

## Boston Street Musicians: Beauty in Sound Amidst the Rush

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Prescott Blackler playing trombone. ©Ramón Bannister

The idea behind this series was inspired by the [experiment](#) conducted by Washington Post journalist Gene Weingarten and world famous violinist Joshua Bell. Bell was strategically positioned near a metro station in Washington D.C. He played classic works from composers such as Bach and Schubert using a \$3.5 million

Stradivari violin. It was fascinating to learn that such

a great musician would be ignored by most passersby.

When I go into Boston on the subway, I see street musicians all the time. I've wondered how successful they are considering that most people don't really have the time or interest in paying much attention to the music. What do the musicians performing along Boston's street corners feel when they're ignored? How much money can they make?

Initially, in doing this series, my broader goal was to take the street music to a different context – the online environment – where people could hear samples, see photographs, go to the musicians' websites to read about their backgrounds, and click on links to buy the CDs. But that was easier said than done. After the first day of collecting material for this story, the key question soon became, *Would they be willing to allow me to record their music and give them free marketing?*

Many times the performers were skeptical of my true intentions. Worse still, most refused to allow me to record their music, even samples of it. Many were rude to me; others told me bluntly that they didn't want to market their music. One performer even forgot to bring his CDs for sale, and just wanted me to go away. He performed while looking at me or at least being aware of my presence in the same way a wildebeest watches a pride of lions.

This came as a surprise to me. As a musician myself, I know how important marketing is to surviving, to getting gigs. I would have jumped at the opportunity to submit 30 seconds of a song to a news blog. What better way to market your services than having someone else drum up support by describing how good your music sounds? Without marketing, you might as well not perform. Otherwise, what's the point?



Figure 2: Prescott Blackler, trombonist. ©Ramón Bannister

I still had many questions, so I pressed on. As I went around looking for musicians, I finally found a guy who would allow me into his space. His name is Prescott Blackler, a young trombonist who goes to school at the [Berklee College of Music](#). He reminded me of myself when I was his age getting my first college degree in music. He had an exuberance, an excitement for life, and a love for his craft. After all, it's not anyone who would choose to play the

trombone by himself in the subway. Even fewer people would do so successfully as Prescott does.

As he played in a jazzy style, the smooth sounds that flowed from the horn of the trombone are unapologetically confident. There were extraneous noises common in subway stations, and he cut through them all. For instance, in the sound clip, if you listen carefully, there is an automated, computerized voice announcing that a subway train "is now arriving." Prescott didn't care; he played on. He's so good he got glances from passersby. I looked into his trombone case and saw change and dollar bills, a sign that he wasn't entirely ignored.

### **Audio sample of Prescott Blackler included in web version.**

I took the opportunity to ask him about how his music is received. He says that people do in fact appreciate his music, especially when it's cold, in the middle of the winter. Perhaps people's mind sets are more open to meaningful experiences, to music, when it's 15 degrees outside. That makes sense. I think music can warm the soul during the mind-numbingly harsh, long, dry cold. To get evidence of the public's appreciation, I asked Prescott how much he can make in an hour.

"The most I've ever made was when I performed along with my friend. We got \$172 in two hours." *That's not bad*, I told him. He agreed, "It's a good way to make some extra money." But he explains that usually he doesn't make that much. And the winters are more prosperous. There aren't as many musicians around, so it's easier to get prime space and people notice the

few performers more. Hence, \$40 per hour in the winter is not unusual, because he can move around the city according to high foot-traffic areas. Sounds like it can be tiring; but Prescott can do that. He's young, unafraid, confident, and he has permit.

All musicians have to apply for permits, which have their pictures, kind of like a mug shot, like when you go get your driver's license. Without it, performers can be ticketed and kicked out of the area. With it, musicians can compete for high-value subway stations such as Harvard Sq., Central Sq. and others. They compete by being the first to schedule their performance during certain times of the day. They are allotted two hours maximum for each location. The permit becomes an asset.



Figure 3: Close up of Prescott Blackler. ©Ramón Bannister

While the winter season may be worthwhile for musicians, the summer is a different story. Prescott says he only gets about half of what he gets in the winter, about \$20/hour. Still, it's extra cash that he wouldn't have, and that's better than working at fast food restaurants for minimum wage where you're exploited. And it's much more meaningful. But performing on street corners isn't for the light at heart. You have to be ready for people ignoring

you. As Prescott said, he sometimes feels like a beggar, a pan-handler.

In a way street musicians *are* beggars. They put out their instrument cases, sometimes throwing in some change of their own to make it seem like they're appreciated. One of them even made a deal with me. "You can take my picture, but only if you contribute a little something yourself." And he said that *twice*, as if I didn't understand the first time, as if I didn't understand the plight of musicians. He didn't know that I myself am a musician; I once played on the street corner for about 2 hours at the famous 4<sup>th</sup> Ave Fair in Tucson, Arizona. Would I have done that if I could attract thousands of people at \$100 or more per ticket like Joshua Bell? I'm not sure, because Joshua Bell did.

If we are to learn anything about street musicians and the whole Joshua Bell experiment, it is that we as human beings should be more aware of the beautiful things around us. We have five senses for a reason. Gene Weingarten, the author of the Bell article published by the Washington Post, put it plainly and simply:

"If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that -- then what else are we

missing?" (Gene Weingarten, "[Pearls Before Breakfast](#)," The Washington Post, Sunday, Apr. 8, 2007.)

Next time you're waiting in the subway or walking down the street and hear a musician, think about the joy he or she is trying to bring into your life. Musicians have lives too. They have emotions. They cry, laugh, some have side jobs, some are going to music school. Give them a word of thanks, reach into your pockets and toss a quarter into their hats. And if you really like the performance, buy their CDs.

In the weeks to come I will publish more stories about the musicians who make our commute more enjoyable. Next stop: [Downtown Crossing](#), where I was about to transfer to another subway (orange line) when I met another excellent musician.

Meanwhile, feel free to email me at [kenacubed\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:kenacubed[at]gmail.com) if you want to see a music group profile of one of your local bands.

The author of this article highly recommends that you read [Gene Weingarten's article](#) about the Joshua Bell experiment.