

# A Busker's Adventures



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# Introduction

This book is a work of fiction.

None of the characters are entirely based on anyone I actually knew or know. Many of them, however, are partially based on people I have known.

Most of the places and situations and politics are real, with names changed to protect the guilty. I mean, the kinds of things I'm talking about in this book really happened, more or less. What's fictional are the details.

I wanted to get that bit of information out of the way. Otherwise I'm not sure what a proper introduction should contain.

Maybe I'll just say a bit more about why I wrote this book. The trajectory of how it came about, more or less.

I was a full-time busker in the Boston subways and elsewhere for many years. I'm very familiar with the ins and outs of making a living as a street performer.

The main character in the book is not me, and is not based on me. But all the places he goes are places I'm very familiar with, as are most of the situations he gets into.

I've been a songwriter and performer by profession for many years since I stopped busking for a living. About ten years ago I also got into writing prose.

I did a whole bunch of blogging, and writing pieces for CounterPunch and other publications. I wrote a whole bunch of other stuff under a pen name, mainly in order to practice this kind of writing.

Which led to this, my "first novel."

I was coming home from a two-month tour. My son, Yutaka, was just about to be born. At some point very early in my four-month paternity leave, I realized I needed something to do when the baby was sleeping. Because newborn babies sleep a hell of a lot, and I have a fairly constant need to do things that feel productive, in a creative sense.

Then I had a story idea one day. And this is what I did with most of my free time during those four months.

I suppose I'd also like to add that I am aware that the main character in this book is a white male heterosexual from the suburbs of an east coast US city. I am, too. He's not me, but he was an easy character to get into.

I really like to write and talk and sing about people in the world and in history who are not so much like me in those ways. I don't want to add to any stereotypes, and I hope I'm not doing that with this book.

But there are also reasons for having such a main character in a book. For he, too, is a human being.

I'll stop there, lest I say too much.

## Acknowledgements

Like so many other activities, writing a book involves a lot of solitary time staring at a computer. Or being lost in thought while out on walks, whether other people are around or not.

It also only happens if you prioritize writing over most other things you could be doing.

I would like to think that I have managed to tour, write songs, and write this novel and other things, without sacrificing my relationships or responsibilities to family members and other people in my world.

Whether or not I have succeeded on that front, I'd like to thank my wife, Reiko, and my children, Leila and Yutaka, for putting up with their tappety-tappety *otosan*.

And thanks to Reiko Maeda for the drawing on the cover!

Casey had noticed at some point that each line of the MBTA had a distinct smell to it. Different stations had different smells, too, but there were also subtle differences depending on the line. He noticed how unfamiliar the smell was now that he was in a Blue Line station, switching onto the train that would take him to Logan Airport.

Casey had lived in the city of Boston all of his 23 years. He knew the city very well, but not the airport. The airport was for tourists and business people, and Casey was neither. He played music for the tourists a lot, to be sure – but not at the airport. Or anywhere else on the Blue Line.

Casey busked on the Red Line, generally. Usually either the Harvard Square inbound platform or Park Street, center platform. But he wasn't heading off to spend another day playing music and breathing brake fumes at the moment. He was catching a flight to Amsterdam.

He had been to Logan Airport plenty of times by car, with his parents, to pick up occasional visiting relatives from the west coast. But on his own, as an adult, never. He had only been in a plane once, on a trip to California with his family as a kid.

It wasn't that he led a sheltered life or anything. The whole world is in Boston in one form or another. And he had spent several years playing music in the streets and subways – a veritable crash course in the school of hard knocks. His family wasn't poor, either. His father just had a strong preference for road trips over flights, so their family vacations had almost always been to somewhere within a day's drive of the city.

Which once involved crossing the Canadian border and spending several days in Montreal when he was eight, so he had been outside of the US before. But now he was about to cross the Atlantic on his own, and travel for an undetermined amount of time.

He was about equal parts excited and nervous, and he felt a sudden upsurge of both of those feelings as he stepped out of the train and down the hallway that led him into the airport. He looked around himself to get his bearings, searching for the KLM ticket counter.

The cavernous room was amplifying the sounds of the teeming masses of people walking on the tile floor. The women in heels were especially noticeable, as their shoes made a reverberating *clack-clack* every time they took a step. The room was filled with well-dressed travelers – suburban families and men in suits, primarily.

Casey felt keenly out of place. He had never taken to dressing up, and had never needed to. He thought of clothes entirely in terms of functionality and cost, so he tended to do all his clothes shopping at used army-navy stores, so all his clothes were comfortable, baggy, and replete with pockets. And either gray, brown or olive green.

He wasn't normally too concerned by feeling out of place – he usually felt out of place in one way or another. What intensified the feeling a lot was the recurring memory of seeing a musician he knew, when the guy got out of the train at Park Street while he was busking one day.

Casey saw him, Adam, that day, and something didn't look right.

“You OK?” Casey had asked him.

Adam had been clearly happy to see a familiar face.

“I just flew to London, and then flew right back,” Adam said. “Did the round trip?”

“How was London?” Casey had asked.

“Well, the airport was a happening place,” he had replied, “but I didn't get to see the actual city or anything. They sent me back.”

“What happened?”

“They asked me what I was doing in their country and I said I was coming to busk. Apparently that was the wrong thing to say.”

That conversation was on repeat in Casey's head as he stood in the ticketing hall. He was glad he was not flying into London, and under no circumstances was he going to admit to his plans to busk his way around Europe.

He was also planning to take the advice of another musician who had gone to Europe without being deported, who said if you checked your guitar in as baggage then you don't have to talk to the immigration agents with a guitar in your hand, since you pick it up after they let you in. Which is when you get to the baggage carousel, the guy had said.

Casey got in line at the KLM counter and scanned his surroundings more thoroughly. There were a dozen other scruffy young people with backpacks. Taking stock of the scene, he realized that his efforts at getting a haircut and shaving extra close were probably pointless. He was still obviously one of those scruffy young people with a backpack. Half of them, like him, had a guitar as well.

The impossibly tall, thin, perfectly put-together woman in the crisply-ironed blue uniform had a sparkle in her eye as she looked at Casey's ticket.

“Air Hitch?”

She smiled as she said these two words. It was only when she continued that Casey realized her faint trace of an accent probably originated from the Netherlands – his other tip-off being that she was behind the counter at a Dutch airline. And the name pinned to her lapel had a “Van” in front of it.

“When did you find out you'd be flying to Amsterdam?” she asked casually.

She and Casey both knew that when you bought a ticket through Air Hitch, you only found out a few days before the flight what European city you'd be flying to. It was cheap, but there was a catch. Several of them.

“I just wanted to see Europe, so I figured it was all good,” Casey replied cautiously.

The woman looked briefly at Casey's freshly-minted passport, and handed it back to him, along with his boarding pass, depositing his backpack and guitar on the thick black ribbon of rubber that perpetually trundled along behind her, one piece of luggage after another disappearing into some mysterious place behind a curtain which resembled an automated car wash.

As Casey walked towards the gates, he noticed a news ticker on the wall above the departures and arrivals board. “May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1988” – the boxy letters and numbers scrolled by, disappearing on the left side of the board – “Soviet troops begin withdrawing from Afghanistan.”

Casey tried to pay attention to the news, but it usually just seemed like a random series of disconnected facts, which somehow didn't seem right. Social studies and history in school felt the same way for Casey. By the time he was thirteen or so he started developing the distinct impression that he was being kept in the dark, and he started making haphazard efforts to educate himself. He decided that there were a finite number of countries in the world – exactly how many, he discovered, was an issue of serious controversy – and that he could at least learn something about all 170 or 180 of them.

Casey's parents had been great customers for the traveling encyclopedia salesmen that came around now and then. There were two book shelves in the house dedicated to nothing but hardbound encyclopedias, which Casey made good use of from the age of thirteen until a few days before he left home. The one thing that had especially jumped out at him about Afghanistan was the country's population statistics. According to his research, it was the only one of the countries whose population was decreasing over time.

As to whether or not the Soviet troops leaving was a good thing, Casey wasn't sure. He didn't trust the patriotic Russia-haters at all, but any admiration for the Soviet Union he may have had was tempered by the fact that he knew he didn't know anything about the place other than what the Russia-haters said about it, including the many Russian street musicians he knew from Boston. All of whom seemed to relish in speaking ill of every aspect of the country they had left. Always with a dry, bleak sense of humor that Casey loved, even though he missed at least half the jokes.

Unsure of what to expect, Casey had gotten to the airport at least two hours earlier than necessary. He had been staring out the window at the planes getting fueled up and loaded with food and such for about twenty minutes, when one of the other scruffy young men with backpacks who he had noticed in the ticketing hall was standing in front of him.

“Hey, you're the guy that plays the upside-down guitar in Harvard Square,” he said to Casey. “I almost didn't recognize you without your guitar.”

