

## Man Sings For Food

### - By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: George Clark. ©Ramón Bannister

When I began the series about street musicians in Boston, I thought that the musicians weren't appreciated very much by passersby. I have since discovered that people really do enjoy the live music despite the hustle and bustle of urban life. The appreciation likely results *because* of the hustle and bustle urbanites experience daily. The first [story about Prescott Blackler](#) suggested you buy CDs if the musician has some. In this story, you'll find out that the performer doesn't have CDs you can buy. There's a very good reason for that fact. The musician is homeless.

I found him on the Boston Common sitting on a ledge around lunch time - singing. That's right, singing. Like when carolers spread Christmas joy during the holiday season. Although this wasn't the holidays, the song had a cheerful nature to it. Repetitive, sure, but happy-sounding, jazzy, and with a good quality voice. I was impressed. Surprised. Here was a man begging for pocket change. No, that's not accurate. He doesn't beg, at least not in the traditional sense.

Often I see people standing on street corners with signs paradigmatic of beggars. "Will work for food." Many of them are pushy. They try to make you feel guilty. I generally don't give them change. I ignore them.

But George Clark was different. Yes, he had a cup in his hands, with coins that jingled as he moved. But he was doing more than holding out his cup. He almost didn't hold it out at all. I got his permission to film him. After I finished, I sat next to him and had a conversation.

He told me his name. He wasn't embarrassed. He was proud of who he was. Knowing that some homeless persons have jobs, and knowing that many people who aren't homeless still ask for money on the street, I inquired, "What do you do for a living?"

George answered quickly and confidently, "I'm a panhandler." I was taken aback by his honesty. He was comfortable with himself, looked me in the eye, treated me like we knew each other for years, but still obviously cautious. "I panhandle for food" he added.

George was born and raised in Boston. He even went to a community college for a short time before dropping out. He has been singing for a long time. I had wondered if his singing helps encourage people to give him money. He answered in the affirmative. George gets a lot of feedback from people. Interestingly, they appreciate him more when he sings than when he doesn't sing. He says he makes more money singing.

There was something about music in the air, at a place I least expected it, that brought a smile to my face. I saw the same thing happened to everyone else as they walked past us. I asked if he could sing other songs, but he said no, "This is all I sing." And he continued his melody. "Does anybody have any change/change change change," he would sing.

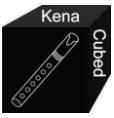
For video, see:

[http://www.youtube.com/v/tslKyO7S4UA&hl=en\\_US&fs=1&rel=0&color1=0xe1600f&color2=0xfebd01&border=1](http://www.youtube.com/v/tslKyO7S4UA&hl=en_US&fs=1&rel=0&color1=0xe1600f&color2=0xfebd01&border=1)

George's music reminded me of a past professor of mine who was particularly inspirational. This professor likes to theorize about what he calls "commemorative discourse," a type of speech that uses stylized intonation, or patterns. Music is said to be the most extreme form of stylized intonation. Through this "commemorative discourse," the message behind the words (and music) becomes ever more poignant. I found that theory quite powerful, as it explains why expressions of art touch the soul.

Other music theorists have taken music to another extreme: music therapy. Now, in Boston, many hospitals have musicians perform for sick patients, believing that music has some benefit to the human body's healing capabilities. I'm not suggesting that George's song, in which he asks people for change, has the power to heal incurable diseases. What I *am* suggesting is that George's melody has a greater potential to reach a higher number of people who would otherwise ignore him.

I invite you to watch the short video I have prepared. Note towards the end when a woman in a black sweatshirt quickly passes the camera, and 15 seconds later comes back to give George



change. It seems as if she wants to ignore him. Would she have given him change were he *not* singing?