

Music Underground: A Busker's Opera in Two Acts

By Neal Learner

ARTIST STATEMENT:

I love street performers. They are free spirits, creative souls and oftentimes great artists who make public spaces come alive with vibrant sights and sounds. I also like the fact that if you don't dig what you're hearing, you simply move on. But that's seldom been the case for me, and I've spent many happy hours hanging out in subways, squares, parks and sidewalks enjoying the talents of musicians, jugglers, dancers and mimes.

As a lifelong musician, I've had the fortune to be a street performer on various occasions. In high school, I played violin in a string quartet that would set up in our downtown's pedestrian mall. In college, I was a member of an a cappella doo-wop group that never missed an opportunity to harmonize in the campus commons. After college, I taught English in Japan where I bought an old guitar and played Beatles tunes on the streets of Tokyo. After Japan, I backpacked through Europe earning beer money playing in London, Paris, Barcelona and Rome.

I found that playing at the bottom of a long London Tube elevator gave me a captive audience, and stoked the contributions. In Tokyo, groups of school kids would gather around the strange site of a Westerner playing in their midst. In Paris, I was just starting to play in a metro hall, when a big dude with a saxophone came up and told me to hit the road. It was his spot, and who was I to argue.

Whether people stopped to listen or rushed on by, I know the music had touched them in some way. Music has the power to capture people's hearts. In fact, it was during my stint in Paris that I met my future wife, a dark-haired beauty from Barcelona. While she was embarrassed at first by my playing – being that I was a clean-cut American boy who didn't fit the image of most street performers – she got used to it.

I hope that Music Underground captures some of the spirit that street music brings to a city. I also hope it serves as a caution of what can happen if a city doesn't embrace this cultural art form. One can't take public performances for granted. I was saddened several years ago when Barcelona banned the amazing "living sculptures" from the city's always lively pedestrian street, known as La Rambla. And just recently, a town in Pennsylvania passed a noise ordinance that prohibits street performing. Oh my!

As Melody, the hero of my play says, "Let the music free!"

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