

## New York Subway Musicians Shine

Difficulty:

**A**VERAGE

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### *Discussion activities to be done after completing this EA lesson*

Today's report was about performers who play music in the New York subway system. Who organizes these performances? Who pays the musicians? What are their main motivations for playing? Do subway riders appreciate their music?

### *Extension discussion topics*

#### **A. Talking about and going over the specific topic / idea / issue in listening text**

*Introduction = Who organizes these performances? Are the musicians paid by the subway system for their performances? What are their main motivations for playing? Do subway riders appreciate their music?*

1. What do you remember about the Music Under New York program?

- It was started in 1985.
- There are 150 sponsored weekly performances.
- Musicians are not paid by MUNY, but by the people who listen to their music.
- A variety of musical styles: American bluegrass, African choral music, opera, folk music, etc.

Do you know of a similar program in your city or country?

2. Who is interviewed? What do we learn about them? What do they say?

- Rawl Mitchell: From Trinidad and Tobago. Has been playing steel drums in the subway since the mid-1990s. He says people appreciate the music. Some of them clap, put money in his case or tell him the music is nice.
- Rosateresa: singer-songwriter. From Puerto Rico. Has been performing in the subway almost as long as Rawl Mitchell. Her mission is to sing like a *jilguero* (Spanish word for the bird, goldfinch).
- Tom McNichols: part of "Opera Collective". Sings opera underground to make opera more accessible to people. It's not lucrative, but he enjoys it.
- Wendy Sayvetz: Folksinger. Has been performing in the subway for 22 years. She once performed at the White House! She says subway musicians are not all looking for a way out of the subway. Many of them like performing there.

Do you know anyone who performs music in a transit system? Have you ever done it yourself?

## B. Expanding on (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

*Topic = Musical performances and other types of entertainment before an audience.*

1. The MUNY program organizes 150 weekly performances in the New York transit system. Do you know of another city that does this? Do you think a program like this would work in your city or your country?
2. There are other people who busk (play music) in the New York transit system, not as part of the MUNY program. Do you think they choose to do this independently? Or do you think they would rather be part of the MUNY program? What advantages and disadvantages might there be?
3. How common is busking, or street performance, in your country? Are buskers allowed to perform without challenge? Or do they face challenges from the police or other people in authority?
4. Do you think people will continue performing in unofficial settings, or do you think there will be less of this sort of thing in our increasingly rule-governed societies? Would be sad to see buskers disappear?

*OR, Topic = Once.*

Find out all you can about the film, "Once", about two buskers in Dublin, and give an oral presentation of your findings to a partner or to your teacher. See if you can find a copy of the film! See:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Once\\_%28film%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Once_%28film%29)

and

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0907657/>

## C. Extending discussion of (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

*Topic = Rules in society.*

According to the VOA web site, where today's report was originally posted, "Court cases have held that subway singers have a First Amendment right to perform and do not need MTA permission. Still, now and then, police tell them to stop." In light of this, think about the following questions:

1. In the past, most activities were not overseen by any particular government agency or organization. What examples can you think of where more and more rules have been imposed? (Food safety, playground safety, rules requiring motorcycle and bicycle helmets, rules requiring insurance in order to participate in an activity, rules requiring children to go to school, rules about what children may or may not wear to school, etc.) Do any rules seem ridiculous to you? If so, do you understand why they were put in place? Can these rules have unintended consequences?

2. In the United States, many homeowners' associations (HOAs) have rules forbidding homeowners in a particular neighborhood from doing certain things.  
(See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeowners\\_association#Onerous\\_regulations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeowners_association#Onerous_regulations))  
For example, you might have to keep your grass no higher than 7 cm, or you might not be allowed to hang laundry outside to dry, or leave a car parked on the street for more than 24 hours. Do these rules seem logical to you? Would you buy a home in a neighborhood where such restrictions were in place?
3. Do you think it is possible to have too many rules? How do you think people might react if they think rules are ridiculous? What about the people who are supposed to enforce those rules? Can they enforce rules effectively if they don't believe in them? Do you think any societies will go back to a system of fewer rules, rather than creating more and more rules?

## Audioscript

Amid the dirt and the grime and the screech of the trains, there is music. In winter or summer, the New York transit system is a free concert hall, with almost every kind of music. Rawl Mitchell is an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago. He's been playing the steel drums in the subway since the mid-1990s.

"The people do appreciate the music. They do stand around (and) listen to the music, and if it pleases them, they applaud and put their money in the case or whatever. But they usually clap and say, you know, it's nice and..."

Singer-songwriter Rosateresa has been at it almost as long. "My mission is to sing like the jilguero - the jilguero is a Puerto Rican bird - I'm Puerto Rican - that wakes up the sun."

While players like Mitchell and Rosateresa perform on their own, the transit authority's official "Music Under New York" program sponsors 150 weekly performances, including American bluegrass and African choral music. The only pay is whatever listeners choose to give.

Today, Patricia Vital and Tom McNichols, members of a group called "Opera Collective", are finding a small but enthusiastic audience. They say they love doing opera here, though it isn't lucrative.

"Music in general is not for the money, and Music Under New York is definitely more about, as our motto says, making opera accessible, more than it is about making a living under here."

Folksinger Wendy Sayvetz has been a subway and rail station performer for 22 years. She's as proud of her work here as she is for having sung at the White House. She says it's not true that subway musicians want to make it out of the subways.

"What they don't get is that we actually love this gig."

Sayvetz and a partner are developing a musical play about subway musicians to challenge what she says is the clichéd view.

"It's not about, 'Oh, we don't have to play in the subway anymore.' What we want to happen is, we want people to go, 'Oh my God, subway music is the best thing!'"

Yet many people already feel that subway music is the best thing, good enough to stop busy New Yorkers in their tracks.

Carolyn Weaver, VOA News, New York.