

Bones 101

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Bones (also called "rhythm bones", "playing bones", "clackers", and probably a few other names) may be the oldest musical instrument known to man. A number of years ago, one of the ancient kings of Egypt was traveling the U.S. museum circuit. One of the items on display was a pair of bones made of probably bone or ivory.

Where can you get bones? Some renaissance faires have wood workers that make and sell bones. If you have access to the Internet, try Lark in the Morning, Hobgoblin Music or go to the web page of the Rhythm Bones Society (<http://www.rhythmbones.com>) and click on the link near the center of the page that says "Buy Bones".

What are bones made from and why does it matter? Bones are usually made of bone or wood but I have also heard and played bones made from plastic, aircraft aluminum, sterling silver, iron and glass. Different materials make very different sounds ranging from ting-ng-ng-ng to tick to clonk. Different sizes or shapes of the same material can make different sounds. In this case, the kind of sound will usually vary less than the "pitch" or "sustain" of the sound. Experiment with many different materials to see what you like best.

If you go to your favorite rib joint and plan to bring the bones home with you, take a few friends along so that you will have lots of bones to choose amongst. Not all rib bones work well in any particular person's hand. In fact, if you have access to a meat cutter, see if you can get your cutter to give you a section of the side of the rib cage where the bones are broader and flatter than they are near the spine where your rib joint gets their bones. Be prepared to spend some significant time drying, cleaning and shaping your bone bones to get them to look and sound the way you want them.

Do I have a particular brand or style that I prefer? Yes, but this is very much a personal preference and you may disagree. I principally see two broad "styles" of bones. "Danforth" bones (named for Percy Danforth who is largely responsible for re-introducing this once-popular instrument to the American public) tend to be strongly curved along their long axis and the cross-section of these bones looks rather like an American football. Most other bones tend to be less curved along their long axis and the wide sides are flat or nearly so. I got my start with "Shooting Star" bones and most of the bones in my current collection are Shooting Star or similarly-styled bones. I have large hands and pretty strong arms so I tend to like larger and heavier bones than many folks. Most of my bones are hardwoods and some of them are from the tropics. I tend to prefer purple heart, rosewood, teak, oak and walnut. I have or have had pairs of jacaranda, Douglas Fir, redwood and cedar.

What about size and shape? The "official" guideline for size comes in two parts. The length of the bone should extend from the tip of your middle finger to the first crease where your hand joins your wrist. The width of the bone should be such that when you slide it into the space between your index and middle fingers, the edge furthest from your hand should not pass the center of the middle joint of your middle finger.

The "unofficial" size guideline is simpler. Try it. If it works, that's grand. If not, try something else.

The question of shape doesn't have a simple answer (other than the unofficial size guideline above). I've seen bones with grooves to show you where to place your fingers. I've seen bones shaped like various animals. Here, the bottom line is simple: do they sound good to your ear when your hands are playing them?

Why the emphasis on "your" hands and ears? To a degree, your hand acts as a sound chamber that somewhat shapes and focuses the sound of your bones. Your finger position will also determine the exact point where the bones strike each other. These factors can make bones that sound good in my hands sound crummy in your hands (or vice versa).

Your ears will probably spend more time in the near vicinity of your playing than anyone else's. If your sound doesn't please you, it probably won't please anybody else's either.

Now that you have bones, where can you go to play them? Initially, the answer to this one is something like "as far from human company as you can possibly get". As a bones player (this applies to other percussion instruments also!), you have one or both of two jobs whenever you are playing with other musicians. The easier job is to accompany and appropriately decorate the tune that the other musicians are leading. The more difficult job (and the one that is the most important if there are dancers trying to dance to the tunes that you are playing) is to set and maintain the beat. To a dancer, the single most important thing a percussionist can do is to clearly indicate beat one of every measure. If you do no more than this but you do it accurately, the dancers will love you. If you speed up, slow down, accent the off beats, or are inconsistent, they will come after you with mayhem in mind. For either job, you need to know what's coming before the melody players get there. To be able to do that, you MUST be familiar with a wide variety of tunes. Ideally, you should be able to sing, hum, whistle, or play on another instrument enough tunes to cover the majority of whatever is going to be played at the session you want to go to.

