Street Singers: A Tale of Two Cities

By Sharon Barron

'Tis la, it's May. You may hear the songs of dissonant singers as you walk down a street peddler. How quaint these troubadours and craftsmen are. How exciting they can be.

Cambridge Mayor Barbara Ackerman is afraid of the ice cream man ("Where do they come in...with all the competition?") Merchants are frightened for their own profit. Police don't like the carts blocking sidewalks, and they don't like what they look upon as begging from street singers.

On the other hand, street singers and peddlers don't like getting arrested.

Outdated city ordinances in both Boston and Cambridge have added to the confusion and mutual mistrust. In New York and San Francisco two years ago there were court battles over the legalization of street singers and peddlers. In Boston it took only days.

Police regulations that date back to the 1920s are a mass of contradictory qualifications for licensing of street musicians. Street singing had to be the sole support of a prospective license, but in the course of his street singing he was forbidden to make an appeal for money. Do it for a living. Don't ask for money, they were told. For anyone thinking he could find his way around these ambiguities, an ordinance was added that forbade street singing between Columbus Avenue and Beacon Street all the way out to the city limits.

Not to be convinced by the city, Cambridge made its own rules for peddlers and singers. They were not allowed within fifteen blocks of Harvard Square. And, lest they retreat indoors, an ordinance forbade the use of percussion or brass instruments in a bar. Some of the laws date back to the days when people went from house to house with their goods for sale. One ordinance reflecting this period requires a peddler to move his cart 200 yards every five minutes. (In sidewalk traffic you're lucky if you can move your body 200 yards in five minutes.)

Another reflection of those times is a police rule that says "A licensed female intimate musician cannot perform unless accompanied by an adult licensed male intimate musician."

The Salvation Army band played on. They were not subject to the Music in the Public Streets ordinances. They're protected by the First Amendment. Unfortunately for street musicians the law protects Hare Krishna singers and dancers, who have become known for their unwavering and often unwelcome attentions to pedestrians. The problem is Not that it's hard to differentiate between the usually docile street singer and the evangelistic leaflet distributor, but troubadours feel Hare Krishna people have scared the audience away from the art of street singing. When a singer is successful enough to attract a crowd, he sometimes attracts the attention of a police officer too. The intimate mood of live performance is removed from the audience, the audience is removed from the singer, and the singer is removed from the street. In the final act of these little dramas, the artist is removed from his money. Ruth Anna, a former school teacher, has been arrested twice while...
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singing, and charged with begging alms. She filed suit in court, "and that same day in the same courtroom they were fining prostitutes $10," she said.

State Rep. John Fiore, who has been a street singer for more than three years, holds license number three for intertiters musicians ("I don’t know who one and two are, but I’m still looking," he said.) When asked how his colleagues' arrests he decided it was time to start the legal action that would make his craft legal in Boston.

"I didn’t expect to street sing again for a year," he said. "I was really revved up for the last three months." Bierd is a guy with a former chemical engineering major at Northeastern University, who carries 85 pounds worth of instruments with him every day: two guitars, an autoharp, assorted percussion instruments, and a dulcimer tuned to five original American instruments — from the Appalachians. He weighs 100 pounds.

He wears a grey felt hat with two distinctive tassels on the side, a three-inch hole in the top, and a silver badge that identifies him as a licensed street singer.

"I was a street singer," he says, "and I got my license in the fall." Bierd used to sing on the streets, but felt constrained by the law, so he decided to leave the city and start singing in his apartment. When he sits with his tambourine on his right foot, red and blue keno in his mouth, and holds a guitar you see why people react warmly to him. And he winks at women while he sings.

In a letter to Mayor Kevin White last month Bierd related some of his experiences:

"In Boulder, Colorado ... two people listened to me singing. One asked me if this was how they had made their living. I nodded yes, for I was still singing. The man then proceeded to turn his pockets inside out while crying. He told me it was all the money he had. After he left, I discovered he had put over sixty dollars in my hat."

"In Boston, three young boys just finishing a little league game stopped to listen. I sang some children's songs to them. They then gathered together and discovered they had only twenty-three cents between them. They gave it all to me."

"Gentle and frail as he may look, you really believe he’s going out to fight city hall. Unfortunately for the glory of war the battle never came off. Two letters to the mayor complaining about treatment of street singers, and a few telephone calls to Assistant Corporation Counsel John Fiore did the trick.

