

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

WHAT DOES an indie folk singer, a jug band, a Caribbean steel pan player, a dancing midget Michael Jackson all have in common with a classical guitarist? All have recently auditioned to receive the coveted *Musicians Under New York* (MUNY) banner bestowed by the City of New York and its Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which confers a weekly rotating schedule of prime playing spots at various subway stations around the city. While all buskers are required to apply for a city permit, these artists have the distinction of being New York's official cultural ambassadors.

The judging panel covered a spectrum of MTA stationmasters and supervisors, music industry professionals and long-term performers within the MUNY program, including classical guitarist and New York native, Don Witter, Jr., who plays a programme of Brazilian music, sambas and classical music underground yearlong with a Crate amp.

MUNY Programme director Tim Higginbotham tells me the influx and outflow of new performers and established ones balances out in the end. 'Some go on tour or have other commitments, gigs or else they move away or take a breather that extends indefinitely. And of course, there are those who had perhaps a too glamourized idea of fame and fortune that the real subway experience did not live up to. From the annual audition, we choose those performers with the highest marks. We have approximately two hundred to three hundred auditioning performers in the first round and settle on seventy for the live audition. It's been approximately the same number each year.'

Final auditions are held for a full day within Vanderbilt Hall at Grand Central Station in two sessions, morning and afternoon. Performers are given five minutes to win over the judges. The five minutes includes set-up time — as learned the hard way by an elderly, ambidextrous Polish accordionist who was attempting to play an electronic keyboard propped upon a rickety wire shopping cart. With its Beaux Art marble grandeur, soaring ceilings and gigantic, turn-of-the-century chandeliers, Vanderbilt Hall acoustically mirrors the havoc a busker will have to contend with underground—an echoing cavern where sound can shift from murky to a full-out drowning din and roar.

Sitting in as a judge on the morning panel, the biggest hazard I'd observed for performers during this session appeared to be oversleeping, which resulted in five no-shows and four late performers out of a total of thirty candidates. The musicians are also expected to arrive prepared and well-equipped to deal with subway noise without

amplifying at excessively high volume levels. Above all, their music had to delight, soothe and entertain.

A brigade of percussionists took to the floor in various forms — two Caribbean steel pan players (one paired with a steel drummer), bongo drums, plastic buckets and kitchen pots. The indie folk/rock singers followed suit, from an ethereal and wispy-looking new age singer unleashing an unexpectedly strong yet elegant voice to a Patsy Cline to a teenager singing karaoke-style in strained earnest. If performers accompanied themselves with amplified recordings, it struck me that it seemed a bit like cheating. Secretly I'd wished they had made the effort of finding another live performer to team up with but of course this always adds an element of unpredictability and another body to share earnings with. I couldn't resist giving good marks to a teenaged jazz violinist on account of her lovely fast-fingered melodies soaring over a recorded, Django-like rhythm guitar. The classical guitarist who auditioned turned out to be a disappointingly unamplified but brave performer of Americana folk songs. Unfortunately, without an amp, a classical guitar will become lost in the subway environment and reduced to the faint strains of a wind-up music box.

A radio station interviewer tapped my shoulder to ask if I had ever busked. The answer is yes — in Europe. I'd played in Paris, London, Dublin, Sligo, Enniscorthy and Wexford, Ireland, where I'd landed one of my best compliments—'You've managed to make an entire pub full of Irishmen shut up on a Saturday night to listen to a song they cannot sing along to.' It was on the tip of my tongue — but I'd thought the better of it — to tell him that I particularly enjoyed busking in Europe because my unfamiliarity with the lexicon of profanity in various foreign languages had forced me to be inventive with slinging back a salty invective or two when faced with the hazards that come with playing out on the street.

'Can I play WHAT—a BeeGees tune? You must be drunk. In fact, if I tie a string around your ankle at the beginning of this next piece I'll bet you will have woven an entire blanket with it by the time I'm done playing, from the way you're staggering around.' Given my book-learned butchery of the French language, this most likely translated into something archly Shakespearean and rococo enough to repel any further heckling, which, admittedly, came mostly from Sorbonne art student chalk drawers who had become upset by the steady flow of change into my cup after I'd drawn a crude stick figure next to their elaborate Mona Lisas and Chagalls with the caption, 'I'm the one who really needs art lessons.'

Why busk in the subways of New York where it is loud, filthy and noisy? For one, on a good day, performers can earn £25/hour and upwards of £150/day in a busy location. Subway performers know in a minute if their music succeeds because of the immediacy — they have five minutes to impress a crowd before the next train pulls in. And unlike a concert situation where a handful of audience members might greet an artist backstage, the public feels freer to approach an artist on a subway platform. Sometimes this even leads to lucrative bookings.

As a New Yorker, I know I will be tired at the end of the day when waiting for the train. Some walk down subway steps as if they are tired before the day has even begun. We live in a city that depends on its sooty, underground hamster runs that mirror the well-worn daily grind running through our own minds. A good busker will cast a spell that distracts, derails and breaks through all this to delight, entertain and make your feet try out a new rhythm.

And if that rush hour train happens to be full, it might not seem like the end of the world to have to wait for the next one.