How do you know what tunes to learn? Go to your chosen session (without your bones) and ask, or listen and take notes, or (after asking permission) record the session. Now, go home and work out some simple patterns that compliment the tunes the way they are played at your chosen session. In the beginning, keep things simple. With time and practice you will come to know when more elaborate patterns are appropriate.

What can I tell you about Irish tunes? (Why Irish? Because a lot of the playing I've done has been Irish and a lot of the ideas carry over to whatever style of music you prefer)

First, let's address their structure. Most Irish tunes are composed of "phrases" or "parts" each consisting of eight measures. Most Irish tunes have two parts. The first part (eight measures) is called the 'A' part. The next part is called the 'B' part. If there are more than two parts, the additional parts are called by the subsequent letters (it's rare for an Irish tune to have more than six parts [A – F]). Often tunes are played with each part repeated once before going on to the next part (A – A – B – B). The most common exception to this pattern is when you are playing for dancers. Then it is common to play an extra 'A' part before going into the standard A-A-B-B. Sometimes the dancers will refer to this as "eight for naught". This gives them a chance to get into position and prepare for the speed of the tune.

Next, let's see how to identify the various common kinds of tunes. In this section it is extremely helpful to have at least a basic understanding of how to read music. At least at the beginning, it's not essential that you be able to tell at a glance what key a tune is played in or even whether some particular note is a C or a C#. It is essential to understand what the time signature is and to recognize whether the measures are full of short notes (usually eighth notes) or have only longer notes (quarter notes, dotted quarters, halves, etc.). As a rule, you probably don't want to be rattling your bones multiple times for each note that the melody player is playing. Like all "rules", there are times when you can break this rule but knowing when it's okay will come with time and practice.

For the next section I want to first define some symbols (note that these descriptions came from a Bodhran class so the direction of travel may be different with bones but the placement of the emphases are critically important):

▲ - Emphasized up stroke ▼ - Emphasized down stroke
↑ - up stroke ↓ - down stroke
* - rest

Jigs: (including Single Jigs, Double Jigs, Treble Jigs and Light Jigs but not including Slip Jigs) These tunes all have a 6/8 time signature. The various names mostly refer to the relative complexity of the melody line and/or the steps that the dancers will do when you play them. In some cases (particularly Treble Jig), the name can also give some indication of the approximate speed at which they should be played.

The basic pattern is: ▼↑↓▲↓↑ Common variations include: ▼↑↓▲** and: ▼**▲**
A simple memory aid is "Rashers and Sausages" or "Pineapple Apricot".

Slip Jigs: These tunes require careful listening. Their time signature is 9/8 but the emphases in the melody line may break the nine into three threes or four-five or five-four and the pattern may change from one part to the next.

The basic pattern is: ▼↑↓▲↓↑▼↑↓|▲↓↑▼↑↓▲↓↑ Notice that beat one is a down stroke in odd-numbered measures and an up stroke in even-numbered measures. Getting the emphases in the right places takes some practice. A common 'cheat' that allows beat one to always be a down stroke is: ▼↑↓▲↓↑▼** (on 8 & 9, move the stick into position for the next down stroke). Note that this 'cheat' does not work well with all slip jigs. It is best used with a slip jig that breaks the nine into consistent sets of three threes. For example, it usually works pretty well with "Kid on a Mountain" but not with "The Butterfly".

Reels and Polkas: These are usually written in 4/4 and 2/4 respectively but there are exceptions. Depending on the particular dance, sometimes the tunes types can be used interchangeably. These are probably the easiest tunes for beginning percussionists to master.

The basic pattern is: ▼↑▼↑ or: ▼*▲* or: ▼*↑*

An important note for reels and polkas is that the fiddle part is often written with a "pickup note" or "grace note" leading into the measure. The memory aid I use for these tunes is: "I Think I Can, I Think I Can".

Hornpipes are written in 4/4 time (like reels) and usually have two distinct beats at the end of each phrase. Often the measure will contain two sets of dotted quarter followed by eighth giving it a feel of DUM-da DUM-da rather than the straight "DA-da DA-da" of a reel. The theme song from the old Popeye cartoon is a well-known example of a hornpipe.

Marches can be written in 4/4, 6/8, 3/2 and sometimes other time signatures. The important thing to remember is that people are marching. Give them a strong beat each time a foot hits the ground. You may choose to entirely ignore the other beats.

