This Issue in Two Sections

NAVSTAR Break-In Activist Tells All, Page 7

READER

November 27, 1987 Vol. 10, No. 6 LOS ANGELES'S FREE WEEKLY

Plenty of Good Eating Suggestions, Page 8

L.A. Talent—Taking It To The Streets

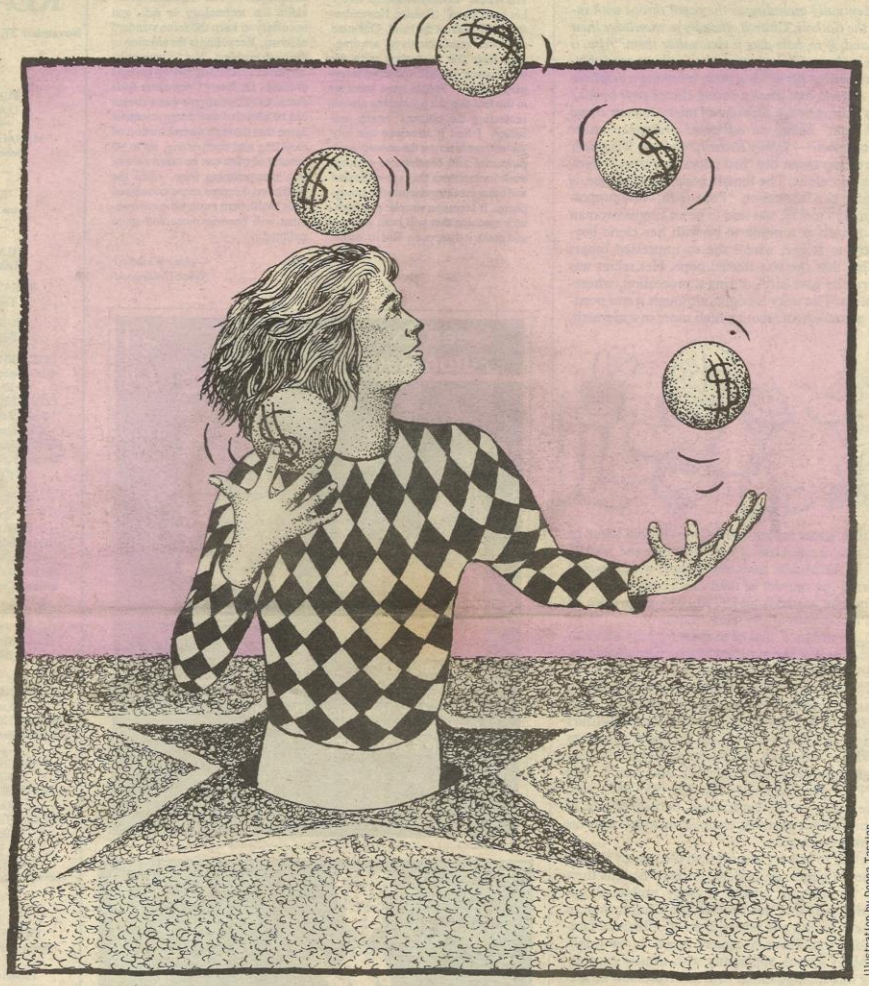


Illustration by Donna Tarzian

By Edward I. Placidi

All the world may be a stage for street performers, but L.A. is the promised land.

And not because the money's easy. On the contrary, these road warriors tell of jaded Los Angelenos who demand more than crowds elsewhere and are slower to dip into their pockets.

And not because all of L.A.'s streets are hot spots for spontaneous, outdoor showtime. On the contrary, street performers decry how they've been pushed out of everywhere but the Boardwalk in Venice.

No, L.A. is the promised land because this is Hollywood. This is where you get discovered.

"I'm here in California on the streets to make it as an entertainer," said Groovin Ruben, who came west from his native Detroit with a dance routine characterized by quick, tightly-controlled movements and contortions. "I'm not really making a living. I do it because I'm serious about making it," he claims, adding that he's looking for an agent.

New Yorker Tony Vera was juicing the Big Apple—boasting a big following and making top money for a street performer—but he opted to go for it all in L.A.