Fiore gets a restraining order that would prevent further arrests of street singers because, he said, "I have yet to find anyone who’s complained about intertiters musicians. Bagging or occupying for sale is against the law, but I’ve found no street musicians blatantly ignoring that rule or assigning the public in any way. The police are very nice guys who just get confused when they’re confronted with these situations where they think musicians are bagging for money. They’re not out to harass them."

To avoid getting arrested, musicians and peddlers learn the police boats. Dominic Palma sells his own handcrafted ceramics in Holyoke Center, Cambridge. "You keep track of the times police come around," he said. "They used to come at 2:30 and 3:00 a.m. So you learned to discontinue around those times for a while. You wait until the police leave and come back again.

"What’s harder to keep merchants from calling the police, for, with peddlers you’re talking not about sweat strains of guitar and folk-song, but about economic competition."

"The last street John Fiore remembers was of a Vietnam veteran who set up a hotdog cart in front of a building — and directly across the street from a delicatessen. Disgusted at their ingredients and, probably unfairly, as the U.S. Department of Health lawyers telling people hot dogs are, they sold well the day the vetus set up his cart. They sold as well as a matter of fact, that the deli owner called the police and had the competition removed."

"Because of their small waistlines they could display their wares and sell without impeding traffic or annoying the eye of businessmen who have to pay high rates for their selling space. Others are lucky enough to find stores where the owners don’t mind their selling out front. Peddlers say the increased pedestrian traffic helps legitimate stores’ retail. When the stores’ owners agree, everything’s fine. One artist who sells oil paintings on Newbury Street said that gallery owners like his presence, probably, because he feels, because he feels, because he feels.

"One in a hundred people will stop," he said. "And one in a thousand will buy. And I only charge $5.00 for a painting." Dominick Palma’s ceramics business is now lucrative. He said, that though the competition among peddlers has increased.

"Two and a half years ago you could maybe six people selling in Holyoke Center. Now on a Friday or Saturday there are a minimum of thirty. It causes a lot of congestion, but the profits have increased too.

"Two and a half years ago I earned just enough to stay alive. Now if I only sell three days a week for four or five hours each day I easily earn $100 a week. I decided a long time ago that when I was earning a good strength living to live as well as the guy who was trying to collect taxes from me I’ll start paying them. So now I pay taxes."

Street singer eats, on a holiday when people are around, and feeling generous, up to $300 in about five hours. But $100 is average take for a week when the weather and season are off.

Craftsmen and intertiters musicians spend comparatively little time performing or selling to earn living. When not on the street the singers just show up on the Commons to give. They’re music students or teachers, and, for the most part, they’re the real hams of the music world. They’re on the grass and wait, confident that they have a sufficient number of admirers who will keep them alive."

"Some musicians have to play the has," Ruth Anna said. "An introverted person couldn’t dress like we do, and probably wouldn’t want to be so close to his audience that he could watch their expressions while he performs. But if you’re giving out something positive, people’s reactions are usually positive."

Street craftsmen dislike selling next to carts whose product is mass produced or badly made. "I object to people selling things they’ve never seen purchased from a wheelbarrow," Dominic Palma said.

"Nothing hurts me more than to see some crummy supermarket with little plastic trinkets, ballons and feathers. The junk carts — junk food and junk merchandise — hand out the people whose hand-crafted things are of special value."

"And when anything gets too crowded the police get annoyed and end up checking everybody out. They change the atmosphere."

Palma said he worries about the mass produced bureaucratic junk that’s already on the streets. He is trying to interest the craftsmen of Cambridge into a guild that will be called the Cambridge Craftspeople Association. If he succeeds, this guild will cooperate with Boston 200 in a program to handcraft crafts to the state, demonstrating their art and selling handcrafted goods. The guild will organize a monthly calendar of peddlers, situating two or three craftsmen per block in the Harvard Square Holyoke Center area. To contact the guild call 23 0000.

As for peddlers, singers, and the law, the future looks bright. Four months ago Mayor Ackerman asked the Cambridge city council to update the ancient ordinances.

"My selling is pre-peddlery, but anti-peddlery," she said. "I’m not assuming we can solve this quickly. There will always be many more craftsmen than spaces, and businesses can be expected to make a fuss. But to the extent the peddlers do bring more people to the business area, and I’m all for them."

From Boston, John Fiore said. "I can predict a lot of support for the street singers and peddlers if they can agree on locations. As long as a leather craftsman has his leather in front of his shop, we’ll have no trouble handling it."