



The Musical Underground

Tim

Photos by Shinya Aizawa

The “Underground” in San Francisco has a thriving music scene. Who are these performers and why do they do it? *etc. magazine’s* Julie Leadbetter answers those questions and more...

Nathan K knows what his life’s about. He plays Bach cello suites, and only Bach cello suites, to thousands of people each day, then quietly sleeps in Golden Gate Park each night. While some passers-by may question his lifestyle, Nathan K is confident that he has discovered the best way to live in San Francisco. “People come up to me and say, ‘You’re a healthy looking young man, what are you doing here? Why aren’t you in Silicon Valley?’ His response is simple and direct. “That’s not what my life’s about.”

Nathan K is one of many performers whose music fills the passageways and echoes in the stairwells of the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit System. A peculiar brand of sub-street musician, their reasons for joining the musical underground are as numerous as there are riders on the train. For some, it’s the love of music; for others, it’s to make enough money to buy food; and for all of them, it’s the promise of an experience unlike anything else that compels them to bring their lyre to the underworld.

Elijah Crossmaker is a handsome, angelic man with dark hair and a beard. He has the presence of a freedom-loving, trouble-making professor with a deep enchanting voice, tweed jacket, buttoned vest, and, on this morning, a Vietnamese peasants’ hat given to him by his daughter. He descends into the 16th Street station at 7:30 a.m. on the way to job number one, delivering flowers for a BART station florist. In his arms he carries America’s oldest instrument, a beautiful

fully worn Appalachian Mountain dulcimer, all tuned up for job #number two which is playing music to the passers-by in the Civic Center north passage. He claims he’s musically illiterate. “You know those people who know the difference between the C and the G and those little bubbles and flags on the line? They’re geniuses in my book. The neat thing about the dulcimer is it means ‘sweet sound’ in Latin, so you can fake it and make people think you know a little bit.”

Like many of the other musicians, the lack of money may have driven Crossmaker underground but the profits alone don’t keep him there. “It kinda just gets in your blood,” he says. “I’m lucky if I make three dollars an hour, but then again, I’m a philosopher and I like to sit back and just smile at people and, you know, be happy. And I do like to smoke pot, that’s, perhaps, part of my story. I’m just your basic Good-Time Charlie.”

In the case of Nathan K, for many years he fantasized about playing in the BART stations, but it was not until he was homeless that he finally took his sheet music and his recorder underground. Living without a home and sleeping in Golden Gate Park frees him from rent expenses and allows him to live on the \$20 dollars a day he earns for food. Nathan K’s homelessness is part of the temporary experience he is looking for. “I’m not homeless 12 months a year. I come here to do this experience then I go back to the working class

world. I garden in the Midwest and I live in an apartment and have a normal life. Then I come here to live like this."

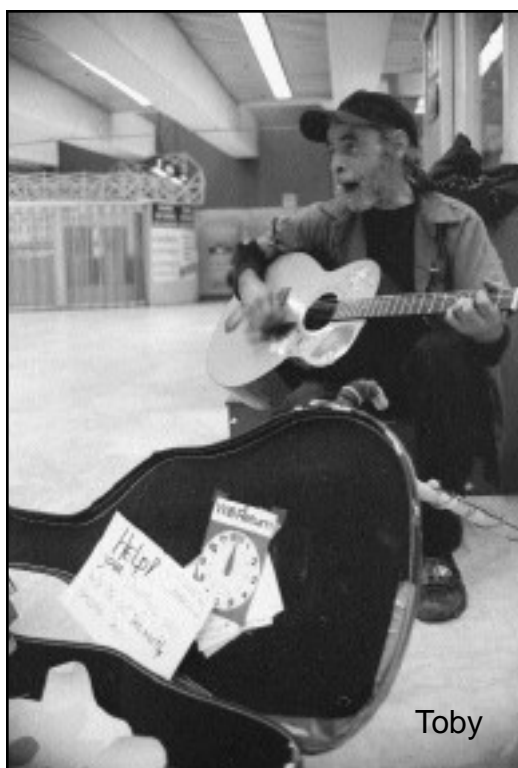
As is to be expected, the experience has its pitfalls too. Competition and territoriality are an unfortunate part of playing in BART. Certain stations are known to be better than others and usually the early bird gets the worm. Nathan K always tries for Civic Center because the acoustics are right for the reverberation of his recorder. The low ceilings and tile walls of the Grove Street tunnel help to create the blanket of sound that envelopes passers-by as they move toward the escalators. This lucrative spot is a popular one among BART musicians, however, other locations have better acoustics for different instruments like guitars or keyboards.