Casey was not expecting to be recognized at the airport, particularly without his guitar above his head. But he was not unaccustomed to being spotted randomly like that in Boston. Busk for a few hours at a heavily-used T stop, and by the end of your session, thousands of people have walked past you at least. Multiply that by several hundred days a year, and that's a lot of people who might remember what you look like.

This kind of thing was always awkward for Casey, though. It wasn't that he craved anonymity, or that he didn't like people or anything. He did like people, generally. He was fascinated by them. Which was a big part of his decision to go wander around Europe. Along with the fact that his girlfriend had recently dumped him, and he needed to do something.

The problem was, he was mildly embarrassed about exactly what kind of material he was playing as a professional busker. So he was relieved when the guy didn't say something like, “I love the music you play.” Maybe they could avoid going there, Casey hoped.

Casey reached his hand out to the man in front of him.

“I'm Casey.”

“Greg,” the man said.

“Do you play music, too?” Casey asked Greg.

Casey had noticed that at least half of the people who actually feel compelled to strike up a conversation with a busker are musicians themselves.

“I just mess around a little,” Greg replied. “Nothing like you. Do you make a living playing music? You got another job?”

Although Casey understood curiosity and had nothing to hide, he was often taken aback by someone asking such direct, personal questions so soon after meeting. This kind of direct communication was especially common in Boston, but Casey still never got used to it. As a kid, this was the kind of thing that got him called “shy,” though he never felt particularly shy, as he understood the concept, anyway.

“No, that's my career, such as it is,” Casey answered. “How about you?”

Casey was happy to be talking to someone friendly, though he would rather have talked about almost anything aside from career choices. But he was trying to play along. As he always did -- partly out of principle, and partly because he actually was curious about what random people did for a living. He just wouldn't ask, if it were up to him to bring up the subject.

“I just quit my job at a pharmacy,” Greg said quickly. “I saved up some money. I'm just gonna travel til it runs out. Maybe I can find some work in Europe. You gonna play music on the streets in Europe?”

Greg was excited at the prospect on Casey's behalf, and probably a bit jealous as well.

“That's the plan,” Casey replied. “If they let me in,” he added.

Greg looked like he was only half-listening to Casey's answer to his question as he half-mumbled, “It must be great to do something you really like to do for a living.”

Casey was indeed glad to play music for a living. He knew that most musicians didn't make a living at it. Growing up in the Boston subway system, he had studied the craft of busking. He decided that's what he wanted to do -- and he concluded that if he were going to do that, he would have to learn to do something really exotic.

He was a keen observer of the world around him, and noticed that there were three main ways to make serious money at the craft. All of them involved doing popular cover songs.

One option was to be an outrageously talented, acrobatic singer of opera or something similar. Another was to be a scantily-clad, beautiful woman with an overtly sexy stage presence.

The third option was to do something completely exotic as well as impressive. (Standard examples being playing an instrument well with something other than your hands, or playing several instruments at the same time.) Casey chose that option as the only one that seemed remotely viable.

It would be years before he'd figure out what that impressive, exotic thing he'd do would be. He had been pressured by his mother into taking piano lessons for most of his childhood. He never developed a love of classical music *per se*, but he got good at playing the piano. One day he woke up from a daydream thinking, what if you could play piano on a guitar?



He then set out to figure out how to tap out piano lines on an upside-down electric guitar well enough to impress people. Impress people he did, especially when he played songs they had heard a million times already.

So he embarked on a career of impressing people with what to him was essentially a gimmick. Employing this gimmick, he played the tunes they responded to most on a financial level. Which meant that every day for the past several years he had played his instrumental version of “Stairway to Heaven” at least twenty times.

Casey did not feel compelled to explain any of that to Greg, who no longer seemed to be paying attention anyway.

“Yes,” was all he said.

Casey didn't sleep a wink on the plane. He was squeezed in between a man and a woman who were clearly a couple, but evidently didn't want to sit together – only to talk regularly with each other in some language Casey didn't recognize, with him left pretending to ignore what was happening. But had this not been the situation, he probably wouldn't have slept anyway.

With the time difference and all that, on flights from the US to Europe, night just kind of gets skipped, or drastically shortened. You leave in the early evening, and by the time it's a bit after midnight in the time zone you just left, you've arrived in Europe, and it's just after dawn.

Casey had practiced lying elaborately to immigration officials. But in the event, all they did was look at his face and his US passport, grunt, and stamp it, gesturing then for him to keep walking. There was one line for the Europeans, and another line for everybody else, which was the line Casey had waited in. Certain people were being questioned extensively, he noticed. Only one of whom – a guy with a beard, very long blond hair, and day-glow clothing and a Canadian flag on his backpack – was white.

Casey picked up his luggage and followed the crowds, who were getting on a train to the center of Amsterdam. The only advance planning he had made for the trip to Europe was to reserve a room in a cheap hotel near the main train station for three nights. He figured he could use some time to get his bearings.

He figured he'd stay in hostels if he needed to spend less money. At the train station he exchanged some dollars for guilders, bought a map of Amsterdam and the best cup of coffee and the best croissant he had ever had, and he sat on a staircase outside the train station, surveying the scene, looking at the map, and spilling a bit of coffee on it.

Within five minutes he had given away all the coins he had to hollow-looking people with very bad teeth. Casey guessed they were heroin addicts. He wondered whether there were more heroin addicts in Amsterdam than in other places, or if they were just more out in the open there.

Casey found his hotel on the map, picked up his backpack and guitar, and started walking. He was happy to get to the hotel and be able to drop off stuff. The combination of a backpack and a guitar, he found, was just unwieldy, and made him feel self-conscious.

The shower felt good. Casey momentarily considered the possibility of a nap, but decided against it. He was in Europe, and he wanted to check it out. He figured he'd leave everything except his wallet at the hotel, so he could be more easily mobile, and have a good look around.

It was only when he went down the stairs to the small reception area and walked out the door that he realized he was in the middle of the red light district. He had been too busy looking at the map before to notice the women sitting behind the windows of what had appeared to be storefronts of some kind. Which they were, but storefronts of a sort he had never seen before.

Casey liked sex a lot, and wanted more of it, generally. But he'd never seriously considered the idea of paying for it. Nor had he ever seen a woman in her undergarments sitting provocatively in front of a

store window, aside from the odd mannequin.

What hit him next was the amount of pedestrian and bicycle traffic everywhere. And the lack of cars. All of which got his busking instincts very stimulated. Quiet streets with lots of people on them -- just the conditions a busker is looking for, Casey thought.

And then he noticed the canals, and the fact that most of the buildings appeared to be so old that they were sagging under the pressure of time and gravity.

People often said that Boston is the most European city in the US. Which it may be, Casey thought. But it's got nothing on the real thing. As a serious busker, you develop an appreciation for good urban planning, and Casey was impressed with the whole picture he was seeing.

And that was before he discovered the actual pedestrian streets, where there weren't just not many cars, but no cars – and far more people. And buskers! Casey walked along the wide street full of commuters, shoppers, tourists, buskers and panhandlers, and momentarily felt more at home than he ever had in all his life.

There's an older guy in Boston that Casey knew named Scott Baine. All the street musicians knew him, actually. Back in the 70's, Scott had started up the Street Artists Guild. As far as Casey knew, it was never really a guild. It was mainly just Scott, and his supporters. But Casey liked the idea very much – just the concept of a guild of street artists. Of solidarity of some kind, particularly among this often cantankerous collection of folks.

The main thing SAG had ever done, as far as concrete accomplishments it could point to, was to win a lawsuit against the city of Boston for harassing street performers. This resulted in the city having to have consistent guidelines for street performance, and cops could no longer just tell people to pack up if they didn't like their style of music. Which is what the cops were doing. So Scott was basically responsible for making Boston such a good city for busking. This was one thing that all the buskers knew.

If people knew anything about the Street Artists Guild aside from that, it was that it didn't really exist as an organization *per se*, but was more of a concept. Casey liked the concept so much that whenever he made a donation to someone raising funds for a cause, or to a fellow busker – as he often did -- he would say the donation was from the Street Artists Guild.

Casey walked along the pedestrian mall, surveying the scene. Especially the street music. Scott always said there were certain universal things about street music anywhere. One was that the quality will vary. There are, or at least should be, no auditions, in principle. Anyone can do it, normally -- it's kind of inherent to the idea. But also the quality will tend towards being really good or really bad, depending on how welcoming a place is for buskers.

If it's a good place for busking, the quality of the busking will be higher overall. If, on the other hand, buskers are constantly harassed by the cops, this may or may not affect the overall number of buskers in a city, but it will drastically lower the quality of the buskers who stick around the town and put up with that kind of situation.

Another thing Scott always said about street performers around the world is that the ranks of the street artists will always include a lot of the most recent groups of migrants to whatever society. And, Scott was fond of pointing out, if you look at those recent migrants playing in the streets of Boston, they are mostly from war zones – they are refugees, in fact.

