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ALL THE STREET'S A STAGE

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ALL THE STREET'S A STAGE

Five years ago, performing on Boston's streets was illegal. Now the area's sidewalks vibrate with color, movement and acting

By Preston Graia

Photos: Ted Duly

5 p.m. Another long, hot day ends in the MBTA station, humidity adds to the frustrations of work, car payments, city living. And then, floating from the middle of the platform, comes a baroque fluting, the trills gracefully curling around delicate high notes. The dog days of summer are gone for a few moments — there's only the soft piping of the baroque recorder and the grace of the 17th century.

During the spring, summer and fall, the streets of Boston and Cambridge are alive with musicians, mimes, storytellers, sword swallows, comedians—even an organ grinder with a trained monkey. They have names like Captain Pepperoni, Washboard Slim, Sidewalk Sam and Brother Blue. At times the streets become part medieval fete, part carnival and part talent show.

Five years ago performing on the streets was illegal; one musician remembers a time when his audience was arrested for simply listening to his music. But today the street performers are encouraged to ply their trade. They've been recognized as an important part of the city's cultural life.

Although you're likely to find music or mime anywhere, Boston and Cambridge holds a few centers of concentrated street entertainment. The Faneuil Hall area remains a favorite among some performers. Boston Common is where it all began; and on a fine day you are likely to find two or three performers within earshot of each other. Harvard Square, at the Brattle triangle, usually boasts a performer or two. Finally, live music in the MBTA is a stable fixture, making commuting a little easier on the body and soul. Articulture, which schedules performances, said there is a long waiting list to play underground.

Here, then, is a random sampling of performers regularly playing city streets. There are scores of others out there and we're not saying these are necessarily the best in the city —

Preston Graia is a freelance writer living in Cambridge.



Brother Blue is a storyteller who is known in Europe and across the nation.

but we've chosen a few to give you an idea of what the people are like behind the magic, music and mime.

Most street performers owe Stephen Baird a small debt. In 1973 Baird's letter-writing campaign culminated in the legalization of street performing. Baird also has formed a loose association called the Boston Street Singer's Guild, and aims at legalizing street singing in other Massachusetts cities. Ultimately, he would like to see it legalized nationally, especially on college campuses.

"They set aside areas for cigarette vending machines on campuses," he said, "why not set aside areas for street musicians and other artists?"

After seven years of street singing, Baird has built a following. People look for him at his usual spot on Boston Common near the Park Street MBTA stop. For many people, Baird's voice, not crocuses or robins, heralds spring. Some people have even taken to calling him the Robin of Boston.

Small, elfish, with a remarkable energy and street presence, Baird has an enormous repertoire: Irish drinking songs, traditional Appalachian music, ragtime, minstrel, blues and sing-alongs. He accompanies himself with guitars, a dulcimer, autoharp, kazoo, harmonica and an Appalachian instrument called a limberjack. Crowds inevitably gather around him and he possesses the uncanny ability to turn an otherwise rational crowd of 50 adults in downtown Boston into a hand-clapping, singing, foot-stomping, head-nodding mass.

"You're in downtown Boston," he managed to convince his audience, "so you've got a license to be weird."

Baird wears a metal badge, adorned with the number one, the first street-singing license to be given out in Boston. He faced a tough crowd to get that license: a group of Boston policemen who auditioned him to see if he really was a street singer. Baird began the audition with a class act, playing the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on a dulcimer.

"They had never seen or heard of a dulcimer and probably never heard Beethoven's Ninth," he remembered. So he took a new tack, putting down the dulcimer and promptly launching into a rendition of his ziestest Irish drinking song.

The audition was a success and Baird got the license.

Of singing on the streets Baird said, "There's freedom out here. You can be non-commercial, and there's a great deal of spontaneity. Once a drunk gave me a potato as payment. I've been given poems, sketches. Once a man cried at one of my songs and gave me \$60. He said he'd like to give me more, but that was all he had.

