

The Boston Phoenix

Vol. 11/No. 19/ Three Sections/ 100 Pages

Boston's Weekly

May 8, 1973 25 Cents

THE BOSTON PHOENIX, MAY 8, 1973

PAGE FIVE



Pied Pipers of the Common, Ruth Anna and Steve Beard

Ken Haber photo

Street Singers: A Tale of Two Cities

By Sharon Basco

Try it, it's May. You may hear the songs of itinerant singers as you buy from a street peddler. How pleasant these troubadours and craftsmen are. How frightening they can be.

Cambridge Mayor Barbara Ackerman is afraid for the ice cream man ("Where do they come in . . . with all the competition?") Merchants are frightened for their own profits. 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Outdated city ordinances in both Boston and Cambridge have added to the confusion and mutual mistrust.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 and three year long court battles have resulted in the legalization of the street singer and peddler. In Boston it took only days.

Police regulations that date back to the 1830s are a mass of contradictory qualifications for licensing of street musicians. Street singing had to be the sole support of a prospective licensee, 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 outdone 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 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 itinerant musician cannot perform unless accompanied by an adult licensed male itinerant 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. Then 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



Street singer Ralph Graham joins in wherever music's being made

[Please turn to page 20]

Singers

(Continued from page 5)

singing, and charged with begging alone. She was fined \$50 in court, "and that same day in the same courtroom they were fining prostitutes \$10," she said.

Stephen Beard who has been a street singer for more than three years, holds license number three for itinerant musicians ("I don't know who one and two are, but I'm still looking," he said.) When he heard about 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 battle."

Beard is a wiry guy, 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 (one of few original American instruments — from the Appalachians). He weighs 100 pounds.

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

Steven Beard is the kind of guy who gets hit in the head with a dollar stuck on a fork, dropped by an appreciative listener from her third floor Charles Street apartment. When he sits with his tambourine on his right foot, red and blue kazoos 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 Beard related some of his experiences:

"In Boulder, Colorado, . . . two people listened to me singing. One asked me if this was how I made my 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 Beard when he talks about 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 Fiske did the trick.

Fiske got a restraining order that would prevent further arrests of street singers because, he said, "I have yet to find anyone who's complained about itinerant musicians. Begging or canvassing for alms is against the law, but I've found no street musicians blatantly ignoring that rule or annoying 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 begging for money. They're not out to hassle them."

To avoid getting arrested, musicians



Street singer Ruth Anna

and peddlers learn the police beats. 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 12:30 and 2:30 p.m. So you learned to disappear around those times for a while. You wait until the police leave and come back again."

What's harder is to keep merchants from

calling the police, for, with peddlers you're talking not about sweet strains of guitar and folk-song, but about economic competition.

The last arrest John Fiske remembers was of a Vietnam veteran who set up a hotdog cart in front of Boston University — and directly across the street from a delicatessen. Disgusting as their ingredients sound, and unhealthy as the U.S. Department of Health keeps telling people hot dogs are, they sold well the day the veteran set up his cart. They sold so well as a matter of fact, that the delicatessen owner called the police and had the competition removed.

Some craftsmen find private alleys where they can display their wares and sell without impeding traffic or arousing the ire 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, he feels, because he offers color but little competition.

"One in a hundred people will stop," he said. "And one in a thousand will buy. And I only charge \$2.50 a painting."

Dominic Palma's ceramics business is more lucrative. He said, though, that the competition among peddlers has increased.

"Two and a half years ago you got maybe six people out 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 enough living to live as well as the guy who was trying to collect taxes from me I'd start paying them. So now I pay taxes."

Street singers earn, on a holiday when people are out, and feeling generous, up to \$100 in about five hours. But \$100 is average take for a week when the weather and season are off.

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

"Street musicians have to play the ham," 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 where the product is mass produced or badly made. "I object to people selling things they've imported or purchased from a wholesaler," Dominic Palma said. "Nothing hurts me more than to see some crummy little stand overflowing with little plastic trinkets, ballpens and leathers. The junk carts — junk food and junk merchandise — crowd out the people whose hand-crafted things are of special value."

"And when everything gets too crowded the police get annoyed and end up chinking everybody out. They cheapen the atmosphere."

Palma said he worries about the mass produced biocentennial junk that's already on the streets. He hopes to organize the craftsmen of Cambridge into a guild that



Pretzel peddler getting kicked out of Holyoke Center by Harvard police.

will be called the Cambridge Craftspeople Association. If he succeeds, this guild will cooperate with Boston 260 in a program that will send craftsmen to towns across the state, demonstrating their art and selling handcrafted goods. The guild will also organize a rotating schedule of peddlers, siting two or three craftsmen per block in the Harvard Square-Holyoke Center area. To contact him for information about the guild call 321-0006.

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 feeling is pro-peddler, but anti-integration," she said. "I'm not assuming we can solve this quickly. There will always be many more craftsmen than spaces, and businessmen can be expected

to make a fuss. But to an extent the peddlers do bring more people to the business area, and I'm all for them."

From Boston, John Fiske 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 stays away from storefronts of leathershops we'll have no trouble handling it."