

LISTEN TO THOSE CITY SIDEWALKS

Ernie plays real good for a living

by Charles Dawe

What a hot, noisy, scrimmaging pain it all is. You're downtown and inside, wading in the randy mass, stifling in your down parka (don't tell me that all those duck feathers breathe), not a breath to be had, not one Presto Hot Dogger left to buy for your crapulous uncle in Worcester, and you definitely weren't bargaining for all these cut-rate and exposed nerves. This is the worst. Christmas shopping. Where each hour is absolutely . . . Last Minute.

OK, somehow you stumble off the escalators of sitting ducks and push your way outside, where your nose begins to sting and the mob's no thinner. The scale is just grander. Out here they must be parachuting from the sky. This is some kind of major offensive. Or worse, a mass-panic retreat. Thousands of shoppers with search lights on them, caught in the glare of commerce, careening off each other, and "random" is the only word for . . .

For everyone but Ernie Sanders. There he is, every day and night during the Christmas rush, and throughout the year too, standing sightless and serene along the side of Gilchrist's on Winter St. And you think *you're* a victim of sensory overload. Ernie is blind — his other senses are compensating all the time — and he's been standing downtown for twenty-five years. Twenty-five years of hearing and smelling and feeling and, when some particularly noxious gas insinuates itself, tasting it all. He's taken it all in, and every now and then he'll give back something of his own. He'll sing a

simple and most always sad song in his sweet Georgian tenor, with a gentleness wholly out of place in this bazaar, except for right where he stands and where his regulars also gently drop coins into the cup hanging from the handle of his guitar. And they'll gently pet Lady Bug, Ernie's equally serene Great Pyrenees.

But these people are the exceptions. Almost everyone is caught in the torrent that rushes past Ernie. Many of them walk straight into him or overturn his can. They step up on the curb, he says, "and it seems like they all just draw an invisible line down the sidewalk. And they'll walk right over anything on that line." It must take the blind to see the invisible, since they're the ones who feel its effects.

Sanders stands between the side and main current, joining those who are coming out of the Washington MBTA and those going down to the Park Street stop. The display windows of each of the stores heaped on Winter St. are packed full of wares. At Baker's there are Qualicraft shoes of every design. Across the street are greeting cards for all occasions and in every language imaginable. There are scads of fire-sale diamonds and in Albert's Primrose Shop there is a swarm of hosiery. Fish nets and Danskins and Crepe Opaque panty hose, and for those who are moving up as well as right along, Business Sheer Seamless.

Gilchrist's itself has the least frantic display. Ernie stands be-

tween two windows which are not stuffed full, but artily adorned with sweaters, draped coyly with overcoats, slung with purses. An obligatory Boston fern or two makes it all organic. There are a couple of manikins to each side of Ernie, a pair of headless floating dolls. Botticelli himself couldn't have created a more ethereal pair. Their capes flow off them with utter grace . . .

And more! Above Ernie and the *anges a la mode* is the very empyrean. The Gilchrist mural that runs clear around the building over the windows: how primitivist and yet, how ani-

mated! *Homages a Rousseau* and Sgt. Pepper. There is a parade of identical waves at the point of breaking, equally very blue and very white. It's a series of voluptuous paisleys, and the colors are vibrant as any woodcut of Hokusai's. This is the firmament of Winter St., replete with white caps and smaller swells and a roseate background. And above the marshmallow breakers are flamingoes, hot pink with purple wings, enormous, Mesozoic dragons. They're joined by a cuddly elephant bobbing in the waves. Over to the left, near the Qualicraft shoestore, is a flying fish, a

flying rubber raft really, or maybe a fish-blimp, I don't know, which has riding it a very Monty Python-like Victorian gentleman. To the far right, at the corner of Washington Street is a slice — no! a flotilla! — of strawberry cheesecake, hovering like cumulus over the waves. Could Magritte himself have dared . . . ?