Casey had often wondered what explained the concentration of Peruvians and Salvadorans among the ranks of Boston's buskers. When Casey first heard Scott talk about the relationship between busking and migration patterns, it all made sense.

So, with thoughts like these floating through his head, Casey walked along the mall. Very soon, he heard the high-pitched strains of pan pipes somewhere in the distance. The Peruvians had made it here, too.

Immediately in front of him was a human statue, completely painted in silver. This form of street performance had started becoming popular in Boston only recently, Casey had noticed. He felt bad for them having to stand still for so long, with what looked like pretty toxic paint on their skin all the time, just to make a buck. People will go to great lengths to avoid getting a day job, he thought. Casey included – but no silver paint.

There was another busker every fifty feet or so on this street, Casey observed. There didn't appear to be any markings on the sidewalk where the buskers were busking, so as far as he could tell, the spacing of the buskers was self-organized.

Next down the way, in front of yet another upscale clothing store, a small, brown man with a defeated look on his face, sitting on a box, playing the accordion. Casey watched and listened for several minutes. It was an unfamiliar, eastern-sounding piece of music. He guessed the musician was Roma. Whoever he was, Casey thought, it looked like he had had a rough time of it.

The music he was playing was intricate and rhythmically complicated, with dissonant, eastern melodies that Casey thought were entrancing. But the man played the instrument in such a way that communicated with every note, *I'm not important, I'm just doing something anybody can do*.

Which isn't true, Casey thought. But presumably where this guy is from, it is. Most people passed him by as if they were thinking the same thing about the man. Which made Casey realize that it must be very common for men like this to be playing the accordion really well on the streets of Europe, or at least Amsterdam, if people could so easily ignore a musician like this.

Casey wanted to tell him he'd do better in Boston, but he wasn't sure if that was actually true. But he wanted to say something. When the piece was over, he dropped several guilders in the man's case, and said, "you're a great accordion player," as he bent down to drop in the coins. The man smiled. Whether he understood English or not, Casey didn't know.

Another fifty feet down, a solo sax player. Great instrument for the street here, Casey thought, lined with buildings on both sides to create a nice echo. Nice, loud instrument, like the accordion. He was a good musician, and seemed to have much better busking instincts than the accordion player. He was standing, for one thing, and looking at people as they walked past, playfully engaging with them musically. Some of them smiled. One dropped in a guilder. Casey dropped in another.

He had no idea how well he'd do busking here, or how far his prospects as a traveler on the streets of Europe might go, but he figured if he couldn't afford to drop some of these guilders in these cases, he might as well take that as a sign that he should go back to Boston.

More than fifty feet past the sax player were the Peruvians. As usual with the Andean bands working the streets and subways of Boston along with Casey and many others, this band had lots of members – seven, Casey counted. All of them short, all with long black hair, all obviously indigenous to South America, all great musicians. They were playing the same tunes that had become familiar to Casey

over the years in Boston.

The Peruvians were definitely generating more interest than the solo acts down the road. But damn, he thought, there are seven of them. He watched the occasional guilder being thrown in by passersby. The smiling children who tried and usually failed to get their parents to slow down to dance for a while. And he realized that there must be a glut of Andean musicians here, too.

Beyond the Andeans there was a long stretch with no buskers. It's Monday, it occurred to Casey. Probably on the weekends there are lots more. Maybe that's when the circus performers make an appearance. At least that's how it was in Harvard Square.

The long stretch of pedestrian mall without buskers made Casey's mouth water. Which made him smile, as he realized how strange that was. He was done scoping out the scene. He wanted to busk.

He made a note of the clouds of marijuana emanating from several of the cafes he passed on the short walk back to the hotel. He'd visit one of them sometime soon. If he smoked weed now, he was sure he'd fall asleep immediately.

Casey relieved his backpack of all its contents in order to access his amp, which was squeezed into the bottom of it. He had taken fresh batteries with him – though they wouldn't be fresh for long, and he thought for the thousandth time about how bad he felt for throwing away all these batteries. Someday, he thought, maybe he'll figure out how to tap on an acoustic guitar. But there's too much pressure involved with playing acoustics, at least the way he had worked out the technique. It had to be an electric.

Casey slung his guitar over one shoulder and his amp over the other, and headed outside. He had rigged up a strap in order to carry the amp. In Boston the street musicians all wheel their stuff around, but Casey was glad he had taken Scott's advice about wheeling stuff around in Europe. The cobblestones would have made that nearly impossible. His shoulders would just have to survive.

Casey walked past all the various buskers, ultimately making his way to the Andean band. He kept walking, and noticed another band had set up. They had a good crowd around them, who looked like they were into the music, just from the way they were standing. As he got closer, he could hear fast-paced bluegrass kinds of sounds emanating from the patch of pavement this trio was occupying.

Two of the instruments were home-made – a drum which was just a plastic bucket, and a washtub bass made of another plastic bucket, a broom handle and a piece of rope. The third member was playing the only store-bought instrument, a five-string clawhammer banjo. All of them were singing, too, rich three-part harmonies.

Casey stopped to listen for several songs, putting down his guitar and amp. He was looking forward to doing some busking, but these guys were good. He liked their music, and their busker sensibilities – really engaging the crowd with brief rants between songs, looking at their audience as they sang together in a tight little bunch.

The fact that two of them were playing home-made instruments was probably half the reason why people stop to check them out in the first place, Casey thought. Probably responsible for half their take. Good move.

But as he listened, he noticed that they were not doing pop songs, or even bluegrass standards. They were doing, as far as Casey could tell, original or some other similarly unknown material. Really catchy stuff – and all in English, with some fairly obvious and entertaining pro-drug, anti-cop

messages.

Casey admired their gumption at coming out and doing their own songs like that. He was pretty sure that these guys knew as well as he did that they could make a lot more money if they did Beatles covers. Casey dropped a fistful of guilders in their case, exchanged “hello, fellow musician” glances with the trio as he picked up his instrument, and kept walking in search of a plot of sidewalk to call his own.

He found one, just down a ways from the bucket band, in front of a jewelry store. He put his things down beside him and stood there for a few minutes. Casey always did that before setting up. He had to recover from the feeling that he didn't belong there -- that it wasn't his space to occupy somehow. Once most of the people who were nearby when he first got to the place were gone, he could start to relax.

Casey sat down on the sidewalk. One of two major ways he broke the basic rules of busking. He opened his guitar case and positioned it in front of him. He plugged the guitar into the little guitar amp he had next to him and turned it on, setting the volume and tone to a good level for his immediate surroundings.

Then Casey swung his guitar around so that the body of it was balanced on his left shoulder and the headstock was tucked in between his feet on the sidewalk. With one arm on either side of the guitar neck, and his hands each poised above the neck as if it were a piano keyboard, he began to tap out his counterpoint-filled, instrumental rendition of “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin.

Sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk was one way he was breaking the rules of good busking – it's almost always best to be standing, and thus looking more like you're working, rather than just chilling out and playing some music for fun. Not only was Casey sitting, but he was looking down at the sidewalk while he was playing. He knew it would be better if he could engage visually with his audience. But he found long ago that if he did that, he'd develop a sore neck very quickly. So he basically ignored them as he played.

But none of these shortcomings in his busking technique ever seemed to matter. He quickly discovered that this was even more true in Amsterdam than in Boston – approximately twice as true. Within seconds of Casey tapping out the clear, descending bass line with one hand and the melody with the other, the heads began turning and the guilders began piling up.

The right kind of captivating street performers will tend to attract an audience that will keep on growing as long as the music goes on, at least up to a certain point. The natural tendency for most musicians is to keep on playing, and see how many people they can enthrall at once.

This, however, isn't necessarily the best busking technique. As a crowd grows, it becomes more anonymous, and less generous *per capita*. With smaller crowds, each audience member starts feeling a sense of obligation to donate something, if they stick around for a whole song or two. But if they stick around for more than a few songs, the individual donations don't increase significantly in amount.

This phenomenon is why Casey preferred the subways to the streets, in Boston. Within two or three songs, unless there was work going on on the subway line, the next train would arrive and the crowd would be gone, making way for the next one. When he played in the streets, he'd simulate this situation by putting down his guitar and taking a five-minute break after he'd do a set of three tunes. At which point most of the crowd that had by then assembled would make a donation and leave, making way for the next audience to build. And then the process would be repeated.

There on the pedestrian mall in Amsterdam he played brilliantly, and applied these busking principles, along with others, such as stashing his take after every three-song session, so it never looked too significant. (Somewhere between nothing and a lot is the sweet spot there.)

After an hour, Casey had made the Dutch equivalent of \$100. An hour later he was up to \$200. About twice as much per hour as he'd usually make in the subways back home.

Casey was feeling slightly delirious. Not only was he completely exhausted from sleep deprivation and jet lag, but his plan for funding his travels around Europe seemed to be a sound one, at least judging from this Monday afternoon in the center of Amsterdam.