Twelve years ago Vera staged a publicity stunt—climbing the Brooklyn Bridge bound in a straight jacket and threatening to jump—to get his street show off the ground. It worked: the media played it up and people crowded Washington Square to see him blow fire from his mouth and perform balancing feats supported by lewd comedy. Between the stunt, his show and a sensationalized incident on 42nd Street when he thwarted muggers with a collapsible cane used in his act, Vera became a celebrity on the pages of *New York Times* , *The New York Post*, and *People, Newsweek*.

"But I felt I wasn't growing," explained the 28-year-old, who learned his trade hanging out with circus performers while working as a vendor in Madison Square Garden. The notoriety had come and gone ("The New York papers all knew me and there was nothing more to write about"). So he decided to take the plunge—on the coast—and set his sights high: Try for the Johnny Carson Show, and from there springboard into the movies.

While Ruben and Vera are still waiting for their breaks, comedian Michael Colyar may be on his way. Three years on the Venice streets for the Chicagoan with a theater background have started paying off.

Doing his act day in and day out, consistently reeling in among the biggest crowds on the Boardwalk, he has been approached by different people in "the business" and asked to audition. The payoff: parts in soon-to-be-released Anthony Michael Hall's *Johnny Be Good* ; Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle*; and a BBC production, *Black Hollywood*. He also has a role coming up in *Necessity* , a movie of the week.

Perry Hernandez had been dipping under the limbo bar and walking on glass for almost 30 years at clubs and hotels in his native Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean before coming to L.A. to try his luck two years ago. Exposure on the Boardwalk has already landed him TV appearances on "The Colbys" and "The Love Boat" as well as the opportunity to do his show for a mass audience on a Dick Clark TV production, "Keep on Trucking." He has relished his introduction to Hollywood, and he wants more.

Performers like Ruben, Vera, Colyar, and Hernandez are serious, committed artists producing one-of-a-kind—or at least out of the mainstream—living street theater. They may share the Boardwalk with travelers strumming guitars and passing the hat to pay their way as they go, or preachers out to save souls, but they stand apart from them. And every show they give is an audition. They never know who may be watching.

Vera, for one, has even redesigned his act with that in mind. "I told more dirty jokes in New York. Here I'm tamer because producers don't want to see that stuff."

While celluloid success may be the ultimate goal for many, exposure on the streets generally leads—at least initially, and for those with talent— to gigs at clubs, parties or hotels, even on cruise ships.

For magician Rod Layson, for example, it took six months on the streets before people began calling him to do private parties. It started slow but has picked up momentum over the two-and-a-half years he's been at it, initially on Hollywood Boulevard before moving down to the Venice Boardwalk.

And now, the 21-year-old, who began dabbling in sleight of hand at the enchanted age of six, is setting the stage to do a quick-change. Believing he has the contacts and following to leave the streets behind, he plans to concentrate on private affairs, clubs and the new baby he's conjuring up: the Los Angeles School of Magic. He'll be teaching basic six-month courses and preparing illusionists for the Magic Castle (where he is presently a junior member but is scheduled to audition for full status in February).

"When I started street performing, the opportunities (to perform at private events) started," said escape artist and pantomimist Tim Eric. Nine years ago he broke free from a 9-to-5 gig for the vagaries and challenge of the street. It was a decision he can live with, happily. He lives the liberated lifestyle he wanted while his streetshow produces lucrative opportunities to perform. He does pantomime and escape routines at parties and affairs of all kinds, charging a minimum fee of $200 an hour.

continued on page 12

L.A. Talent

continued from page 1

Eighteen years ago, Eric began working the door at the Hollywood Wax Museum—in costume to drum up business. After four years, Universal Studios hired him away to entertain tourists. And then, about five years later, "I got smart," he quipped. "I went to the street. The streets are my break. I make more money. I'm my own boss. I travel. I love what I do.

Fame and fortune, freedom of expression and lifestyle—these, in whole or in part, are basic motivations street performers seem to share. But there is another impetus linking them. All claim to have something else that drives them, something intensely personal and consuming, something that gives substance and worth to their work.

