-stretching music. What we did was amazing,

Steve Brown showed us every part of his process of crafting cow shin bones (see summary on Page 6). After dinner, we enjoyed informal performances from many of the attendees.

Saturday, after refreshing ourselves with coffee and pastries, we held the general meeting of the Rhythm Bones Society, which included board membership elections and lots of ideas for spreading the joy of our odd little rhythm instrument (see Page 2).

Then we left the venue for some adventures in the Central Village of Westport, starting with a group photo on the banks of the Westport river (see Page 8). We also astonished and delighted the unsuspecting visitors to the Westport Farmers market with a Bones Flash Mob, and then split up to find lunch.

In the afternoon we held two more workshops: Advanced Bones Rhythms with Kenny Wolin (see summary on Page 7), and an in-depth look at the acoustics of the bones with Steve Wixson (see Vol 28, Nos 2 and 4).

In the evening, we continued to jam and prepare for our public performance, MC'ed by Dean (see photographs on Page 5). Almost every bones-player present regaled us with great sounds that evening, and the variety of music was astounding (as is usual for these events), including sea shanties, blues, Irish and old-time American tunes, corny jokes, and not just one but TWO modern songs written specifically about the bones! Even after the show was over and the venue was cleaned up, many of us just had to keep going. So we headed down the road to the Good Friends Chinese Restaurant and jammed into the night.

Those of us who didn't have to leave right away celebrated the end of the Fest with brunch at the Danforth house on Sunday morning, letting us make even more music together before finally saying goodbye (until next time!).



We ended the weekend with the feelings that always come with Bones Fests – a joy in reconnection with some of our dearest friends, euphoria from music shared, and inspiration for the rhythms yet to be played. *Jonathan Danforth*

Irish Session/Bodhrán Workshop



Most of the attendees at this workshop brought a bodhrán with them, but some people had little or no experience. I therefore spent the first portion of the Workshop conducting a basic tutorial on how to play the bodhrán. This included suggestions on the type of bodhrán and tippers to use, a review of basic strokes and the names of drummers to follow.

The remainder of the Workshop was devoted to a discussion of playing the bodhrán at an Irish session. I reviewed the general rules of etiquette at sessions, and noted that the same rules apply for anyone who wishes to play the bones at an Irish session. Most importantly, I emphasized that the role of a percussionist at an Irish session is to accompany the melody players. I suggested ways to do that, including the use of motor rhythms, syncopation, tonal variation and accents.

Kenny Wolin accompanied me on concertina as I demonstrated these techniques. The importance of becoming familiar with as many tunes as possible was also discussed. I mentioned that all of these ideas and techniques applied to bones playing at a session, and the Workshop closed with a demonstration of playing the bones to some Irish tunes. *Dean Robinson*

How to Make Rhythm Bones From Cow Leg Bones Workshop



In my 40 years of making rhythm bones out of the cow leg bone, this was the first time in doing an in person workshop. I admit that I've been somewhat secretive in my methods, not always sharing what I've learned over the years, but as my age advances, and my wife's frequent questions, "are you really going to continue doing this," I realized that this might be the time to start sharing some of the information I've gleaned over the years. This brief article summarizes the workshop which can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/uCWzD8P5D8A>.

I did not discuss working with ribs. I have occasionally worked with ribs, but not a huge amount. Ribs already have the shape you're looking for, so consequently are much easier.

The challenge of working with leg bone is taking something that doesn't remotely look like a pair of bones, and turn them into a pair of bones that easily fit in your hand, and can be played. It is immeasurably more difficult than working with ribs, but the reward is great.

Where do you start? Getting the bone, perhaps is the most frustrating part. In the beginning I processed the bone myself as taught to me by an old Merchant Marine sailor, Milton Shapanka. He was a great old character, a bit eccentric, who told tales of carving and working with bone aboard ship. Processing the bone is a miserable process, and when I began to realize you could get bone already processed it really changed everything. Locating a cooperative company has always been difficult, and I've gone through many. Just when I think I've got a good one, they stop carrying the bone. I've never found one that will let me choose my own, so I'm always dealing

with what they gave me.