The afternoon was waning, the stores were closing, the batteries in the amp were dying, and Casey's shoulders were hurting by the time he started packing up. In different parts of different cities, there are optimal times for busking and terrible times for busking. On this pedestrian mall, clearly busking time was during the day. All the other buskers were packing up, too, as the stores were closing and the shoppers were going home, or going to some other neighborhood -- wherever it was the bars and restaurants were to be found, which were not on this street. There were cafes, but they were also closing.

Casey was doing what he decided was going to be his last set -- his last repetition of the same three winning tunes -- when he noticed the guys with the banjo and buckets walking past him. One of them gestured to the other two, and they veered in Casey's direction. They stopped a few feet away and watched. Soon they put their things down and watched more closely.

Casey finished his set and put his guitar down. Yet another crowd of folks poured guilders into his case, and he nodded appreciatively at them. As they walked off, he looked up at his three fellow buskers, who were starting to gather their things back up.

"You guys are fantastic," Casey said to them, with complete honesty.

"Teach me how to do that?" asked the banjo player, as he pointed to Casey's guitar neck byway of explanation.

Casey smiled. "No problem," he said. "It's really not so complicated. It's just a matter of practice."

"A lot of practice," the washtub bass player chimed in.

"You from Canada?" asked the drummer, looking at Casey quizzically.

"Close," Casey responded. "Boston, Massachusetts, in the US."

"Always safer to guess they're from Canada," the banjo player explained. "The Canadians seem less inclined to blow up the world."

There was a brief but pregnant pause, during which time Casey realized that all three of them were waiting for him to respond in some way to that last statement.

"I agree," he said, a bit awkwardly. "Sorry about that," he added. "Reagan is a real lunatic, eh?"

"Not your fault," said the drummer with finality.

"We live in a squat called DMZ," said the banjo player. "There's dinner tonight if you're hungry."

For Casey there was no question. Of course he wanted to have dinner at the squat.

“Do you have a bicycle?” asked the drummer.

“What would he be doing with a bicycle?” said the banjo player.

“Well you can't really get there without a bicycle,” said the bass player. There was consensus on that point.

“You can fit in mine if you don't mind being a bit scrunched,” said the banjo player, as he brought around a massive bicycle with a wooden bucket built into the front of it.

Casey had clearly never seen a bicycle like this before. “I can sit in there?” he asked, incredulous.

“Usually I put the banjo in there, but I can carry it on my back, and you can sit in the bucket,” said the banjo player. “No worries,” he added. “I'm Zack.”

“Casey,” said Casey.

“And that's Patrick,” said Zack, gesturing towards the bass player. “And he's Grub.” The drummer snorted in response.

Casey was struggling with trying to get his guitar and himself in the bucket, when the bass player offered to take the guitar on his back.

“The puzzle is complete,” Zack noted, as three of them began to pedal, and Casey had his first experience as an adult as a passenger on someone else's bicycle.

The bucket bike with Casey in it got started very slowly, but once they were moving, it seemed to go quite smoothly. Casey wondered how it might be if they came upon a hill.

Even without the wooden bucket or the people, the bicycle was massive, and the bucket probably weighed as much as the rest of the bicycle combined. As they went along on the endless, thin roads made only for bicycles that snaked around the city, and then began to make their way out of the city, Casey realized that the rumors were true – there were no hills. The whole Dutch obsession with bicycles suddenly made a lot more sense to Casey.

The group had made its way well outside the more populated areas of Amsterdam, and into an area with a lot fewer houses and a lot more industrial-looking buildings, warehouses and the like. He realized there was no way he'd find his way back to the center of town in the middle of the night by himself if he wanted to get back to his hotel room. But he didn't care.



When the group left the city center it still felt like day-time, aside from the fact that the stores were all closing. By the time they got to the outskirts of town – where, as Casey discovered, the squat was located -- it felt more like dusk. It would continue to feel like dusk for several hours -- the sun low on the horizon but not quite managing to set until late in the evening, the lighting constantly changing in noticeable ways. Almost like a nature documentary, where time gets sped up to give us an overview of the weather patterns.

They turned off from a street lined with warehouses and buildings with lots of big smoke stacks above them, and then soon turned again onto a gravel road. Lining the gravel road were caravans, vans and other sorts of live-in vehicles and makeshift structures. A group of small children were gathered around a puddle as if it were a work of art or something.

“Is this the squat?” Casey asked.

Casey didn't think he had ever been to a squat, though he had heard of the phenomenon of squatting, particularly in reference to New York City -- though he had never visited the squats there in the area of Tompkins Square Park. In any case, he thought of squats as being abandoned buildings, usually of the bigger variety, that were taken over by folks -- not an encampment of vehicles.

“No,” said Zack, “this road here leads to DMZ. This is a camp, for people who live in caravans. A 'wagon place' I guess is what it would translate as.”

And then, a few hundred feet down the gravel road they stopped at a very high, black metal gate. A black metal wall almost as high as the gate extended in both directions from the entrance. On top of the gate was a huge metal sculpture that spelled the letters, DMZ. To say the sculpture was metal doesn't nearly do it justice, though. It was made entirely out of old car parts, as far as Casey could tell from thirty feet below it, in the waning light of the day.

Casey extricated himself from the wooden bucket, nearly falling over as he got out of it. One of his legs had fallen asleep. Grub pressed a silver doorbell, which stood out easily on the otherwise entirely black gate. Twenty seconds later, the massive thing slowly began rolling open, creaking under its own weight with a medieval-sounding *clack-clack-clack*. Casey half expected someone to fire a crossbow next. As the four musicians walked through, he nodded in greeting at the couple who had been the ones to pull open the gate, which they then began to push closed again.

As soon as Casey looked around, he felt like he was home. There were the sorts of big buildings that Casey thought looked like they should be squats. But then there were many other, smaller buildings scattered around the bigger ones.

The bigger ones had clearly been a warehouse and an office building, once upon a time. Now they were something else, and they had been joined by these many other constructions of a decidedly more artistic variety. One resembled a giant spider. Another was clearly modeled after a classic 1950's flying saucer that had a crash landing.

“Do people live in all of these structures?” Casey asked no one in particular, as the group was walking their bicycles down the path, towards the warehouse.

“Some of them have people living in them,” Patrick answered. “Some are more like guest rooms. Some of it is just art.”

“What's that one?” Casey asked, pointing towards a suspiciously unstable-looking three-story tower made of wood, each floor about the size of a shipping container.

“On Saturday there's going to be a party,” Zack said. “That gets burned.”

“We're gonna have a bonfire,” said a man with long dreadlocks who was hammering on something as the group passed by, and heard the topic of conversation. “We'll burn an effigy of Ronald Reagan on top of it, too!” he added.

Was this a reaction to the guy hearing Casey's American accent, Casey wondered? Plenty of other reasons to burn an effigy of Reagan, he reflected, and decided not to pursue the matter.

The bass player and drummer had left their home-made instruments attached to their bikes, apparently unconcerned about either theft (of a plastic bucket and a broom handle?) or the elements. Zack did bring in his banjo, which he had in a gig bag, and Casey had retrieved his guitar from Patrick. The four of them, two with instruments slung over their shoulders, walked in to the ground floor of the former office building.

The lobby had been converted into a bar and performance space, as Casey observed right away, judging from the stage with the drum kit and sound equipment scattered about -- and on the other side of the room, the bar, complete with rows and cases of bottles of all description, in every direction.

In the bar were a dozen or so folks, most of whom seemed to be busily doing something or other. Two of them were doing things with sound equipment. One was preparing drinks. Two were in the kitchen around the corner from the bar, cutting vegetables. And there were several people sitting around the only table in the room, next to the kitchen. They all had notepads in front of them and were leaning forward, apparently having some kind of meeting.

There were some ruffles of acknowledgment as they walked through the entrance, across the room, towards the rows of bottles.

“Beer?” Zack asked Casey. Casey nodded in the affirmative.

“Four,” Zack said to the woman behind the bar.

Monosyllabic communication, Casey noted agreeably. But with an easy, relaxed tone, clearly not interpreted by anyone in the room as rude.

Casey realized he hadn't actually heard any of these guys speak Dutch, except in between songs during their street set a bit. Even then, much of the patter was in English.

“Don't you guys speak Dutch in Holland?” Casey asked Zack.

“Well,” Zack replied thoughtfully, “my mother is Finnish, so I was raised in English. It was the common language between my parents. I also speak Dutch, of course. She” – he gestured toward the woman behind the bar – “is Chinese. But she speaks really good English, luckily. Since none of the rest of us speak Chinese.”

“Yes, but I'm learning Dutch,” she said, with a mock look of defensiveness. She continued: “we have meetings here where sometimes there are 22 people, and I'm the only one who doesn't speak Dutch. So they have the whole meeting in English, just for me. It's embarrassing.”

