

To hear some of Europe's best free music, head underground

Strumming in the Subway



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TUBE TUNES: London finally bowed to public demand and legalized busking—for those who make the cut

BY LIZ KRIEGER

Looking to hear some nice, free music this summer? You could do a lot worse than to head underground. In the subway stations of Europe's biggest cities, busking is surprisingly popular, not just among tourists but among locals and city officials as well. Sometimes the music is even good.

That's because the competition has really heated up. Once the province of every amateur accordion player and karaoke crooner, busking in many places now requires a permit. In Paris, where there are 360 licensed subway musicians, only one in

three makes the cut. Rotterdam started giving out busking licenses in 2000. And just last month London, where illegal buskers have long waged a guerrilla war with police, acceded to the demands of the public (eight in 10 say they want music in the Tube) and made the practice legal. Over the next four months, auditions will create a pool of some 300 musicians who will rotate through the Underground.

Besides looking for good musicians, judges are looking for diversity. From Bond Street to St-Michel you'll hear Gypsy folk songs, Irish reels, blues guitar, acoustic folk-rock, accordion jigs,

African drumming, Latin rhythms and, of course, the standard Bob Marley and Beatles covers. Indeed, certain stations are renowned for certain sounds. London's Oxford Circus has long been known for its blues, while classical-music fans can enjoy a (nearly) free concert at highbrow South Kensington. In Paris the popular African drumming group Christ can often be found at the République station; at the Opéra station, predictably, classical tunes are more common. Now French busking fans can even take the sounds of the subway home: last week "Correspondance," the first album of Métro music, went on sale.

Astute observers might even glimpse greatness while waiting for a train. Both Paul McCartney and Rod Stewart logged hours underground in their early days; Sex Pistols lead singer John Lydon (a.k.a. Johnny Rotten because of his teeth) was discovered while busking on a London street during the '70s. Today, Namibian opera singer Angelina Kalahari can sometimes be found singing Puccini arias in the Tube—when not performing at London's Royal Opera House. In Paris the Senegalese percussion group Toure Kunda got its start in the Métro, as did Nigerian bluesman Keziah Jones and French-Tunisian singer Laam, who went on to sell nearly 2 million albums. In Rome, NEWSWEEK once witnessed Billy Corgan, then lead singer of the Smashing Pumpkins, plop down on a bench in Piazza Navona and start playing. Italians who didn't recognize him threw money into an open guitar case.

Still, it's a tough way to make a living. Not technically allowed to "conduct commerce," buskers must rely on the generosity of their listeners. Paris musicians say the most they can make is about \$50 on a good day in the high season. One sad saxophone player at the Châtelet station recently made only \$3 all evening. And when the scruffy, unshaved singer Damon Gough—otherwise known as Badly Drawn Boy—tried busking in the London Tube earlier this year, all he earned was \$3.17. So much for street cred.

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