Waltzes are in 3/4 time and are usually played at a slow to moderate tempo. Seriously consider not playing these. If you do play, keep it quiet and simple.

Airs can be in any time signature or none at all. Usually they are quite slow. Percussion rarely contributes anything of value to airs.

With any type of tune, if you discover (or someone points out to you) that you've lost track of the rhythm, stop, listen, find beat one, and come back in. It is **MUCH** easier to stop and re-start than to try to catch up to what the melody is doing.

OK, now that you've mastered a goodly array of tunes, you go to your chosen session only to find five other bodhrán players and seven bones players already there. It may be time to get out your penny whistle. As a very general rule, there should be no more than one percussion player for every 4-5 melody players. If the number of other percussionists is small, you may be able to work out an arrangement to take turns playing tunes. It is unusual for a session to sound good with multiple bones players playing at the same time.

Even if you are the only bones player within 100 miles, ***ALWAYS ASK BEFORE JUMPING IN!!!*** There are players of other instruments who dislike percussionists in general and bones players in particular (also bodhran players) because they've experienced other players with little skill and no sense of musical etiquette who believed they had some sort of God-given right to play. DO NOT assume that you can win them over with your amazing performance. That will only serve to inflame their already negative opinions. Put your bones away and play something else or listen or go home.

Q: How can you tell when a bones player is knocking on your door?

A: He gets faster and faster and never knows when to come in.

It is a VERY common problem amongst bones players, even those of us with many years of experience, that we want to play everything at light speed, so we push the tempo a little faster and a little faster and ... Pretty soon the dancers stop dancing and the mandolin players stop playing and nobody has a good time. Remember what I said earlier about dancers coming looking for you with mayhem in mind. It can get UGLY! Absolute, dead-on, consistent rhythm is VASTLY more important than any fancy frills you may want to add. Add in frills where they are appropriate only after you have mastered consistency.

Now go ye forth. Listen, learn, play, enjoy!

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The Mechanics of Bones Playing



Start with the bones in your "off" (non-playing) hand. For Righties, this is your left hand and for Lefties, this is your right hand. Notice that the bones are curved. Hold them with the curves "back-to-back" so that they make a "V" shape.



Now spread the fingers of your playing hand wide apart and insert the middle finger near the top of the "V" of the bones.



Wrap your middle finger and ring finger around the bones, towards the thumb, pressing the bones against the palm of the hand. The position of the pinkie is not important for now. In order to control the bones, one must be stationary while the other one moves. I like to think of a blacksmith with his hammer and anvil. He doesn't try to lift the anvil into the air to meet the swinging hammer. Instead, he knows that the anvil isn't going anywhere and he brings the hammer to it. The index finger provides a solid brace to help the middle finger hold the stationary bone (your anvil). I usually tuck my thumb under my index finger. Your anvil should now be right in the groove at the base of your palm or possibly just a little way up onto the pad of the thumb. Imagine that there is a nail passing through the middle finger nail, the anvil bone and into the palm of your hand. Your anvil DOES NOT MOVE relative to your hand. The moving bone (your hammer) is controlled by your ring finger. You will need to experiment to find the right level of tension to allow the hammer to move a little without flying away (trust me, that WILL happen sooner or later).



**Now, bend your wrist up, stick your elbow out and hold the bones so that the tops are pointed at your chin (some people prefer to point at their breast bone).
Notice that the bones are parallel to the ground and there is about a finger's width of space between the far ends.**



**Imagine that the bones are part of the spoke of a wagon wheel. The axle is a few inches beyond the far end of the bones.
In the beginning, your hand will move back and forth along the top of the rim of that wheel. With time and practice, the shape and size of the motion can change. Starting out big really is easier.
Notice that the bones have spread apart a bit. This is okay as long as they come back together in the next frame. Again, how much to allow them to spread will come with time and practice.**



**At the end of the stroke, your arm should be fully extended and the bones should be parallel to the ground. You've now gone 180° around the wheel.
In theory, when your hand came to a stop at the end of the stroke, your hammer should have struck your anvil. This is sometimes called "tick".
Now, roll your hand back to the starting position and, when it stops, your hammer should strike the anvil again, giving you "tock".
Get "tick-tock" to repeat with control and you're well on your way to being a skilled bones player.**