

In the Groove

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Gary Dowling. ©Ramón Bannister

Sometimes you hear a musician and you wonder why he doesn't have a recording contract with a big music distribution company. Gary Dowling is no exception. I found him by chance, when transferring from the **red line** Boston subway to the **orange line**. I was on my way to the famous Quincy Market, in a hurry to get there before the lunch madness begun so I can set up and find the next musician for this story. I saw Gary after arriving to the

Downtown Crossing transfer station and decided to wait so I could hear

the quality of the music. The first song I heard was a religious song in a blues style. Though I'm not religious myself, it was one of the best songs I've ever heard. It was one of those songs when I thought, "Had I heard this when I was searching for life's answers through God, I would have become a believer." That's how powerful his performance was.

Audio Sample #1 provided on website version

And I don't only mean that figuratively. He had a lot of power in his voice. When he sang, he projected his voice so that the entire station could hear him – on both sides of the tracks. When the loud trains arrived, thundering and squeeking to a stop to pick up passengers, the entire station could *still* hear him

– on both sides of the tracks!



Figure 2: Gary's guitar. ©Ramón Bannister

Audio Sample #2 provided on website version

Gary is from South Carolina, and he talks with a heavy southern accent. He identifies himself as a disabled vet from the Vietnam war era. Apparently, he experienced what I interpreted to be PTSD before being sent to the war. It sounded like he heard lots of horror stories about what it was like to fight on the front lines, and he just broke down. Music probably helped him to weather the storm. He certainly has a rich background knowledge in blues music, as he demonstrated by talking about BB King and other famous musicians. He told me how they got

started in the music biz and how they got famous. Gary learned how to play the guitar from his grandfather. He has been playing since 1955, and it's obvious when you hear him perform.



Figure 3: Gary Dowling in a groove. ©Ramón Bannister

Audio Sample #3 provided on website version

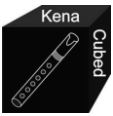
As I listened to his performance, I noticed a peculiar trait that all good musicians have. He got into a groove - my way of saying that he was in a sort of altered state of consciousness, if you will. We musicians become one with our music. It's a strange experience, like falling in love again and again. We get a "high," and we want more so we keep playing and singing. We get into a groove. He loved the audience and interacting with people while singing. At one point, as you can hear in the next audio sample at around 56 seconds, he addressed a small child by singing, "You don't need to cry babe! Girl, your last chance is gone...I just had to leave ya alone!" He turned his body and looked straight at the little girl. Her mother giggled and hugged her child, apparently agreeing with the musician. Music came quite naturally to him. I wish I were that good.

Audio Sample #4 provided on website version

His ebullience never waned. His exuberance was infectious. I couldn't leave. I had to stay even after I interviewed him. He made me excited, and I wasn't the only one who felt that way. I heard a young man, maybe a little bit younger than me, walk by slowly and yell, "Rock n' roll babe!" In another instance, a woman standing nearby felt the need to approach Gary and tell him that she was from Louisiana: "You remind me of home," she said in a pleasant, relaxed voice. She continued to listen intently while waiting for the train, moving her body to the music, smiling - she was in another zone, another world.

One ongoing question I have is why these street musicians don't have recording contracts with major labels. Gary enlightened me as I boarded the train to go to Quincy market. He repeated over and over again, "I don't want money!" He said it in a friendly way, realizing that his music had great impact on me. I didn't know how to respond, so I said, "ok...ok...ok," all the while knowing he appreciated that I gave him \$1. It wasn't until later that I thought about the significance of what he said. After all, even when I was on the train, with the doors about to close, he was adamant, "Tell people I don't want money!"

What he really meant, I think, is not that he doesn't want money. His statement was more figurative. He's not there to make his millions. He's not interested in million dollar recording



contracts. He doesn't want people to think that he's solely there for himself, for the selfish desire of American green. No. He's there for us. He's there to bring smiles to our faces. Our everyday stress that his songs talked about gave us a reprieve from that stress. Sure, he gets satisfaction when we show our appreciation for his music. But that's entirely the point. He wouldn't be there if we didn't smile, converse with him, sing with him, dance, and tell him how much he reminds us of our homes in the south.