

SOUNDS OF LONDON'S UNDERGROUND

by A. Baron

One of the most noticeable features of the music industry is that the market is permanently saturated. Nowhere is this truer than in the field of busking. On a recent visit to a large provincial town I passed three buskers performing within 200 yards of each other. For the provinces this is exceptional; for the London Underground system it is the norm.



The Underground stretches from Amersham and Chesham in the west to Upminster and Ongar in the east. There are nearly 300 stations. In central London some stations are barely a quarter of a mile apart.

It is here that the buskers are thickest on the ground.

It has always been, and still is, a breach of London Transport by-laws to obstruct the subways. Over the past few years though the Metropolitan Police, British Transport Police and London Underground management have, in practically all cases, turned a blind eye to the practice. One busker told me that this is because they discourage muggers. Though, judging by recent crime figures for the system, there seems to be little or no evidence to support this contention.

Although there is no such thing as a typical busker, they might be divided into two broad categories: the highly organized and the ad hoc.

Where a rota is operated a list is posted every morning, often as early as seven o'clock. This may be a case of buskers simply turning up and writing their

names and instruments on a designated poster with the time they intend to play. Usually they change over about every hour. The list is rigidly adhered to. Any unwary who turns up at, or near, the pitch and starts strumming his guitar will quickly be told where to go in no uncertain terms.

The ad hoc buskers are a different kettle of fish. They turn up anywhere that is not a regular pitch and play for as long as they like. These are the ones who only busk when they need to make some money in a hurry. The others are, to all intents and purposes, doing a job; moving from pitch to pitch all day long.

Most buskers are singer/guitarists. The word 'guitarist' is not to be taken too literally, the clever ones are those who can play four chords. There are exceptions though; classical guitarists and other classically trained musicians can be found amongst the ranks. Most of these are music students, supplementing their grants, and there are a few professional musicians who have seen better days. Other buskers include: saxophonists who often play with a backing tape on a portable cassette player; electric guitarists; electric keyboard players; classical singers who perform solo, with or without a backing tape; solo violinists; string duos and quartets; clarinetists; and even the odd tap dancer. This list is by no means exhaustive.

The classical musicians tend to stick to the best known melodies. For example, one often hears extracts from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." Typical saxophone numbers are "Take Five" and the "Pink Panther" theme. Singer/guitarists tend to adhere rigidly to regular folk/rock; what variety exists is unadventurous, and very few play their own material. Overall, London Underground's music corp. comes a very poor second to the buskers and street entertainers found in Covent Garden on a Sunday afternoon.

Most buskers are very reluctant to reveal how much they make. Presumably many of them are drawing the Dole or living on Income Support (the new name

for Social Security). So how much do they make? As far as I was able to ascertain about £3-5 per hour is considered to be good. That is for an hour during peak travel times, (not necessarily the rush hour). Most of the time they have to settle for a bit less. Many Underground stations are not that busy for most of the day, and the fact that there are so many buskers working virtually round the clock, day in, day out, does sap the generosity of even the ever-giving British public. Also, many of them are, to put it kindly, not very competent musicians. Christmas and the high tourist season are the best times; I have seen buskers with hats full of pound coins during the festive season.

Though I said earlier that there is no such creature as a typical busker, the following selections are typical of this untypical bunch. They are all members of the ad hoc fraternity.

I met Benny playing the harmonica in the underground shopping mall at Charing Cross station. He was holding his cap out with his free hand, and doing reasonably well. This was probably because people felt sorry for him; he looks, and is, a genuine hard luck story. Benny is 48 years old and comes from Glasgow. He had been down here a mere three weeks this visit, and told me he was trying to make his fare back to Scotland. He said he has a wife and family at home, which might be true. Although he is a recent arrival, he has played on and off like this for 25 years. He also plays farther north at Tottenham Court Road station. Benny smelt heavily of drink and had obviously been sleeping rough. He refused to tell me how much he had made that day: "never discuss money," he said in his strong Glaswegian accent.

At the other end of the scale is Sean, a 24 year old teacher from Ireland who is on holiday, but unashamedly admits he needs to make some money. He is also playing to build his confidence for when he goes home. He likes to play in front of a live audience, but says he suffers from nerves. Sean sings ballads and accompanies himself on the guitar. Today is his first day. He has strayed onto a much used pitch at London Bridge station, but has, fortunately, gone unnoticed by the regulars. He says he has made about £5 in two hours.