Formerly a stuntman for old spaghetti westerns, Richard Antill can now be found pleasing crowds with any one of his many stringed instruments, banjo, violin, guitar or twelve-string. He first began playing in BART stations during the wet, cold, and rainy winter of 1995. Going underground was a way to solve two problems created by living on the streets at that time, how to escape the inclement weather and what to do since two of his fiddles were stolen. The Sansome Street Tunnel in the Powell Street Station became the answer to his dilemmas. It was warm and dry, and it had the perfect acoustics for an old classical guitar he happened to have leftover. After 5 years of experience he knows to grab his favorite spot early. He says 6 a.m. is not too early to set up for the morning rush.

"First come, first serve," is the unwritten rule of the rails and it's usually enough to regulate who plays where. However, every once in a while a conflict arises between two competing musicians. 16th Street BART Service Agent, Wayne Bruner explains that territorial arguments are the only problem that seems to come up with the musicians. "I've never seen it become physical, but there are shouting matches." Carlos Guitarlos, a feisty, well-known blues guitarist and singer says the unwritten agreement is just plain common sense. "It's whoever gets there first. This is San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit 16th Street Station. This is not the Carlos Guitarlos Bay Area Rapid Transit 16th Street Station." Many of the performers, like Nathan K, say that these tensions make an already difficult day a little bit harder. "I just think that street musicians should show more brotherhood between each other."

Carlos Guitarlos and Jim Scoville have known each other since 1970 and their friendship demonstrates the great deal of respect that does exist among fellow BART musicians. As they sit along the wall

in the 16th Street station, Carlos teaches Jim the right way to play a Robert Johnson riff. Half of their conversation is in musical language. Jim's harmonica finishes phrases started by Carlos' guitar. They continue like this until a wave of travelers rolls by and Jim just sits back to let Carlos take the stage. A raspy and emotional "Kind-Hearted Woman" fills the station, grabbing everyone's attention. Vicente Pascua, the Chronicle newspaperman, taps his foot in time while Jim alternates between singing along and dreaming



aloud.

Jim has a vision of setting up a gig at a local San Francisco club with all the musicians of the BART underground. Whether he will be able to drag Carlos back to the clubs, is a question that remains unanswered.

Both played the club scene and studios for years, and came to perform in the BART for a change of pace. "Anywhere except a club, too many club owners," Carlos says with a chuckle. "It's like going to Europe, too many foreigners." When he finishes his song, Vicente the newspaperman claps and Carlos smiles as they exchange nods.

Talented musicians like Carlos Guitarlos are antidotes for the BART system blues. Civic Center passenger, Charlie, remarks, "It beats the silence and the other noise you can have in this sketchy little place." Yet more often than not there seems to be a passenger or a BART employee complaining about the repetition of the music or the inexperience of the performer. "Sometimes they'll play the same song over about 50 times an hour. After about the second rendition it gets a little old, even if they're good," says Greg Savage, a lieutenant with the BART Police Department. This is complaint that can't be filed against seasoned musicians such as Carlos, Jim, Richard and Nathan K. Since Carlos Guitarlos began playing on March 18, 1960 at the age of ten, he's written over 3600 tunes. Although he does confess, "I play the same 20 or 30 songs over and over, cause I like 'em."

BART riders, employees, and musicians seem to agree on one thing-whether or not they enjoy the music that accompanies their morning commute or their p.m. shift depends entirely on the person who is playing it. Dan Ziarko, a daily commuter from Rockridge to 16th Street, rolls his eyes in agony as he bluntly describes Rockridge's local duo-" an abstract modernist saxophonist with a brain damaged guitarist." On the other hand, Nathan K tells of a man who enjoys his music so much that he "customarily kneels down and prays" before him.

It is these kinds of surprising and unusual experiences that acts as the common thread among all BART musicians and perhaps is the true reason for playing in BART stations. Elijah Crossmaker reveals that the underground is a magnet for stories. Tales of thievery, love, anger-you can find them all down here. His favorite is a parable about the day that Angela Alioto campaigned in the Powell Street Station. "She came down panhandling, so to speak, for votes, and she just kinda looked down at me like I was nothing," he recounts. "You know, among the panhandlers it's protocol that if somebody's working a space, you don't interfere with their space. And there she was at the top of the ladder . . . obviously interfering with the tips I was going to get. It struck me as ironic that, as the saying goes, 'We are all equally beggars.'"