I wonder if Ernie knows about this mural. He certainly has never seen it, or the flocks of semiprecious jewels, or those Opaque Crepes at the hosiery across the way. But his other senses are in fine running order. "I don't hear better than anyone else," he

says, "I just comprehend more." What he means is that he knows when a new edition of the paper has come out because he can smell the fresh newsprint as it passes by under someone's arm. He can also tell what the specials are at the coffee shop across the street. And when the weather's warm, he'll walk with Lady Bug down toward the Common, identifying each store by the specific aroma that wafts out its open door.

Can you smell the fruits at the stand over there and the horse-shit up at the corner? "If the wind's right, I can smell any-
Continued on page 12

ERNIE

Continued from page 10
thing around here."

But of course it's Ernie's sense of hearing that performs the most prodigious feats. Stand blindfolded there for a while and you'll probably just catch snatches of passing conversation. "The way it happens every . . ." and "OK, what if he did invite . . ." But Ernie hears the most muted conspiracies. Once a couple of fellows were standing yards away from him. Whispering, mind you. They were planning to stick up a bank the next day. They had already stolen a car for the purpose. "And the next day it was all over the papers."



Another time he overheard two girls who had just spotted a well-heeled dame approaching them. "She must have been

looking prosperous enough, because I heard the one turn to the other and say, you know, real close, 'Let's get this one's bag.' But the other said under her breath that there wasn't hardly enough traffic on the sidewalk, and they should move on over to Washington."

Lover's squabbles, *pianissimo* and otherwise? "All the time," he smiles.

But Ernie's attuned to more than furtive exchanges. When he says he comprehends more, he means that all those noises we take for granted clue him in on details that would astonish us. He insists he can tell how big a bag is and how full. "Like the one that just passed by," he goes on. "It's a medium-size and it's only about half-full. I can hear that something's loose inside and rattlin' around." And damned if the man wasn't right.

A guy with an ear for bags must have a ball during the

Christmas shopping spree. But all year long, bags speak louder than words. Say some bag passes by making a stiff, heavy paper sound. Ernie knows that it's probably groceries. A tissue rustle gives away cut flowers. And a swish, like plastic blowing out of a car window? Someone's just picked up a pressed suit at the cleaners.

But the sound supreme, the one that keeps up the most consistent clatter, that betrays its wearer every time, is . . . footwear. The platforms knock about. The Oxfords are constantly scuffling. Vibram soles make hardly a sound at all, except for an occasional slurp. And spiked heels — so *passee* — are the most unmistakable of all. They sound like a knife puncturing the airseal on a bottle of Nestle's Instant.

The shoes keep up a steady two-beat that varies from abrasive to whisking, from fast to

slow. It all tells Ernie about the age and bearing and maybe even the self-regard of the pedestrians on their way.

As for background, there are car brakes and gurgling linkage and the deep rumblings of huge construction vehicles. They set off brief throbbings in the chest. Sometimes Ernie will hear a far off subway, rumbling like a gutter ball on Lane 42. But usually

he just feels it vibrating in the sidewalk, just as he can feel the airhammers over at the Marsh site. Add jingling change (invariably in a well-cut pocket the shoes of which are squeaking new), and girders clanking and the shrill police whistles and the wind slicing through and . . .

And behind it all, steady as its clientele, is the strange emission from the door of Dee's Jewelry Store. There must be a crimp or something in the hinges because every time the damed thing closes there's this squirt, this

creepy EEEK!, like a mallard taken in the act of . . . or maybe it's just some plaintive loon.

Throughout the barrage, Ernie stands without so much as a knit cap to dampen the noise. He doesn't care how ferocious the wind gets, he's never worn a hat in his life. "Makes everything sound like it's in a barrel." The racket is quite enough without distorting and amplifying it.

So he stands there hatless. Ernie has a good, if thinning, head of hair, topped by a wind-swept pompadour. Every so often he'll run the three fingers of his right hand back through his hair, and it'll stand up even more prominently. As he talks, he'll tip his face slightly upward toward Abbot and Rocco's Hair Styling Salon on the third floor across the street.

He has thick fingers and he holds his Kools like his pick, between his thumb and the stub of

Continued on page 60

Continued from page 12

his forefinger. By the time the cigarette burns out, he's smoked it down into the filter, which crumbles from the strange way he holds it.

The man dresses in a plaid cloth overcoat and, more often than not, wears one of those print polyester shirts — the kind with the cream background under a profusion of unidentifiable pepper-like buds and berries. He buttons it right to his neck.

