

New York's Underground Guitarists

by Julia Crowe

In the daily dash and scramble down New York subway steps to its gum wad-speckled platforms, natives who have been stymied by plodding tourists or a bad day at work can look forward to two things: going home and hearing an interesting tune before their train arrives.

New York's underground provides a wild aural palette, from shamisen players to mariachi bands, classical violinists, folk singers, inexhaustible drummers and keyboardists mixed in with colorful hip-hop dancers, mimes, and oddities such as a ballroom dancer whose partner happens to be a life-size rag doll.

Fifteen years ago, the MTA decided to distinguish the best of its enterprising performers by instituting a program entitled "Musicians Under New York," with auditions held every May at Grand Central Station. The selected entertainers are designated by official orange and black banners bearing the MUNY logo along with the performer's name, and they are given the opportunity to perform at prime stations on a rotating schedule. Many of these "buskers" say it provides them a rare chance to connect with the more humanizing aspects of playing in a seemingly indifferent setting.



"You get to see immediately what people feel about your music," says Brazilian jazz guitarist [Carlos Munhoz](#). "Sometimes they have zero knowledge about the kind of music you are playing, so it gives me the opportunity to be a cultural ambassador."

Munhoz, who is from Rio de Janeiro, has been performing regularly as a MUNY musician for the past fifteen years. He plays exclusively in Grand Central Station and Penn Station an average of four times every two weeks while also performing weekly at The World Bar in Trump Tower.

"The MUNY program gave me the opportunity to organize myself and has served as a good reference," says Munhoz.



Munhoz's repertoire consists of Jobim and Bonfá in addition to the samba and bossa nova rhythms on his French-Canadian made Godin guitar. About ten years ago when he was performing in Grand Central Station, he had given one of his complimentary demos to a passing couple as a way of saying thank you for their donation. Three years later, the man phoned Munhoz to inform him that the incident had marked their first date, and that they had enjoyed his music so much that it came to signify that one special afternoon for them. He then asked if Munhoz would be available to play his guitar at their wedding. The invitation was gladly accepted.



"Another time, when I was set up in Penn Station," Munhoz says, "I was playing Ave Maria, Gounod's adaptation of Bach's first "Prelude from The Well-Tempered Clavier" when I'd noticed a lady standing there for a long time. She must have lost her train but still gave me a beautiful smile. A cop came along and told me to move on because the station was crowded but I pointed out my MUNY banner and explained I had been scheduled to play here.

I continued playing and right at the emotional height of the music, this woman turned around once more with the most beatific expression on her face. The policeman slapped me a



\$250 ticket for disturbing the peace. The case was later dismissed in court. Playing in a setting like this goes to show you, though, you do not always realize how much your music has an effect on people and does move them, even if what they're hearing is just for a few minutes."

No one knows this better than Bronx-born classical guitarist [Don Witter, Jr.](#) who decided to leave behind his job as a computer network troubleshooter in '94 for a shot at winning a MUNY banner.



"For years, I'd seen musicians playing and I knew that I wanted to bring guitar to regular people," says Witter.

Witter, who also serves as one of the judges on the MUNY audition panel, says, "We don't have too many guitarists. You really have to be amplified and it's a tough situation in particular for a classical guitarist to keep it going. I play year-round, even in terrible cold snaps. I grew up in New York, though, so it's nothing for me to experience the weather changes and I love playing."

Witter performs at a variety of stations and says of the various challenges he faces, "The new trains are nasty sounding suckers. On the 4 Line, the new silver trains

make so much noise, even when they are standing still. The most courage-building station is 28th & Lex on the 6, the uptown side. This is the noisiest station that ever existed. You have to have character to play there."

In spite of the din, Witter says, "I find it helps build my concentration. The other factor is that playing with amplification helps build your touch—you must have pure clean sound with no scratches or squeaks because you never know who is out there listening. Interestingly,



for some reason, I've noticed I tend to tune up a half step on my guitar. There's something about the acoustics underground that causes me to do that."

Witter relies on his Takamine EC-132S and a Crate Taxi amp for playing his repertoire of classical pieces and jazz standards. He advises subway players to be aware of their surroundings. "You should not think you're in an isolated situation. Don't be offended by homeless people, and if someone is hanging around too long, do not have too much money in your [guitar] case. Keep it to a minimum to avoid temptation. Play every single note well and bring your business cards because you never know who might hire you."



Witter admits to one incident where a kid snatched \$4.00 from his case. "I would have given him chase, but I felt it was better to say to this young man, 'Hey, I earned this. You've got to learn to earn yours.' " One time, when Witter was performing in Penn station, a homeless man offered him a piece of cheese. "I was stunned," he says. "That was the most powerful moment I have ever had as a musician."

"Also, a woman had also approached me to say she had lost her husband just the week before—and that the song I had played had been one of their favorites."

Witter says that sometimes he will catch people humming a tune and enjoy surprising them by launching into a six-stringed rendition of the piece. His playing has earned him front-row theatre tickets to Broadway shows from appreciative listeners, and he was once asked to perform at a dinner held at Christie's Auction House. He has also served as the entryway performer to the Eastern Parkway Station at the unveiling of the Brooklyn Museum renovation and was asked to play at the VIP cocktail hour for the MTA's 100th Anniversary Celebration.

Witter wistfully recounts performing for Guitar Review founder and friend Rose Augustine, a few weeks before she passed away. "I grew up knowing Rose from the 60s from the original New York Classical Guitar Society," he says. "She had given me the invitation to hang out at her place and drop by whenever. I played for her the bossa nova, some Jobim, Sor and Catalonian folksongs. She gave me a box of strings and expressed concern that a person of my talent would play in the subway, but I'm a New Yorker! I grew up here and to me, it's as natural as anything else."

Witter leaves no doubt about this. His all-time favorite station is Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn. "I played there for my birthday this year," he says. "I put up signs saying that it was my birthday—and that I wanted to spend it with you! In Grand Army Plaza, I've watched children grow up. When I see the people who have given to me all these years, I surprise them by giving them my new CD because I have got something to give back."



For more information on the MTA's performing arts program, visit:
<http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us/mta/aft/muny.htm>



Julia Crowe

Julia is a New York-based guitarist and writer. She writes a monthly column and features for Classical Guitar Magazine in the U.K. and is a regular contributor to Acoustic Guitar Magazine and Mel Bay's Guitar Sessions® webzine. She has also written for FRETs and Guitar Player. Julia is a graduate of the University of Chicago with a degree in English Literature and has worked extensively in print journalism, film and television. She has lived and performed in New York, Los Angeles, Wexford, Ireland and Paris. She has performed solo in Grant Park, the Daley Center Plaza and at DePaul University in Chicago.

Julia played an arrangement of John Lennon's "Imagine" at a 9/11 memorial concert in Manhattan, where she resides. Recently she debuted several of her own pieces at the World Financial Center Wintergarden Plaza's "Carnival on the Hudson," in a benefit for downtown public schools.

For more information, please visit her website at www.juliacrowe.com