And impressive, Casey thought. As was this dynamic, expressive and, he thought, incredibly beautiful little Chinese bartender. Vaguely uncomfortable with the very carnal thoughts he was having in her direction, Casey looked away at the wall, acting stoic.

Acting stoic was Casey's main vehicle for getting through the more challenging parts of life. Perhaps the tactic had served him well at times, but it didn't necessarily help in his mostly ineffective efforts at dating over the years.

The wall, in any case, was quite something to look at. Casey wandered over to it and inspected it more closely.

It was covered with posters – covered as in wallpaper, without a bare inch of anything other than posters, all of which overlapped, sometimes a lot. As far as Casey could tell, all the posters were either related to concerts, festivals or protests. The concerts and festivals were decidedly punk in nature, and the protests mainly seemed to be related to squatting, police, and something that involved a lot of radiation symbols.

Although he did knowingly avoid conversation topics with strangers that he thought seemed too intrusive, if he had questions that he determined were not intrusive, Casey wasn't overly concerned about whether they were dumb ones to ask. So he walked back to where Zack and the bartender were hanging out posed his question.

“What are the radiation symbols about in those posters?”

“Some are about nuclear weapons,” said the woman behind the bar. “Others are about nuclear power. Others both!”

With “both” she smiled broadly. “I'm Ming,” she almost chirped. “Who are you?”

She emphasized each of these three words in such a way that showed she was well aware that “what's your name” might have been a less unusual way to ask the question.

“And you are not from Amsterdam. Welcome! Half of us here are not from Amsterdam.” She pointed towards the stage. “He's from Greece.” She pointed toward one of the people taking part in the meeting by the kitchen. “He's French.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Casey noticed Zack quietly shaking his head and smiling.

“I'm from the secret police,” Ming said matter-of-factly.

“No respect for security culture,” Grub growled from just down the bar.

“That's Grub,” said Ming. “He doesn't like to take a bath so much.”

“I'm all for bathing as long as it's in a natural body of water,” Grub mumbled, but audibly.

“He goes swimming in the canal,” Ming explained.

Ming was clearly using the presence of a new visitor to jab her fellow squatters, who were clearly

enjoying each one of the jabs. Casey had noticed that Grub smelled a lot like a dog that had just gotten out of the water – a musty kind of smell, but not too offensive, as smells went. There were plenty of homeless people hanging around during Casey's busking sessions in the T who smelled a lot worse. Old urine was a smell that Casey would always remember as long as he lived, much as he'd prefer not to.

“Are the canals clean enough to swim in?” Casey asked skeptically.

“There's a lot of bicycles on the bottom,” said Patrick.

“And some delicious seaweed!” chimed in a woman who was cutting vegetables not far away.

Suddenly the large black speakers on the other side of the room erupted with the sound of distorted guitars, throbbing bass, pounding drums, and a low-pitched, shouty growling sound that seemed to emanate from a human's throat.

“He got it working!” shouted Ming above the clatter, evidently referring to the sound system.

The volume was soon brought down to a more humane level. The folks having their meeting looked away from the stage and back towards each other, continuing the discussion which had just been interrupted.

“His name is Demos,” Ming informed Casey, in reference to the guy by the stage who had just subjected the entire room to a potential case of tinnitus. “And he goes to demos. You go to demos?” she asked Casey.

Casey was handling being part of the group conversation just fine, but when Ming directed her attention at him with a question like that, he had to remind himself to keep breathing. Doubly so in this case, since he suddenly realized he probably had the wrong answer.

“Um, no, not yet,” he stuttered. He was somewhat desperately searching in his now seriously sleep-deprived mind for something else to add to that statement that would sound slightly less unimpressive. “I remember when we bombed Libya, there were people in the subway with signs who were going to the federal building. I thought about going with them, but I just kept playing music instead.”

“You bombed Libya?” Ming shouted in mock disbelief.

“Well, not me personally,” Casey explained unnecessarily.

“Oh good,” she smiled. “I didn't think it was you.”

“When did you get in to Amsterdam?” Zack asked Casey, changing the subject.

“This morning,” Casey replied. “I just flew here from Boston last night.”

“You must be knackered,” Ming observed. “That's a British word, knackered. You can't have it.”

Something was happening around the table where the meeting was taking place. The meeting was ending, and those involved were picking up their things. Just as soon as they did, the table was covered with metal pots filled with food, and various implements for serving it. No words were spoken announcing that dinner was ready as far as Casey could tell, but a line of squatters had formed in front of the table, and more people were trickling in from outside now and joining the line, as did everyone else who had been hanging out at the bar.

Being served was a gloppy rice and vegetable concoction, and salad. With salt, Casey found it was surprisingly good. Plus he was really hungry, he realized.

The only places to sit were the chairs at the bar, a couch up against one of the walls, and a bench on the other wall. Which apparently looked uninviting, since most people just sat on the floor in various combinations. Including the bucket musicians, and Casey.

“If you want to spend the night at the squat, it's no problem,” Zack said. “There are a few free beds. In the morning, if you want to get back into town, there are extra bicycles.”

“Everyone in the Netherlands has an extra bicycle,” Patrick added.

“They get stolen so much, you have to have a backup,” someone else said.

Casey was touched by the hospitality he was being offered on his first day in Europe. He was also so tired now, he could barely hold himself off the floor.

“You look tired,” Zack pointed out. “Shall I get a bed ready for you? You can give me that guitar lesson tomorrow.”

Casey noticed a donations bucket on the table by the food, got up and dropped a fistful of guilders into it. Then he followed Zack out the door of the bar, into the twilight.

“To piss,” Zack said, “anywhere is fine. If you have to shit, there's an outhouse there.” He pointed to a wooden structure on stilts.

They walked a bit further, to a VW van parked beside a tree in a field. “This is one of our guest accommodations,” Zack said. “There should be blankets and a pillow in here.”

He slid the side door open and investigated the situation, which was evidently up to snuff.

“Sleep good.”

Casey lay alone, enjoying the cool night air, the warm blankets, the pillow. The pillow which smelled a bit like sweat -- a bit like his father after wearing a suit all day in an overheated office. A nice smell, Casey thought, as he quickly drifted off.

He awoke five hours later, in the wee hours of the morning, feeling an odd combination of tired and fully awake at the same time. It was reminiscent of the feeling of taking caffeine pills, Casey thought. He had taken many of them in his senior year of high school as a last-ditch effort to stay awake in class. This must be jet lag, he realized. He tried to remember if he had experienced this feeling as a kid on that trip to California, where there's a three-hour time difference from Boston, but he couldn't recall.

He noticed that it was starting to get light out again. Just enough to see where he was going if he wanted to take a walk around, he thought. He figured he'd do that, rather than lie awake.

He hadn't actually had a good look around the place yet. He figured no one would mind if he wandered about, which he did. He discovered there was a little path that circled around the high perimeter fence, and he walked around it all the way -- quietly, not wanting to wake anybody. For as he discovered, the purpose of this path was to connect several dozen home-made dwellings, along with other, less home-made ones, like the van he had been sleeping in.

He didn't want to go into the main buildings, in case it was against protocol for a visitor to go in there

in the middle of the night. But he wondered about the details. Like were there showers with hot running water in there somewhere? He couldn't imagine living life without one. Were they hooked up to public utilities? But at the moment there was no one around to ask, so he just wondered to himself.

Over the next several days, having only just set foot in Europe, Casey and the bucket musicians commuted between the squat and the center of Amsterdam by bicycle. He was humbled by his adoption by this bunch of buskers and their fellow squatters, and fascinated by his new surroundings. He tried to be a good guest, donating generously when there was the option to do so, and he tried to be helpful when he was around the squat. And he taught Zack the rudiments of playing the piano on an upside-down guitar.

While Casey's hotel reservation lasted, he kept on using the room for showering, without mentioning it to anyone. He hadn't yet ascertained how these squatters managed to bathe. He had not yet come across any showers or bathtubs, and he just didn't feel like asking about some things yet. He would learn about that over the weekend.

As the week went on, the busking got better by the day. Which was always the case in Boston, too. Everyone's feeling more generous when it's closer to the weekend.

Casey was recovering from jet lag more each day, and staying up later. Which was good, because on Thursday the live bands started up at the bar at DMZ, and if he had wanted to get to sleep before 4 am it would have been challenging. Or at least it would have required ear plugs, or the assistance of drugs or alcohol.

Casey wasn't sure what he thought of any of the bands that were playing each night as the week progressed. They were all very loud, and he couldn't understand any of the lyrics. A lot of the dancing was a bit violent, with people crashing into each other a lot. Casey had heard of "moshing" before, but had never actually witnessed the phenomenon. It wasn't particularly to his liking, but the people doing it were.

Casey wondered how many other people were ambivalent to the noisy music, but just went to the shows because all their friends were there. It seemed wrong to ask anyone, "do you really like this stuff?" so he just wondered to himself.

Then again, Casey often wasn't sure what he felt about any kind of music. He saw how much music affected other people – that was obvious in his profession. He played music that was calculated to affect the largest numbers of people, at least among that section of humanity that rides the Boston subways.