Now about those fingers. They were blown off in the same accident in which he lost his eyesight. He was four at the time. One day he's playing in the coalbin out behind his home in Cedartown, Georgia. He brings in a couple pieces of the stuff and puts them on the hearth. He's playing with the coal and it's blackening his face, his hands and his arms, in some cruel premonitory way. He starts

pushing the pieces into the fire with the poker (he uses his cigarette to show me how). There's an explosion and that's it. There had been a dynamite cap in the goddam stuff.

"My left eye splattered like a grape." Fingers on his right hand were blown off and the little finger that remained "isn't much

good for anything either". His mother rushes in and sees her child, sooty and bleeding and terrified. She has to carry him half a mile to his grandmother's. There's no car there. She hurries on a second half mile with this howling mess until she finds a car. Then she drives him across the county to a hospital.

Ernie retained about 50 percent vision in his right eye until it, too, went dark when he was 10. Now he can "just about tell daylight from dark, but I won't bother to turn on a light in a dark room." He has an artificial left eye that has caused him no end of fun over the years. Every now and then a skeptic will take a look at it and say, "Hey, man, you aren't blind. That left eye's good." His whole face brightens up as he tells me this. "And I'll just pull the thing out right there and offer it to them. Those kids, they take off like Moody's Goose."

Once some bleeding heart lipped how she was just dying to donate one of her eyes to Ernie. So out pops the glass eye and he offers it to her, "to see if she'd make good and trade on the spot."

So he's standing capless, gloveless, sunglassless, with one eye looking pretty normal and the other just flat, and both squinting up at Abbot and Rocco's. A cigarette is burning down much too close to the filter,

which can't do him much good since he has emphysema on top of everything else. You hear the effects of that after he finishes singing a song. He'll begin hacking away and that's really about the only time you see Ernie move. The overwhelming visual impression you get of the man is that he appears to stand so still all day long. That entire Byzantine marketplace raging around him, and him standing on his feet for six, seven hours a day (the arthritis in his knees can get fierce, but he still won't bring a campstool to sit on because then he'll be treading on a few more invisible lines), and I tell you, the manikins behind him in Gilchrist's aren't any more immobile than Ernie.

In fact only Lady Bug fits into this picture of patience. The Great Pyrenees sits next to Ernie, alert and mannerly despite the impulse to sniff a passing crotch or two.

She's got to be about the best selling point Ernie has. Everyone's always stopping to pet her, especially young women. "I'm thinking of wearing that harness for a while," he whispers, as the fifth girl to stop in fifteen minutes has fondled Lady Bug. (Someone asked him once how he can tell the good-lookers from the rest. "I told him I use Braille," he says, and do I see him start to rock ever so slightly on his heels?)

Everyone makes up to Lady Bug. People will stroke her without breaking their stride and without giving Ernie anything at all. Others will furtively drop a coin in his can and then give all their attention to the dog as if they're paying for the privilege of petting such a shaggy creature.

An old couple totters by, wraiths really, dressed impeccably. They don't say a thing. The old man can't tear himself away from Lady Bug. He strokes her with his long bony fingers for a couple of silent minutes. Then they continue on their way with small, satisfied smiles. They haven't given Ernie anything, but you have to believe that they were distracted by this very fetching sheepdog.

You have to believe, because according to Ernie, it's people like these, slightly down at the heels, who are the most generous with money. I had been noticing that women, and especially those in their twenties and fifties (those who could have been his daughters or wife), seemed to give most frequently. I asked him about that but he turned the remark around to what was more important. He said, "It's the working people who keep me from starving. Yeah, it's the poor who feed me. If you don't have it, you give it. The ones who've got it, they keep it. They're greedy."

His take has been worse in the past few years, what with inflation and unemployment. His best days are still the ones after holidays, when shoppers are drawn downtown by the special sales. His worst day is always Tuesday. Monday and Wednesday nights the stores are open, and people just don't do much buying in between. As for an average day's wage, "there's no

such thing. Everything depends on the weather." If it's too hot or cold, people either won't put their hands in their pockets, or won't take them out.