"I dance for Jesus," said Groovin Ruben. "I'm born again. Without Christ none of this madness would be possible." He explained that his act is an "expressing of the soul," and through the Lord he claims to have overcome a physical aberration and turned himself into a dancing wonder. Noting that he was born swayback, he boasted, "What I do chiropractors can't understand." In his act, he follows and accents every beat of the music with precisely controlled—and seemingly freakish—movements of fingers, arms, legs, torso, head.

For Hernandez, through his act on the Boardwalk he relives an integral part of his culture back in Trinidad, the "Shango." He describes it as a sort of semi-religious cult aimed at expanding spiritual energy and a belief in mind over matter. "You know, it's similar to voodoo, man," he says in his lilting Caribbean accent. "We would play drums, chant, sing. Then the drums take possession of the body and we would do the limbo, walk on glass, or on nails or knives. The whole thing was to build self-confidence in yourself and what you can do."

Everytime Hernandez slides under the limbo bar and jumps on a mound of shattered booze bottles, he proclaims his self worth. And sometimes that's painful. Exhibiting the feet of his trade, pockmarked with scars, slits and discolorations, he admits stoicly, "Sometimes I get cut up, but I don't worry about it. I gotta go for it, man." And he means it. Even when he's almost had a foot sliced in half he's shunned doctors in favor of his own quick-fix medicine. "Doctors will only stitch me up and slow me down. I got to keep working," he professes.

Driving Eric is "a sense of pride because of the way I do it [escape from a straight jacket]. I'm the only person in the world who uses no tricks," he asserts, adding that even Houdini was a trickster. He learned the basics of straight-jacket escape from a former roommate, world record holder Bernie Orlando (14.5 seconds)—a record Eric claims to have unofficially broken (12 seconds).

To inflate suspense, and his sense of pride, for his Venice show Eric doesn't settle for the jacket alone. He has volunteers also wrap him with four heavy chains, which are locked up. Escape time varies, from a few minutes to well over an hour. Once, one of the chains was pulled around his neck so tight he chocked and passed out—and he came close to death before rescuers freed him with bolt cutters. But apparently that didn't phase him. He's planning to "create more excitement" by rigging up a scaffolding to do his act hanging upside down.

Michael Colyar may dream of the big-time, but he tosses out punch lines for two very down-to-earth motivations: his eight-year-old son and the moral message behind his comedy. And for Colyar the two go hand-in-hand.

"Nicholas is my heart and soul. Everything I do is for him and us," he said. "He's my motivation." To underscore that he makes the responsibilities of parenthood one of the main topics of his routine. Labelling his act "education through comedy," Colyar, through ironic and off-color skits and jokes, attempts to instill an understanding of the dangers of AIDS, the duties of being a parent and the absurdity of judging people by race or sexual preference. "I expect people to laugh their asses off but if I don't get them to think and act I've accomplished nothing," he in-

continued on page 15

L.A. Talent

continued from page 12

sists.

Colyar's trusty vehicle for making an impact is audience participation. Pulling hapless souls from the sea of faces, he reduces them to laughing-stocks to make his points, all too aware how much people love to get off on the foibles of others—and how deep an impression that can make.

The power of audience participation is no secret. It's employed by others on the Boardwalk and in many countries, such as Peru. Late afternoons, clowns in garrish garb with electric orange hair and bulbous red noses (yes, looking like Peruvian cousins to our circus clowns) appear on the streets of many Peruvian cities. Within moments a throng has gathered around, and then these Latin performers do as Colyar does, turning onlookers into the butt of jokes that play off Peruvian life, culture and current events.

Peru's clowns, however, perform freely, almost anywhere, while in L.A. the stage has been whittled down to Venice. Two other spots, Westwood and Hollywood Boulevard, used to be hot—until the police stepped in. According to Sgt. Curt Hussey, who supervises the Westwood foot patrol, the street shows were drawing big crowds, blocking the sidewalk and creating a safety hazard by forcing pedestrians into the street to get around them. performing isn't illegal but blocking the sidewalk is, he asserted, adding that their policy is to give warnings and move the violators along, resorting to arrest only after repeated violations.

Sgt. Paul Von Lutzow, who heads up a 12-man unit patrolling Hollywood Boulevard, offered a verbatim explanation. But some of the performers themselves see things differently. Eric of straight-jacket fame, a mixture of disgust and disappointment on his face, maintained the police were just "using technicalities" to chase the performers away.