At Waterloo I met Trev who is a 29 year old composer/song writer. He plays instrumentals, his own compositions, and

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is very funny. Mary's vulnerability is very familiar, even to the strong, and Celia, the woman we get to see least, has a false positiveness built upon a mass of phobias and insecurities and leaves her yelling at Jo when she is unable to move Mary's clothes out of the bath when she needs to use it.

This is a lovely, entertaining, quick-moving play. The production, directed by Nancy Meckler, first at the Royal Court Upstairs and now revived at the Lyric Studio in Hammersmith, London, capitalizes on the utter believability and familiarity of the characters and situation.

TROUBLE AND STRIFE THEATRE COMPANY

Trouble and Strife Theatre Company's first piece of co-operative theatre, "Now and at the Hour of Our Death," inspired by Nell McCafferty's "The Armagh Women," deals with a protest in Armagh Women's Prison in Northern Ireland. Frank Murray, manager of the Irish folk-rock band, The Pogues, saw it in London after it had toured nationally, and sponsored the company to take the show to the Dublin Theatre Festival. He has since financed their trip to New York's Irish Arts Center in May and early June of this year.

On their return from Dublin the company found they had an offer of a month's rehearsal space at the National Theatre Studio. They began 6 months work on their new project, now called "Next to you I Lie." It has been playing in London and will be at this year's Edinburgh Festival.

Trouble and Strife boast a wide pool of collective experience within the company and describe "Next to you I Lie" as a product of writing and rewriting rather than improvisation. In order to do research into pornography, the subject of their new show, the women pretended to be looking for modelling work themselves. They got involved with glamour agencies, photographers and professional models. They also dealt with the Campaign Against Pornography and Censorship, an organization which believes that pornography should be eliminated because it contributes to sex discrimination, sexual inequality, sexual violence and sexism.

They are intelligent women, and their approach to the material involves a lot less drum banging than, say, Sarah Daniels

uses in her play, "Masterpieces." The material they have produced is both thought-provoking and emotive, though there are occasional dead moments in the writing. The four women on stage each embody an interesting character who has a clearly defined viewpoint on the issue, but the issue comes from characters concerned, the characters do not carry the issue.

Gabrielle Chiappe plays Juliet Banks who enjoys her glamour modelling career and has always been encouraged in it by her bar manager mother, Paula (Finola Geraghty). Paula does not fully appreciate all that 'glamour modelling' can mean until, spurred on by comments from Juliet's friend Sian, she buys all the porn magazines her daughter's photo might be in, and spends an afternoon looking through them. She is disgusted by what she has encouraged her daughter to do, and horrified by the way that she now feels men must see her and all women. Sian (Caroline Seymour) is using porn to fire her relationship with the man she loves, but it's making her hate herself and him. Juliet's booker, Elly (Maeve Murphy), who gets her girls work and tries not to become too involved, is receiving letters from Mandy in Manchester. Mandy's father is taking pornographic photos of her and wants her to become a model. After various abortive attempts, Elly writes to Mandy, not offering help, but a long list of phone numbers of other agencies in London, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool.

Trouble and Strife maintain that porn degrades both men and women and we need to reeducate ourselves in how we respond to each other. Meanwhile there's a multi-million pound industry perpetrating the use of porn. Juliet and Elly both argue the harmlessness of porn-induced fantasy and the money to be made in the industry. Paula and Sian have personal experience that make them want to condemn it.

In this time of financial desperation in the Arts in Britain this new company is managing to create powerful new work around controversial issues. They seem to be getting some of the support they need to spend time in research to create their courageous and intelligent work.

Music

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has a friend, Tich, "bottling" for him (holding out a hat and soliciting donations). Although Trev is somewhat shabbily dressed and in need of a bath, he is not in the same boat as the unfortunate Benny. He says he doesn't like busking, but needs the money. At home he composes and makes his own recordings. Trev has been busking for about three years. He says the earnings are "as good as you make it," but admits he had a bad morning, making 10 pence in half an hour. He doesn't appear to be doing much better now, which is a pity because he really knows his instrument. He does make sure



Untalented, but at least he makes a living.

that he is paid for the interview though.

There seems to be no slackening in the number of new recruits to the busking ranks: new music students, down-and-outs, and even a mature Canadian tourist playing "The Sailor's Hornpipe" on the violin! Most people ignore them, and they do cause trouble here and there. I personally would be happier if there were a lot fewer of them, and they were more competent performers, like Trev. But love or hate them, London's buskers are here to stay, which brings a whole new meaning to the term "Underground Music."