But he's quite sure about the wealthy. They can't cough up a dime. Are they uncomfortable taking money out of their pockets right there on the street, where anyone can see? They must burst forth from vaults, armed in credit, declaring that business shall be transacted inside. And thou shalt give charity in private, preferably by check. For what's wealth anyway but the knack of holding on to the stuff? The well-to-do passers by who aren't disgusted when they see Ernie feel maybe a helpless pang. They pick up their pace. And they don't feel guilt as much as some incoherent funk.

But working stiffs, they know that what money they have will disappear sooner or later. And here as well as there. Those of them who give to Ernie probably don't deliberate any more than do the rich when they hold back. For the non-upwardly-mobile, Ernie is a fixture, he represents their own being "out of step" with the pace of sidewalk traffic. The wealthy are on their way, they have things to accomplish. But nothing's so pressing on the minds of the poor that they can't afford to take notice.

Of course not everyone simply gives or ignores Ernie. He is occasionally hassled by kids who steal his change. The small thieves start petting Lady Bug and pretend to knock the can off the guitar accidentally. The coins scatter over the sidewalk and the kids take off with it.

This doesn't happen often, but then there are the "crackpots" and "drunks" and all the others who figure that Ernie is a perfectly captive audience. They "stuff my ear" mercilessly. And don't even start him on moralists who bother him about the dog. "She can be up to her nose in water some hot day, but someone is going to come along and complain that I don't give her any."

What about the hookers, Ernie? They're supposed to be fanning out from the Combat Zone these days. Do you have to deal with them? "No, they don't come around here much." And then, deadpan: "Guess they figure I'm too easy to rape." But there is competition, and Ernie figures it does get keener around

now, what with the Salvation Army bands up the street, and the St. Nicks clanging their cowbells down it. And don't forget the wheelchair b-ballers setting picks at every corner. But the Christmas spirit picks up too. No, what worries Ernie the most is the weather. The wind is his evil genius. "It can get to be a wind-tunnel down here. One day, I remember it was blowing up from the Common fierce, so I went around the corner to Washington. And it was whippin' up that street, too. The wind was blowing two ways at once."

Still he's out there five or six days a week unless there's a downpour or if it's colder than ten degrees. I asked him how he kept warm when it was cold. "I don't." Well, which parts of you get the coldest? "All the parts. Sometimes my toes get so numb I'm not sure I own 'em any more." He says that since he doesn't wear a hat, the cold mist will freeze around his head like a skullcap. And won't begin to melt until he's home for the night. If it gets too cold he'll

Continued from page 60

walk over to Liggett's for a cup of coffee. And when it's too hot . . . well, nothing in Boston compares to Phoenix when it was 120 degrees, yeah, it broiled, and he could smell the paint scorching off his guitar.

He may be weather-beaten and noise-drenched, but at least the man can hear the sound of his own voice. It's something special, in speech as well as song. There's a lot more of Georgia in his singing voice, but the signs are there when he's just conversing. It's not really a drawl, but in it you can hear some of those Middle English inflections that have been preserved in Southern dialect. Like the way he thanks someone who gives him a coin. Every time he hears a ring in his cup, he turns his head toward it and says, "Thankyih." It's one word that rises slightly in pitch to a half-breath of a "yih." The "you" is more a susurrant than a syllable, like those just audible "e's" in Chaucer. "Springe," "roote," "seeke."

Ernie's voice is soft and moves at a good clip. It's the kind of speech that bats the breeze. Friendly, but undemonstrative. You hear it when you lay around campfires, or when you're out fishing.

His singing is a lot more defined. Ernie's a tenor. He has a winsome voice, limited in range but very gentle. It sways within its octave. He's in no hurry; he doesn't warble or yelp and he doesn't hold notes for effect. His only peculiarity is that he diphthongs most every vowel. "Arms" stretch into "airms" and "blue" thins into something a little greener, like "bleuyu."

He sings slow songs, songs fit to walk by and to brood over. They're songs to soothe the weary. Most of them deal with loss, like "Overlooked an Orchid." A few, like Red Foley's "Satisfied Mind," look ahead to rest. They all have simple chords. He has his one groove that he sticks in, where the pace is to his liking. The ballads focus on the heretofore and the what's-to-be; they're songs with a bit of melancholy and a lot of yearning.