But for himself, he never felt deeply attached to any of the classical music he grew up playing, nor did he develop any deep emotional connection to the pop music he discovered on the radio as a teenager. Or most of the songs he played every day in the subways.

Other people he met growing up felt deeply connected to the music of their youth -- or the music of their homelands if they were from somewhere else. As so many people were, especially if you made your living in the subways.

Casey often felt a bit jealous of people who felt strongly about anything, be it music or some other aspect of life. He was thinking about that on Friday night, sitting on a damp bench outside the bar, when Ming approached him and asked him a random question, as she often did, much to his enjoyment.

"Why didn't you join those people who were going to protest the bombing, Casey?" she asked.

He liked Ming's random comments and queries, and how she tended to combine them with some kind of friendly gesture. Like in this case, not only was she smiling as she asked the question, but she proceeded then to sit down on the bench alongside Casey and light up a large joint she was holding between two fingers.

The smoke billowed from the paper foreskin before the fire reached the widest bit of the joint. The weed and tobacco then started to slowly cook, creating a bright orange half-moon which contrasted with the dim, dank evening.

Casey thought about Ming's question, as he simultaneously tried hard not to be immobilized by the enchanting beauty of the woman asking it – and tried as well to avoid being hypnotized by the smoke wafting up from the joint she was holding. As he began to formulate an answer, however, she passed the joint to him, adding a further obstacle in the way of his efforts to stay focused.

“I don't know,” Casey said, after gathering his thoughts a bit more. “I almost did. But then I didn't. I guess I thought it's a good idea, but it's not gonna make a difference. So why bother?”

“It can help you sleep at night, for one thing,” Ming said.

She looked serious when she said that, but to Casey the words and Ming's expression didn't seem to match up, since he heard “slip” rather than “sleep.” He was still getting used to her Chinese accent. But he tried desperately to hold onto the thread of the conversation, which he had just lost so quickly.

“Like on a banana peel...?” Casey asked.

Ming looked momentarily perplexed until she realized what had happened. She smiled, and in an exaggerated way said “no, sleeeep, not slip.”

Casey blushed. “Fuck, sorry,” he said.

He took a hit of the joint and passed it back to Ming, who held it in her hand for quite a while before getting around to taking another hit herself.

“They can be good for that, too,” Ming said.

Casey was completely confused now. “What can be good for what...?” he asked, meekly.

“Demonstrations! For fucking!”

Ming said this very loudly, causing several people in the area to turn their heads approvingly. Casey was clearly still lost, so Ming passed him the joint and continued.

“Where do you meet the best people? In a disco? At the vegetable market?” she asked rhetorically. “Maybe. But the most nicest people are at the demonstrations.”

Grub happened to be passing by as Ming said this. “But if they're wearing helmets and carrying sticks,” he said, “they might not be so nice.”

Finally feeling like he had rediscovered the thread of the conversation, Casey chimed in.

“Actually, one of the reasons I almost joined the protest was because I thought a couple of the women going there looked, um, very interesting.”

“But even then, you still don't go?” Ming asked, in mock incredulity.

"I figured my chances of hooking up with one of them was about as good as the chances that the protest might change anything."

Casey was smiling slightly as he said this, but it was obvious he was being completely honest on both points -- from his perspective on both US foreign policy and his dating prospects.

"So defeatist!" Ming exclaimed.

Casey had once again quickly passed the joint back to Ming, who then took this as opportunity to impart some advice.

"Casey," she said, looking suddenly serious. "If there's one thing you have to understand about being here in Amsterdam, you have to learn how to smoke a joint *properly*. You do it all wrong! In America, you pass the joint so quickly. Maybe in America you do everything more quicker, I don't know. Here in Amsterdam, you take your time."

"How much time?" Casey asked.

Suddenly he realized that he had noticed this incongruity with how he and the others shared joints, but he hadn't yet gotten around to actually asking anyone to clarify things for him on this matter.

"It's not exact. A few hits. There's always more weed," she explained reassuringly.

This way of smoking joints here makes sense, Casey thought. Since the joints are mostly made up of tobacco, you have to smoke quite a bit of one before you feel anything. So you may as well "Bogart" it.

Having been thus educated on how to smoke a joint in Amsterdam, when the joint came round again, he spent more time with it. Then he noticed that Grub was rolling another one.

"Wow, I feel like I need to do something," Casey observed to no one in particular.

"Sativa," said Grub.

"Sativa?"

"Sativa usually makes you feel like that," Grub explained. "That's what you're smoking."

The door to the bar opened, and the sound of a band doing a sound check drifted out of it. Casey realized that he had heard this song before. They were singing in Italian, he recognized. And half the bands who played at the squat had done the same Italian song, it then occurred to him.

"What's that song?" he asked.

"Bella Ciao," Ming and Grub answered at the same time. "Probably the most well-known antifascist song from the Second World War."

Zack had just come out of the bar and joined his friends and acquaintances around the damp bench.

"You can't dance to most of them," he said. "Most of them are fucking dirges."

Grub started tapping the rhythm of the song on the bench with his hands, emphasizing the upbeats.

"There's syncopation," he pointed out.



Casey had suddenly found the solution for satiating his new-found urge to do something useful.

“I want to learn it,” he proclaimed.

The head rush he got when he stood up nearly knocked him over. He steadied himself and meandered towards the rusty van that he was currently calling home.

There was no electricity there near the van. He thought momentarily about finding a place in one of the buildings where there was an outlet, but nixed the idea right away. Nicer outside, sitting on a log by the VW. He could buy more batteries, he thought, with only minimal guilt this time.

It only took a minute for him to set himself up there, but he was mildly annoyed by each passing second, until he finally was comfortably seated, guitar in place, perched on his shoulder. Amp beside him, set to a barely audible, practice volume.

With his left hand he began tapping around, finding the melody to the song – a simple melody that he had now heard enough times that he knew it well. Though the only words to the song that he could remember were the two in the refrain, “bella ciao,” and he didn't know what they meant.

After figuring out the melody, he realized he'd need to do it in a different key in order for the bass line to work better. Which was the next project, for his right hand. He was very happy when he stumbled upon an especially nice hammer-on, pull-off riff for the bass line that emphasized the syncopated rhythm of the song -- in a way that he thought would at least cause the less uptight folks walking by on the street to wiggle a bit.

By 3 am he had mastered the song. His back, neck, hands, wrists, and knees were all hurting, and he was exhausted. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything in hours, or stood up. But he had the tune down cold. He was feeling very accomplished, when he thought he would go have a piss, before collapsing for the night.

It was only then that he noticed that the music in the bar had both started and ended, and most folks who didn't live at the DMZ had left, with the local residents having gone off to bed as well. A dozen or so stragglers were gathered around a small fire. It seemed odd to Casey that their fire was positioned right beside the large wooden structure that he understood was soon to be consumed by a much larger fire.

Standing, Casey could see that Ming and Grub were sitting in the dark about fifteen feet away.

Noticing that Casey had spotted them, Ming said, “beautiful.”

“Nice bass line,” Grub added.

“Thanks,” Casey said as he approached them.

“You gonna play that on the streets?” Ming asked.

“I'll give it a shot,” Casey said. “See if people like it.”

“The tourists might not like it,” she said thoughtfully. “But other people will.”

Casey could hardly see her face, but he could somehow hear that she was smiling.

“Maybe no money,” she said, “but lots of friends.”

Ming and Grub stayed seated on the ground in the dark, as Casey bid them good-night, and went to look for a spot with no people sitting nearby where he could relieve his bladder.

## 4

Not twelve hours after Casey went to bed in the wee hours of that Saturday, he was in the center of Amsterdam again. Feeling refreshed after the long bike ride from the DMZ, once again enjoying the camaraderie of his fellow buskers on the way, he went hunting for good spots that were free to use.

Casey introduced his instrumental version of “Bella Ciao” into the repertoire. Just as Ming had predicted, it didn't generate frequent donations. But when it did, the donations came from people that looked interesting.

Although there were too many people at the DMZ that night for Casey to feel brave enough to try to mingle with the crowd, he enjoyed the burning of the structure. It was, he figured, the hottest fire he had ever experienced.

The fire was an all-night affair, and he ultimately slept through most of it. He knew there were drugs being consumed that were stronger than weed. Which was why all these folks could stay up all night like that, he figured. No one offered him anything, and he didn't seek it out, preferring to avoid becoming nocturnal.

Which meant that he was one of the first people up and about on Sunday, when he discovered how it was that people at the DMZ bathed. It was a discovery he was very happy to make, having now reached a stage of griminess that had almost provoked him to ask someone where there might be a shower or something.

There was a massive pile of very hot coals where the bonfire had been. He was admiring it at around 8 am, when he saw that among the zombie-esque squatters and other folks that were stumbling around after partying all night were a more determined-looking group of eight black-clad men. Each of whom was sporting a smart jacket, and pants with two zippers. Together, they were pushing the largest industrial tub on wheels that Casey had never imagined.