"Typical L.A.," growled Matthew Cooper, who began juggling in Westwood seven years ago at the age of 12. "They said performers were taking money from shops [both sargeants admitted that pressure from local merchants was one of the factors forcing them to act]. When, if anything, we were entertaining people and bringing them into Westwood."

Street performing has been a growth industry in L.A. in the '80s and police policy has channeled the flood into Venice, turning the Boardwalk into the open-air stage for every type of crazy performer imaginable. That may have brought notoriety and bigger audiences to the beach community, but performers say it's also had a negative impact on the streetshow scene: The throngs see it all, and the more they see the more they want. They're never satisfied, and such a jaded crowd does not easily part with its money.

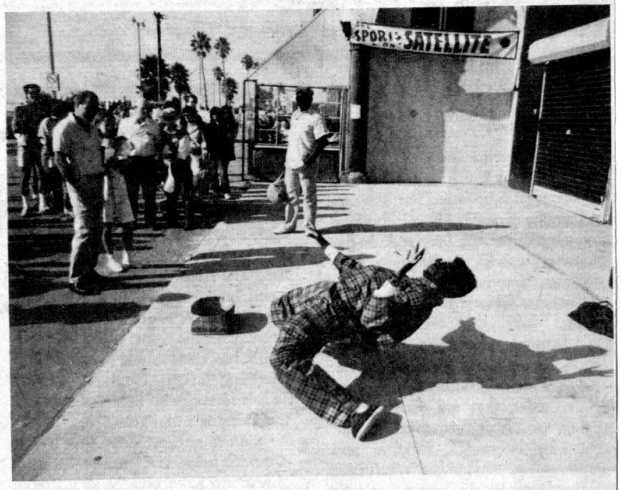
"It's the most humbling experience," Cooper says, observing that in places such as San Francisco and New York, where street performing is far more widespread, people are much more receptive and appreciative. "They pay [in New York] even if you're bad," notes Vera, adding that in L.A. you've got to earn your money.

And so most of the performers—at least the stronger acts—don't limit themselves to Venice. They take their show to the Big Apple and other cities, to Mallory Village in the Florida Keys, even festivals and other events in Europe and Japan.

Despite it all, however, Venice is still it on the street performing scene—because of its pulse and ambience as well as the singular opportunity it offers to springboard to bigger and better things in the entertainment world. Morever, while hassles sometimes arise between performers and the local merchants and police, there's generally give-and-take on all sides. The entertainers have learned the importance of cultivating good relations. So, the atmosphere is basically cooperative and easy going.

"There's so much love here, and energy," says Hernandez. "This is home for me. The vibes are so positive." For Eric, Venice is a favorite because of its flavor: "I make less money than elsewhere but Venice is unique. There's people from all over the world. It's so diversified on this little beach." While Vera says he's "so happy here" that it's going to be a "lifetime thing for me."

Magician Layson is taken with "the many people I meet out here and the things that happen. If a day goes by and something amazing doesn't happen, it's amazing." Even Copper, who juggles everything from flaming torches to hatchets, sees a positive side to Venice: "There are fringe benefits—the women I meet here."



And despite the jaded audience, money can be—and is—made. Friends in New York told Vera he wouldn't make it in Venice where it's basically the same acts, the top ones, that survive. "But you know you're doing good when the local shopkeepers keep asking me to make change [on big bills]," he grins.

Colyar, for that matter, seems to have the money angle—collecting it—down to a science. Two-thirds of the way into his show, when he's really got the crowd going, he makes his move, using intimidation and embarassment.

One of his favorite lines: "You go down the street and buy a piece of that greasy-ass pizza that makes you shit in five minutes, yet you expect to laugh for free." After tossing out a few of those, he then asks who is having a good time, getting them to raise their hands. When many do, he challenges, "Okay, now put that hand in your pocket!"

Those who try to walk away he cuts with sharp barbs—such as, "Okay, go back to Orange County"—discouraging others from leaving. Now he whips out long-handled, spring-action tongs—drawing a roar of laughter as he flexes them—and dives into the crowd extracting bills from outstretched fingers. When he's raked in everything the crowd is going to give, then, and only then, he finishes his show.