"There's no antagonism between performer and listener out here. People give what they want, whether they're rich or poor."

Baird, born in Cambridge, didn't originally plan to make his living on the streets. His college training in mechanical engineering at Northeastern University appears to make him more suited to the world of corporate regularity than to the freedom and unorthodoxy of living as an itinerant musician.

He regularly performs in the streets and college campuses across the country — once playing by request in the grand foyer of the Kennedy Art Center. Boston remains his home base. Baird's monetary needs are simple; he lives in a cooperative household in Boston which insures low living expenses. The \$2000 to \$3000 he earns on the streets each summer, supplemented by college performances, holds him through the year.

If you happen to be male, and you make a habit of munching at Faneuil Hall market, don't be surprised if one day a "fuzzy blonde" drapes herself across you. Don't be surprised if her enraged husband finds you together, starts screaming, rips his jacket off and challenges both you and his wife to a fight.

You've just been included in a skit from "Two's Company," a comedy team of John Fucillo and Sally Deering.

"While Two's Company" has appeared on television, on the "Woman '78" show and at the Charles Playhouse, they still hone

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Left, Stephen Baird, who led the campaign to legalize street performing in Boston. At top, Peter Sosna does his magic act on Brattle street, Cambridge. Above, Sally Deering and John Fucillo, who put on satirical sketches at Faneuil Hall Market.



Their eyes are on Peter Sosna's magic in Cambridge.

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their talents and make their living on the streets. Much of their act is created and developed there, where a constantly changing scene calls for occasional improvisation.

Mix one part satire, one part "mood" piece, one part slapstick and one part each the personalities of Deering and Fucillo and you have some idea of the scope of "Two's Company." Targets of their satirical sketches include game shows (in a skit called "Let's Make Fools of Ourselves"), television chefs and 1940s-style romances.

Even their meeting and the birth of their act is the stuff that B-grade movies are made from.

Deering grew up in a theatrical family. After college, summer stock, "dropping out" and a brief stint at "The Proposition" in Cambridge, she ended up where any number of aspiring performers do: washing dishes to support herself.

John majored in psychology in college. While he always wanted to be a comedian, he remembered, "I figured that I should get a job like everyone else." He went to a school of radio, broadcasting and theater and eventually worked as a singing waiter.

After being introduced by a mutual friend, John and Sally developed a two-hour comedy revue in six weeks. Since the market for comedy in Boston is limited, they are forced to perform on the streets.

"People are more honest on the streets," Deering said of street audiences. Fucillo added, "It's good for your energy to be so close up to peo-

ple; totally unexpected things happen."

But their skills depend partially on props, which makes street performing occasionally burdensome and difficult.

An initial reluctance to ask for money in the streets had them netting only \$11 the first day they performed at Faneuil Hall last fall. They have since overcome that reluctance and now average about \$25 per performance.

But the streets, and their other performances, don't provide either of them with enough money to live on. So Fucillo supplements his income by waiting on tables and Deering works for a caterer. Both hope that "Two's Company" will be a stepping stone toward supporting themselves solely with their comedy.

They prefer Faneuil Hall to other areas of the city. Go and see them. You will find some of the finest comedy in Boston, at little, or no, expense.

The early morning commuter train squeals and clatters to an inharmonious halt. Commuters push their way off the train into the harsh underground light of the Park Street Station. The train lumbers off, the crowd thins, and Joe Field, stooped slightly in concentration over his vibraphone, is one of the few people left. The cool tones of his music wash over the station.

If music could sing, its voice would be the vibraphone. A gentle cascade of notes comes from the instru-

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ment, which is often mistaken for a xylophone by the uninitiated.

You can find Field at an MBTA stop, or less frequently on Boston Common.

"I play every day for about six or seven hours until I get tired," Field said of his working habits. "Then I'll take a couple of days off and take a rest. I make enough for a typical middle-class living."