He thought about offering to help, but he figured if his pants didn't have two zippers, he shouldn't. He was clearly missing something important. Over the course of a very long and arduous twenty minutes, they moved the tub towards the pile of coals, and then positioned it above the coals. At that point, several other people were working together to drag a very large hose up to the rim of the tub. Once that was in position, the gushing of the water began.

A couple hours later, one of the guys with two zippers blew a horn at an impressive volume. Within twenty minutes, there were dozens of sleepy-looking people milling around, groups of whom were periodically removing all of their clothing, and bathing above the coals.

Casey had spent a week at the DMZ, and figured he had probably best not overstay his welcome. He knew he was just a guest, and he had heard people talking about how hard it was to become a full-time resident at the squat. Mostly, he didn't want to just get stuck in the first city he came to in Europe, much as he liked it.

So after his first and only bath at the DMZ, Casey hitched a ride on a bucket bike to the main train

station, gave some guilders to some junkies, and looked at the big Departures board.

The only vague notion Casey had in terms of forming any kind of a travel plan was that he wanted to avoid hot weather, and go places where the busking was good. He had heard that the busking was good in most European cities. So he figured he'd just start out with the countries where he would never have to sweat while standing still, which was what he disliked the most about Boston in the summer.

Casey had met a lot of Germans in the Boston subways, and almost all of them were mild-mannered, bespectacled academics. Plus Germany was on the way to Scandinavia. There was a direct train to some city named Koln, so Casey took it. On the way, he realized that Koln was Cologne. Which didn't help much, since he knew almost nothing about the place either way. Except that now it was a city that he had at least heard of before.

The existence of the cathedral in the center of Cologne was the one thing he had heard of before. It was very nice, though covered in scaffolding. Casey explored the city center around the cathedral, until his shoulders were too tired and walking wasn't fun anymore. Then he sat down to busk, in an area surrounded by cafes filled with people enjoying the crisp afternoon air, on this mostly sunny spring day.

The vast majority of people passing by a busker don't generally donate to them. But some do, and in Cologne, as in Amsterdam and Boston, Casey received donations from more people than most buskers do. In Cologne as elsewhere, guitar enthusiasts were wowed by Casey's unusual, upside-down tapping technique. And there seemed to be no end to the number of people in the world who wanted to hear yet another rendition of "Stairway to Heaven" on any given day.

That first evening in Cologne, he collected his weighty piles of coins and went looking for a hostel. In all the telephone booths, there were fliers advertising sex and hostels. For many lonely travelers, Casey figured the desire for sex and the need for housing went together. He still wanted to find love, or even just sex. But he thought it was sad that these fliers were all over the place. That so many men apparently wanted to pay for sex with strangers.

Casey looked at the fliers for the hostels. Examining the graphics on the fliers, one had a prominent cross on a hill. Avoid that one, Casey thought. The graphics on another reminded him of the Boy Scouts. That would do if there wasn't something more interesting. Then he saw the flier with the peace sign and the anti-nuclear graphic he had noticed on so many of the posters at the DMZ. That one.

The hostel was only a few blocks from the cathedral, near where Casey had been busking. It had an English name – the Green Room. The name was written in friendly, green bubble lettering over the door to the place, and the "o's" featured anti-nuclear symbols and peace signs.

Inside, the place was bustling with activity. There were a few people with backpacks waiting in line to check in, and several dozen other people around the place, both inside the building and in the spacious backyard that Casey could see once he stepped through the front door. Many of the people in the place were industriously painting big sheets and banners with German words, and what appeared to be anti-nuclear graphics of various kinds.

"Are we speaking English?" asked the woman standing behind the counter.

Like most of the people in the hostel, she was in her twenties. Like a significant minority of the people, she was tall, thin, and blonde. And, Casey thought, uncomfortably beautiful. He made a conscious effort to look at her eyes and ignore her large breasts. The effort was made more difficult by

the skin-tight fabric her shirt was made of, and the ample cleavage that wasn't even covered by that.

Casey was glad she had asked first. He didn't like asking people if they spoke English, or admitting that he didn't speak their language. Now he didn't have to.

“Yes, please,” Casey said.

The blonde woman looked at Casey a bit oddly when he said “please,” as if to say, “where do you think we are, in Sunday School?”

“You want one bed for tonight?” she asked Casey.

“Yes.”

Casey had skipped the “please” this time. Which seemed to meet with the woman's approval, since now there was a faint hint of a smile, rather than a faint hint of a sneer.

“Any of the beds in that room” – she pointed – “that don't have stuff on them are free. There's breakfast in the morning at 8. If you're here for the media training, it's happening at twenty o'clock.”

She paused a moment before continuing. “If you're not here for the media training, it will happen anyway.”

Casey thought she had just made a joke, and he thought about laughing, but he wasn't sure, so he didn't.

He almost said “thank you,” but didn't want to be sneered at again by such a beautiful woman. So he said, “cool.” Which, upon reflection, he thought sounded even stupider than “thank you.” But she neither sneered nor smiled, so he wasn't sure.

He had to do some quick math in his head to figure out that “twenty o'clock” presumably meant 8 pm. He didn't even think about asking what a media training was. He figured he'd either find somebody less intimidating to ask. Or, much more likely, just hang around and see what was going on.

Casey walked down the hall, found a fairly cramped, dorm-style room with eight bunk beds in it, and plopped his stuff down on one of the ones that just had a mattress and a small pile of neatly-folded things at the foot of it. Then he set out to satisfy his curiosity about what was going on in his colorful little hostel.

The walls were covered with murals, giving the place a friendly, bright atmosphere. Very different from the DMZ's general emphasis on grey, black and red.

Most of the folks had a bit of a college student vibe, but with an overtone of hippie. Young and sort of alternative. Like most of the folks at the DMZ in that sense, but cleaner, more colorful, with fewer tattoos or piercings.

Casey sat down on a chair among the folks busily making props and banners, in a large common room. Most of the chairs didn't have people sitting on them. Most of the folks were sitting or kneeling on the floor, working on things that were spread out across it. Casey was excited that he could make sense of the biggest of the banners, which read “*atomkraft, nein danke*” – atomic power, no thanks.

No one said anything to Casey during the ten minutes or so he was sitting in the room, trying not to look like he was staring at anyone. No one gave him any unfriendly looks either. He didn't mind being ignored at all, as long as he wasn't in the way.

Someone said something in German to the whole group. A few words, and everybody started packing things up and putting their projects off to the side of the room. Within a couple minutes, everyone was seated on chairs or on the floor, with others standing in the back. There was just about space in the room for everyone that way. A very fit-looking man in his thirties, with bright, blue eyes, curly hair, and yellow jeans now stood in front of the assembled group.

“Is there anyone who doesn't speak German?” he asked, in English.

A few people in the room were looking at another small group of people, as if they were wondering if that group was going to speak up for themselves. Which they then did, by raising their hands – two young men and one young woman.

“The Finns are coming,” one of the young men exclaimed.

Most of the people in the room chuckled spontaneously. Not Casey, who thought the idea of Finns coming sounded perfectly lovely, but he had no idea why it was especially funny.

“Is there anyone who doesn't understand English?” the man in front asked.

As he waited for an answer, it apparently suddenly dawned on him that if anybody didn't understand English, they wouldn't understand his question, either. He quickly repeated the question in German.

A small, plump, older woman with a messy, dirty, red wig on her head raised her hand. Several of the young people in the room looked visibly annoyed. Casey soon realized why.

For anyone who understood both English and German, this meeting would now take at least twice as long as it would if it were only conducted in one language. From here on in, everything the man said, and everything anyone else said, would be translated -- all for the benefit of three Finns and the woman with the smelly wig. And Casey.

“OK,” the man in front began. “I have heard people asking when is the Castor Transport going to be. The thing is, nobody knows. They don't tell us in advance. But they have to move the nuclear material to France because Germany does not have a reprocessing plant. So all we know is that there will soon be another Castor Transport. And we know that we are coming to greet it.”

He smiled somewhat mischievously, and waited for a girl with a very long braid to speak. She had just walked to the front of the room, and was evidently translating what the man in the yellow pants had said. She looked very comfortable and confident, which struck Casey as unusual for a girl who looked to be about fifteen years of age.

One of the Finns raised his hand, and the man nodded for him to speak.

“How do you know when the train is coming?” the Finn asked.

Casey appreciated this question, for he now knew that the Castor Transport was a train, or that a train was somehow involved, anyway.

“In recent years the government has required 35,000 cops just to keep the train moving at all. When 35,000 cops book every hotel room and B&B within a hundred kilometers of the town of Gorleben, the farmers notice this.”

He paused for translation.

“OK,” he continued, “so we don't know when it's coming exactly, but we need to be prepared to share this information very quickly. So we use the telephone tree.”