Which bone to use? In the workshop I had examples of the three bones in the cow's leg, The femur or hip bone, the tibia, the shin bone, and the metatarsal or ankle bone. I have in the past had access to femur, but not any more, I keep looking as the bone has some great sections available, although about half of it could be unusable. Over the years the tibia has been the most acquirable, but even those can disappear with out notice. The ankle bone can be used but I've had mixed results in getting the ones I want.

There's a fair amount of cutting to start with. I use a table saw to make the first two cuts. Incredibly dangerous, mostly because bone is not symmetrical, and I can't use a fence, part of a table saw that keeps the material straight while cutting. Means I have to eye my cuts, and keep an eye on my fingers!

On the inside of the bone there is a natural curve. Most of the work is removing the bone to bring into alignment with the curve. I use a small belt sander, and very low grit. Once the bone is down to the curve, you continue to sand, and gradually shape. This whole process produces a lot of dust, and you must wear a mask to protect yourself.

Matching the bones to pairs is a continual process, has taken years to perfect. In the workshop I describe the process. The goal is to produce the best sound possible. I don't want any bones going out of the shop without the best sound possible.

Much of these processes are described in depth in the workshop. I'm sure it will be posted relatively soon, and I would love to hear any feedback that you might be willing to share. *Steve Brown*

Advanced Workshop Polyrhythms



For this year's Advanced Bones Workshop, I wanted to dive a little deeper into how polyrhythms—two distinct pulses

happening at the same time—work and break down some of the math behind them.

We started with the differences between 2:3 (“two against three”) and 3:2 (“three against two”) and how to write them out by finding a common denominator, or subdivision. Once that was established, we were able to group the two pulses evenly over the same span of time in two different ways.

All of the examples we worked on were leading up to what I felt was the most practical polyrhythm: 4:3. This applied really well to bluegrass music, which we all played along to, because it complemented the syncopation of the clawhammer banjo.

To help solidify this feel, we worked on some inner-pulse exercises so we could mentally switch from a flow of triplets to 16th notes. This naturally created the 4:3 rhythm, which worked well with a Bluegrass Vamp play-along I found on YouTube.

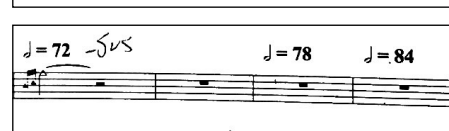
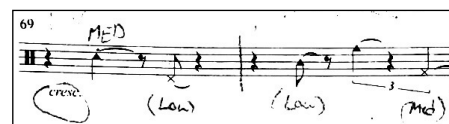
For an added “show and tell,” I brought in a very rare Trinome from the 1960s (see below) that I used in college to learn complex polyrhythms. Even though we mathematically worked out how to play 5:4, the Trinome helped us hear what that polyrhythm sounded like at faster tempos.

I had mentioned during the workshop that I've had to apply these concepts to works I've performed, and sure enough, during the 9/11 Memorial Service at the Pentagon, I played a part involving two finger cymbals and three triangles that contained multiple polyrhythms changing from measure to measure (see example).

It was a great real-world reminder that these concepts aren't just mathematical exercises—they're practical tools that can help us understand, hear, and perform even the most complex rhythms. *Kenny Wolin*



Billotti Trinome Polyrhythmic Metronome



Jonathan's Exercise Workshop (see Page 6)



Jerry Bryant



Key to people from left to right: In the tree from the top; Jeff Keller, Jonathan Danforth, and Lissa Michalak.

Kneeling: Melissa Danforth, Cliff Teixeira, Kenny Wolin, Bruno Giles, Evan Lattimore, Ernie Duffy, and J. C. Belleman.

Standing: James Weitlauf, Emmett Danforth, Mary Gunderson-King, Michael Ballard, Skeffington Flynn, Bruce Strong, Gerry Hines, Teri Wolin, Glen Kidwell, Janet Hines, Truman Muhrer-Irwin, Darryl 'Spike Bones' Muhrer, Jennifer Brown, Gene Joy, Wally Jakubas, Adam Jennings, Tim Reilly, Dean Robinson, Marie Bruschi, Rob Rudin, Ron Bruschi, Nathan Keyes, Andy Chase, Dennis Riedesel, Bridget VerVaet, Steve Wixson, Steve Brown.

Not shown: Rowan Wallace, Billy Scribbles, and Jerry Bryant

Rhythm Bones Society

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Address Correction Requested