Street performing is his prime source of income, and pays him enough to live alone in a Beacon Hill apartment. Field is a beneficiary of the MBTA decision to allow performers underground. Before then, the 31-year-old musician supported himself by teaching at the Berklee College of Mu-

sic and by performing at clubs and private parties. Thanks to the MBTA he has been able to quit teaching, although he still plays at clubs and private parties. Playing rush hours on the MBTA, he said, pays better than most clubs.

Both Field's parents are musicians, and his mother works as a pianist in Seattle, the place where he received his early musical training in piano and composition. Much of his background is in jazz but his underground repertoire is varied.

"There are all kinds of people down here," Field said, "so I have to play a variety of music. I'll pick up things that catch my ear, and then test them in the subway to see people's reactions. But I only play what I enjoy, those are

the things that catch my ear." A typical Field performance might include "Be Bop," Stevie Wonder, soul music, Boz Scaggs and some "easy listening" top 40 tunes.

"Most people with an ear for music enjoy what I do, especially since many don't usually hear this particular instrument," according to Field. "But still, some people don't support the idea and look on it as begging. But in the music business you don't have one job and sit there for 25 years and settle down on a pension."

Boston may be a good city to perform on the streets, but recording companies, and contracts, are in New York. Field is saving up so he can go to New York. He hopes to live in both New York and Boston.

"There's no music program on the New York subways, and the climate in the city for tipping is no good," he said of New York. "I've tried it there and people are more on the move, with less time to listen."

So the next time you push your way off the Red Line, stop for a moment. If you don't have time to listen to the music, you might as well live in New York.

If you notice a bright orange glow near Harvard Square one night, don't run to a fire alarm. The glow probably signals the beginning of Peter Sosna's magic show. He usually begins by breathing fire. His singed beard reveals that flames sometimes go

slightly awry.

His magic is a treat for those who have only seen television magic. Coins vanish, razor blades disappear, rings magically lock and unlock — all accompanied by a witty, running commentary from Sosna, whose career as a magician began at age 7 (he is now in his 20s).

One trick calls for a \$100 bill from the audience — a smaller bill if no one has that large a denomination. The bill is initialed by the owner/victim for identification, sealed in a plain white envelope and mixed with three similar, but empty envelopes.

Upon command of the victim, Sosna burns the envelopes one by one, until only one is left.

"Now," Sosna announces

proudly, "will you open the envelope and tell me what's inside."

The victim opens the envelope. He isn't smiling. It is empty.

Sosna falters for a moment, grabs the envelope, fills it with ashes of the burned envelopes and tells the volunteer, "Just bring this back to your bank. Tell them a magician made a mistake and it used to be a \$100 bill. I'm sure they'll understand."

He tries to push the victim away. The victim, however, does not budge.

"OK," Sosna says. "You're lucky that I carry fire insurance."

He reaches into his vest, pulls out and unzips a leather wallet to reveal a sealed envelope identified with the words "Fire Insurance." Inside is the original, initialed \$100 bill.

His show now includes a full-stage trick, performed on the streets. His assistant is handcuffed, put in a sack and locked in a large wooden box. A curtain is pulled up and almost instantaneously the assistant is standing outside the box. Sosna is inside the box, handcuffed and in a sack.

"I started performing on the streets out of necessity," Sosna explained. "My booking agent only does colleges, so there's no work for me during the summer. I just had to take to the streets."

Before making a living as a magician, Sosna sold knives door to door, worked as a stock boy in a supermarket and as a disc jockey for a Long Island radio station.

He performs regularly at the Brattle triangle in Harvard Square. He positions himself in front of a large metal sign so people can't sneak in back of him to watch the tricks. He also contends that the area provides an especially receptive audience, claiming, "They're more intelligent and so it's easier to fool them. They want to believe in magic."

On a good night he can make between \$50 and \$75 in contributions; Fridays and Saturday nights can mean \$100. But he imposes certain limitations on what he'll accept.

"Please," he says at the end of each show, "no corporate contributions."

Working as a street magician brings a certain amount of freedom.