He paused for translation again, and then went on to explain this system by which each person called ten other people, who each then called ten other people, and ultimately resulted in hundreds of thousands of protesters converging on this train, Casey gathered.

After a thorough explanation of the workings of the telephone tree, the man with the yellow pants changed the topic.

“OK. So then, we're there. There are actions taking place. There is mass nonviolent civil disobedience. There are people digging tunnels under the tracks.”

“Property destruction!” someone shouted.

“Yes,” the man in front confirmed. “And then there will be the *Autonomen*, who will be trying to destroy more than just property.”

This word, *Autonomen*, was not an English word that Casey was familiar with, but no translation for it was offered.

“And the *Autonomen* attacking the police will be all that's on TV that night,” a woman complained, with what Casey thought was a very nuanced tone of resignation lined with bitterness.

OK, so these *Autonomen* attack cops, Casey thought. Got it.

“Let's run through some scenarios,” the man in front said. “Hello, I'm from BBC. What do you think of these anarchists throwing molotovs at the police?”

A young woman near the front of the room nodded. The man nodded to her, and she spoke.

“It is not our job to control the tactics of people who do not adhere to our principles of nonviolence. We are here to oppose dirty energy, and to support an alternative, green future.”

The man in front was beaming. “Excellent, yes. Why is this such a powerful statement? Anybody?”

A young man from the back of the room spoke. “Because she distanced us from the violence but avoided getting dragged into a debate on conflicts between protesters. And she turned the focus back to the goals of the movement.”

“Hello protesters. How do you justify destroying these nice public train tracks here?”

“It's not us, it's the moles!” someone shouted.

“They make very big holes, these moles,” the mock reporter said.

“We destroy the tracks,” said someone else. “We commit this crime in order to try to prevent a much bigger crime from being committed.”

“But the Castor gets to France every year eventually anyway.”

“Maybe this year it won't.”

“Excellent,” said the man with the yellow pants. “Protesters, why protest? Why not just vote or run for

office? Isn't that what democracy is about?"

"Most people in West Germany oppose nuclear power," someone answered. "Why do the politicians not do what the voters want them to do, and shut down the nuclear power stations?"

The back-and-forth media/protester role play went on like that for quite some time, and Casey found it engrossing. These people were not just attending a protest. They were clearly part of a movement. They had thought this stuff through quite a bit. He found these young Germans to be very sympathetic characters.

The day after this training, the place was back to just being more like a regular hostel. Albeit a laid-back one, affiliated with the anti-nuclear movement. Casey enjoyed a few more days of being based out of the Green Room at night, and busking near the cathedral during the day.

Then he got a sort of itch he was starting to become familiar with, that was telling him he needed to see more. So he figured he'd keep on heading in the general direction of Scandinavia.

Casey took a train to Hamburg.

He liked Hamburg right away. It had a cosmopolitan feel, with lots of people from all over the world living in the city. He discovered the subway system, which he found very reminiscent of Boston's. After spending a night in a cheap, dank hotel near the main train station, he spent an entire day taking the subway a couple of stops and then getting out and exploring a new neighborhood a bit, before doing it again. He discovered the Elbe River, and marveled at the extent to which it was still a big shipping channel -- something his own Charles River had long ago stopped being.

Though he preferred the more mellow scene among the locals and tourists on the Elbe, Casey figured out that the most lucrative busking was on a busy pedestrian mall near the Rathaus -- the City Hall -- in an upscale neighborhood.

He developed a routine that was reminiscent of life in Boston. Except that home was a cheap hotel room that smelled like mildew, rather than his parents' house. And the subway was the "U" rather than the "T."

One Friday, however, a day that started out like many of his other days that week took a dramatic and decidedly un-routine turn.

He was playing "Stairway to Heaven" for the 14<sup>th</sup> time that day, when several dozen people wearing entirely black from head to toe, except for bits of blond hair sticking out, faces all covered by balaclavas or bandanas, were running full speed all in the same direction, past Casey.

None of them seemed to have noticed Casey as they ran past. But he still thought he should switch to "Bella Ciao" at that point. He had gotten a few notes into the tune when a far, far larger mass of black-clad people ran past him. At the end of this group, which he guessed to be close to a thousand people, there were some who were limping, and leaning hard on the shoulders of others in order to progress forward. Which they evidently felt they needed to do as fast as they could.

Casey had never seen more than a few dozen punks at any one time in any one place. He was too bewildered by this sudden turn of events to consider whether he should possibly do anything other than sit there on the sidewalk in front of the clothing store where he had recently become accustomed to busking.



He was just beginning to formulate the thought that maybe he should go, as he noticed as well that the pedestrian mall was suddenly bereft of shoppers now. The only people on the mall now were a thousand black-clad Germans and him.

And then he saw police emerge on the roof across the pedestrian mall from him. As they emerged, they shouted something, and a black-clad person jumped off the roof, towards the sidewalk below.

The buildings were only one story, but the ceilings were very high. Casey thought it was clear from the way the person had jumped that they were hoping to land on their feet and run away afterwards. This was not a suicide attempt or anything like that, but Casey could tell it wasn't going to go well, and it didn't.

The black-clad person landed on his feet initially, and looked like he was trying to roll forward to absorb the shock of the jump. But instead, he just rolled as far forward as his knees, which slammed into the pavement with a crunching sound that Casey immediately knew he would remember for the rest of his life.

The black-clad person tried to get up and run after that. When he did, he screamed in pain, and then began to vomit. Casey noticed at the same time that he did that one of his leg bones was visible, and sticking out at an absurd angle.

Casey had never seen a person's bone sticking out of their bodies, and he was reminded of the fragility of the human body. And how much human leg bones resemble chicken leg bones.

Then he heard what sounded like Stormtroopers marching on the Death Star in Star Wars. But instead of seeing an army of guys in white armored suits with laser guns, it was fast-marching lines of policemen, with big plastic shields and long wooden clubs which they were beating on their shields as they marched, aggressively.

Casey was momentarily mesmerized by the whole, completely surreal scene. Until the punk with the leg bone sticking out began to convulse. Alone on the pedestrian mall, aside from Casey and an army of fast-approaching riot cops.

At that point, Casey stopped thinking, and just acted. He dropped his guitar, which he realized he had still been holding upside-down, over his shoulder. He ran towards the man convulsing on the mall, and held his head, so it stopped smacking against the sidewalk with each convulsion. Casey knew nothing about convulsions and had no medical training whatsoever, but he did what seemed like the sensible thing to do when someone was reflexively smacking their head against very hard cobblestones.

And then the riot cops were upon them both. Casey realized he might have time to run into the clothing store, if he left the convulsing man on the sidewalk. Instead, he stayed, holding the man's head, and found himself shouting at the cops much louder than he had ever shouted in his life, so that the veins on his head and in his throat were bulging and red, and tears were flowing from his eyes and froth was coming out of his mouth.

“His legs are broken! He needs an ambulance!”

He kept shouting these two phrases over and over with such fervor that the riot cops parted their phalanx and went around the two figures on the sidewalk at their feet. They did not offer to help. But none of them swung their clubs.

After what seemed like an eternal sea of menacing men in green armor passing by in reality took about

thirty seconds. Casey and the man were once again alone on the pedestrian mall.

Casey was just happy to be alive at that point, and also happy that the man whose head he was holding was also still alive. He felt like smoking a joint more than he had ever wanted to smoke a joint in his life. But he stayed there on the sidewalk instead.

He saw down a nearby alleyway that a woman was gesturing towards two men in uniforms with a lot of fluorescent green reflective strips on them, who were carrying a stretcher.

The men ran over to Casey and his ward, and very professionally relieved him of his duty, strapping the man onto the stretcher and carrying him a block away to where their ambulance was waiting. Casey followed them to the ambulance, getting a good look at the black-clad man's face for the first time as the medics removed his balaclava, before they put an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose.

For having two badly broken legs and some kind of violent convulsions, his face looked surprisingly unscathed. He had a short blond mohawk and soft, gentle features. Casey thought he couldn't be much older than twenty.

The ambulance drove off, and Casey returned to his guitar on the pedestrian mall. Shoppers were beginning to emerge from the shops in which they had taken cover. Shopkeepers who had hastily dropped metal gates in front of their windows began to lift the gates and reopen their shops.

Casey had no intention of continuing where he had left off – he was done busking for that day. He squatted down to pack up his instrument. Which was when he realized that the neck was cracked in several places. Either from how violently he had dropped the guitar when he went to the punk's aid, or because the cops trampled on it. He didn't know which, but it was kaput.

As he thought of the word, *kaput*, he remembered a World War 2 movie he had seen at some point, and how often the German tank commanders kept using that word to refer to their frequently disabled vehicles. Kaput.

It's too big to fit in one of those garbage cans, he thought. So he abandoned the broken guitar on the cobblestones and walked back to his hotel. He had never been so happy to be alone in a moldy room in all his life.