Ernie began to play the guitar in Georgia when he was fourteen. He left home at eighteen. (He gets back once a year for a family reunion. Incidentally, one of his younger brothers is Doug Sanders, the golf pro.) After leaving Cedartown, he traveled through some of the sleepest towns in the South, waiting around for market days, when there'd be some life in the streets. Then he went up North and criss-crossed the whole country. "I've played in every big city in the country a dozen times over." He picked up songs as he went along, and he reckons he's forgotten more now than he can still sing, or ever learn again. He came to Boston nearly thirty years ago, left, and then came back to marry Pat. She stopped by to see Ernie one morning. She had just gotten out of the hospital where she'd had minor surgery and had come downtown for some air. And wouldn't you know it, the woman has a pair of the biggest and clearest blue-gray eyes I ever hope to see.

They have four children and two of them still live at home. Pat doesn't work and Ernie claims that he receives no disability assistance from any government whatsoever and that he alone has raised this family, wholly from his earnings on Winter street.

I asked him once what he would buy if he were to wake up

tomorrow a rich man. A boat, he said. He loves to go salt-water fishing. Another time I asked what he most regretted about being blind. He answered, again with no hesitation, that he couldn't drive a car. Where would you drive it? "Wherever other people do. Wherever I had to go. The store. I just hate to rely on people to get me places." Ernie doesn't say he wants sight in order to see anything, to visit the Taj Mahal or simply know what his wife's face looks like. He just wants to move under his own power.

He adds that, were he sighted, he probably would not be a musician. It makes sense. His sad and slow songs, moving deliberately with their tentative phrasing, express the very pedestrian life he'd like to overcome.

Why are all his songs sad? He evades the question, saying that most country and western is sad, that down South they're called "heart songs." But there's something else besides sadness in his singing. The lyrics may be sad but the rendering is gentle and innocent. The pace is so deliberate, it reminds you of a child mastering his first few steps. There's a great stress on rhythm, on making the meter *even*, on getting the words right.

The songs are sad but not maudlin. It's Ernie's delivery that balances the sad lyrics. The rendition itself says, no matter how resigned and experienced the singer grows, I am still innocent.

Ernie says it's important for him not to come to work wearing his heart on his sleeve. So instead he dresses it in a heart song.

With the blindness, arthritis, emphysema and immobility absorbed by his songs, his speech is free to move. It's quick and amiable, and enables him to make things around him move. "The crackpots come up and ask me my name. I tell them I don't have one. They take off." As for boozers, one began slobbering over Ernie, and was promptly dispatched. All Ernie said was, "Yeah, friend, that's right. That's right. You've got your antifreeze for the winter." The wino seemed satisfied, smiled like he was just cited by the Clean Plate Club, and moved on.

No representative of the management ever got rid of obnoxious drunks as swiftly and considerately. "Yeah," Ernie said, "you almost have to be a

diplomat in my position. You have to treat everyone like an individual." Of course, that's exactly it! Ernie's a diplomat.

He's caught in the middle of a dangerous situation. He can't move, much as he'd like to. He must camouflage his disadvantages and cultivate a talent for blandishments.

Diplomacy calls for intuition, patience, for an ability to win concessions while making certain that no one loses face. Ernie possesses all these qualities. And he especially possesses that which diplomats need most — a genius for spontaneous reaction. He'll be singing a song and someone will drop a coin in his can, and quick! he'll turn toward the can and say, "thankyih" softly and then quick! he's picked up the song again. The man simply does not miss a beat.

Everything in the world is passing by and he's the one who counts it all. He's a master of four senses because he's lacking the fifth. And a sixth sense that's governed by mood and the atonal composition of a hundred moods. The sense that makes a diplomat. People surge past Ernie, hassle him, pet his dog, give him a quarter, and then sweep back into the irresistible current. Ernie stands on the bank, listens to the river rush by and once in a while the tip of his fishing rod jiggles a bit, it's a bite! He nods to the tip, thank-yih, and the river starts rushing on again. ○