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 Grausa

Photos: Ted Duffy

5 p.m. Another long, hot day ends at the MBTA station, humidity sizzles to the recognition of workers, car payments, city living. And then, floating from the middle of the platform, comes a baroque whirr, the trills gracingfully curling around deliberate 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: minstrels, storytellers, sword swallowers, 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 become 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 is 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. Articulate, which schedules performances, said there is a long waiting list to play under the green awning.

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

Preston Grausa 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 own 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," the association chairman has told his usual spot on Boston Common near the Park Street MBTA stop. For many people, Baird's voice, not croakily or robins, heralds spring. Some people have even taken to calling him the Robin of Boston.

Small, elfin, 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-rattling mass.

"You're in downtown Boston," he manages 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 his license: a group of Boston policemen who auditioned him to see if he really was a street singer. Baird began the audition with a classic 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 zestiest 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 I drank gave me a potato as payment. I've been given poems, sketches. Once a man cried at one of my songs and gave me $80. 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 have him more suited to the world of corporate regularity than to the freedom andanhodoxy of living as an itinerant musician.

He regularly performs in the streets and on college campuses across the country — once playing by request in the grand foyer of the Kennedy Arts 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, you make a habit of mashing at Faneuil Hall, market. Don't be surprised if one day a "koozy blonde" dapes 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 Fusillo and Sally Deer.

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

Preston Grausa is a freelance writer living in Cambridge.
Left, Stephen Baird, who led the campaign to legalize street performing in Boston. At top, Peter Scena 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 Sozna’s magic in Cambridge.

Street from page 8

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 “moody” 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 Propostition” 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 Sal
tly 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 en-
thusiasm to be so close up to people; 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 re-
luctance 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 in-
come 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
catters 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
vibravhone, 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 vibra-
phone. A gentle cascade of
notes comes from the instru-
ment to page 14
proudly, "will you open the envelope and tell me what's inside."

The victim opens the envelope. He is smiling. It is empty.

Sosna villagers for a moment, grabs the envelope, puts 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," said Sosna. "You're lucky that I care very much 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 hand-cuffed, put in a sack and locked into a large wooden box. A curtain is pulled up and almost instantaneously the assistant is standing outside the box. Sosna is in the box, hand-cuffed and in a sack.

"I started performing on the streets out of necessity," explained Sosna. "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 performed regularly at the Baret 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. "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 $20 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 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 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 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
ahhhhh
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 enable the listeners as well.

Dressed in blue, adorned with multi-colored ribbons, balloons, streamers and embroidery, Blue looks like a giant swooping butterfly. He mimics, 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 television.

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...