"My schedule is very erratic," Sosna said. "I'll almost always perform on weekends and a couple of times during the week. A lot depends on the weather. If the weather is nice and I feel like doing it, I'll go out. But my props are susceptible to water damage so if there's more than a 50 percent chance of

rain I won't go out."

When he is not performing, Sosna practices for his act.

"Actually," he said half seriously, "I'm a very boring person. I'll just sit around and practice magic and juggling or hang around the magic stores and meet other magicians."

He shares his apartment in "scenic East Cambridge" as he characterizes it, with his assistant.

*"Dance and sing
Do your thing in the street.*

*The story is ah, so ah ah
ahhhhhh
Sweet."*

—Brother Blue

Brother Blue, probably the most well-known street personality in the city, does not consider himself only a performer. Blue is a storyteller and while his stories entertain, they teach, and Blue hopes, they ennoble the listeners as well.

Dressed in blue, adorned with multi-colored ribbons, balloons, streamers and embroidery, Blue looks like a giant swooping butterfly. He mimes, speaks, dances and sings a mixture of jazz, blues, gospel and scat singing.

Blue writes parables and tells stories from all over the world. He acts street corner Shakespeare (Hamlet is "Ham, a bad brother, disappointed in his mother"). His parables have names like the Beast and the Butterfly.

Blue has told stories for 72 hours straight in a local church, to focus attention on the millions of people starving in the world. A recent story of his focuses on the life of murdered South African activist Stephen Biko.

Blue has told his stories in prisons, churches, hospitals, trains, airports, and on television, radio and a record. In 1975 the Corporation for Public Broadcasting recognized him with an award for the "outstanding solo performance" on national public radio.

But fame doesn't always bring monetary rewards. Blue lives in Cambridge with his wife, Ruth Hill, who provides most of the money for their household with her work on an oral history of black women, conducted through Harvard University.

Blue is a native of Cleveland. His educational background is extensive, with an undergraduate degree from Harvard in social relations, a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Yale Drama School and a PhD from the Union Graduate School. He has

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taught storytelling classes at Harvard's Divinity School since 1975 and teaches occasionally at other area colleges and universities.

Before becoming a storyteller, Blue had planned to become a playwright. One of his plays won him the Blevins Davis Award at Yale for the best original play at the Drama School. His storytelling began almost by accident. Blue was to conduct a service at a Unitarian Church in southern Connecticut. The service was written by him and was to include a cast of dancers and musicians. The cast never quite came together and Blue performed the entire service himself. He's been storytelling all over the world ever since.

To give a small flavor of Blue, here are a few short excerpts from a lengthy talk, edited and condensed.

"I have my own kind of madness, a calling, you know? I do it for the same reason that rose bushes bloom. It's my calling . . . I pray my stories out. That's why I was born. God put me in the world to do one thing, to tell stories. Stories open blind eyes and deaf ears and make the lame dance, to remind us that we all are supposed to be like angels.

"One of my jobs as a storyteller is to awaken us to our common humanity. We live in a rainbow world. We must be concerned for all people and better than a lot of sermons and lectures is the work of art: the song, the dance, the piece of music, the story.

"I'm a walking story, the reason I go on the streets is, listen, they're hungry in the streets, everybody is saying, come on tell us a great story, give us bread, oh, something wonderful so we can make it, so we can fall in love with life."

Blue has told stories in Italy and Switzerland. He's been flown to California to tell a story for a wedding taking place in a redwood forest. Pregnant women have come up to him on the streets to tell stories to their unborn babies.

"If enough stories are told," he said, "we'll have better lives."

"We are storytelling creatures. We are born storytellers, all the human race. A baby from the time it opens its mouth and cries, it's telling stories . . . what I try to do is make my stories fit the world . . . on the street there are people who are sad, who are troubled, who want to laugh."

When you walk by Blue, you see the people gathered around him aren't troubled anymore. They're not sad. They're entranced.

And they're usually laugh-