

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Busking in the 19th Century: Whistling Billy and Old Sarah

For many of us busking is something one does for fun, or for additional income or advertisement while traveling or between gigs, or even as a deliberate way of honing one's performance skills in front of an impromptu audience. Few of us have done it for long, for it is a financially uncertain and often grueling way to subsist. There has been, however, a long history of street performing as an occupation throughout the world, its uncertainties hazarded by those with the need, or talent, or brashness to undertake it. A historical

snap-shot of London street performers can be found in the third volume of Henry Mayhew's three-volume *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those that Will Work, Those that Cannot Work, and Those that Will Not Work*, published in 1861. It is a remarkable compendium of street-life in the early Victorian era that documents the occupations of the working poor, the indigent, and the infirm. Of particular interest is Mayhew's biographical sketches of street musicians and vocalists (volume 3, pp. 158-204), in which a panoply of musicians and singers of all kinds briefly and often poignantly step onto the stage. They have varied reasons for performing art in the street. As Mayhew noted in his title, there are descriptions of people who are infirm, often blind or lame, whose musicality is sometimes an aspect of begging but always a way to self-identify as something more than their debility. There are the street musicians as well who are indigent and marginalized; many are non-English – the Italian concertinist, the German brass band, Scottish bagpipers, Irish pipers and harpers, fiddlers of all kinds, drummers from India, and "Ethiopian" performers, including actual blacks among the black-face musicians.

Mayhew's writing is admirably accessible and free of judgment or condemnation: his purpose is not to evaluate or unmask, but to describe and to illuminate, and bring us closer to the world of people only briefly encountered. He is interested in motivations – in why people do what they do, and how they sustain themselves. Refreshingly (for the era) he allows the subjects of many of his sketches to speak for themselves, in quotes or paraphrase. Mayhew actually took the time to interview and get to know his subjects, rather than just observe and describe from a distance, and in so doing he allows the people the Victorian upper-class public only fleetingly and superficially came into contact with to share their voices, unencumbered by judgment.

Two of the most striking sketches, among the many, introduce us to Whistling Billy and Old Sarah, two very different street performers with different motivations and goals. They differ by sex, age, temperament, talent, and a host of other characteristics, yet both have managed to subsist by busking. Meet first Whistling Billy:

That's my name, and I'm known all round about in the Borough as 'Whistling Bill'... but in general I'm 'Billy'. I'm not looking very respectable now, but you should see me when I'm going to the play; I looks so uncommon respectable nobody knows me again. I shall go to the theatre next week, and I should just like you to see me. It's surprising. I ain't a very fat chap, am I? but I'm just meaty enough



"OLD SARAH," THE WELL-KNOWN HURDY-GURDY PLAYER.
[From a Daguerrotype by Beard.]

for my profession, which is whistling and dancing in public-houses, where I gives 'em the hornpipe and the bandy jig, that's dancing with my toes turned in.

Billy is a young man, in his early 20s, and although he remembers life with his family it has been a while since he lived with them. His father was a barber and had a small shop in London near Fitzroy square, where he lived with Billy's mother and two brothers. At the age of 12 he ran away from home; not because of poverty or abuse, but because of the lure of adventure and because he was asked to: "It was another boy that put me up to running away from home. He axed me to go along with him, and I went." They ended up south of the city in a lodging house full of itinerant and working poor who slept in one room, but his friend had a little money that kept them for a while. They sold trinkets door-

to-door and stole a little, managing to get by, and in the evenings they would go to pubs. "At night we used to go to the public-houses and dance... I was always fond of dancing."

I used, when I was at father's, to go to a ball, and that's where I learned to dance. It was a shilling ball in the New-road, where there was ladies, regular nice ones, beautifully dressed. They used to see me dancing, and say, when I growed up I should make a beautiful dancer; and so I do, for I'd dance against anybody, and play the whistle all the time. The ladies at these balls would give me money then for dancing before them. Ah! I'd get my entrance shilling back, and four or five into the bargain. I'd generally take it home to mother, after buying a little sweet-stuff, or such-like, and I think that's why mother would let me go, 'cos I picked up a good bit of money... I don't like work, and, to tell you the truth, I never did work, for it's like amusement to me to dance; and it must be an amusement, 'cos it amuses the people, and that's why I gets on so well.

After three years Billy and his friend split up. He found a new partner but got in trouble when he stole a piece of brass hardware on a dare, for which he was briefly imprisoned.

When I came out of quod I had a shilling give me, and I went and bought a penny whistle. I was always fond of music and dancing, and I know'd a little of playing the whistle. Mother and father was both uncommon fond of dancing and music, and used to go out dancing and to concerts, near every night pretty well, after they'd locked the shop up. I made about eleven bob the first week I was out, for I was doing very well of a night, though I had no hair on my head. I didn't do no dancing, but I knew about six tunes, such as 'Rory O'More,' and 'The Girl I left behind me,' two hornpipes (the Fishers' and the Sailors'), 'St. Patrick's Day,' and 'The Shells of the Ocean', a new song as had just come up. I can play fifty tunes now. Whistles weren't so common then, they weren't out a quarter so much as now. ... People was astonished at seeing a tune played on a tin whistle, and gave pretty liberal. I believe I was the first as ever got a living on a tin whistle. Now there's more. It was at that time as I took to selling whistles. I carried 'em on a tin tray before me, and a lid used to shut on it, fixed. I'd pitch before a hotel amongst the gentlemen, and I'd get 2d. a-piece for the whistles, and some would give me sixpence or a shilling, just according... I traveled all round Devonshire, and down to Land's End, in Cornwall – 320 miles from London, and kept on playing the whistle on the road. I know all about them parts. I generally pitched before the hotels and the spirit-shops, and began whistling and dancing; but sometimes I'd give the cottagers a turn, and they'd generally hand over a ha'penny apiece and some bread.

Soon afterwards Billy hits his stride as a busker, and even manages briefly to reach the level where his performances can be “booked.”

I stopped traveling about the south of England, and playing and dancing, for a little better than four years and a half. I didn't do so well in winter and in summer. Harvest time was my best time. I'd go to the fields where they was working, and play and dance. ... Sometimes, when the last load of hay was going home (you see, that's always considered the jolliest part of the work), they'd make me get up to the top of the load, and then whistle to them. They was all merry – as merry as could be, and would follow after dancing about, men women, and boys. ...

I've had as many as forty dancing at a time, and sometimes there was only nine of 'em. ... They was mostly Irish, and I had to do jigs for them, instead of a hornpipe. My country dance was to the tune 'Oh don't you tease me, pretty little dear.' Any fiddler knows that air. It's always played in the country for country dances. ... I used to be regular tired after two hours. They'd stick me up on a box, or a tub, or else they'd make a pile of straw, and stick me a-top of it; or if there was any carts standing by loaded with hay, and the horses out, I was told to mount that....

You mustn't think this dancing took place every night, but only three or four nights a-week. I find 'em out traveling along the road. Sometimes they've sent a man from one farm-house to bespeak me whilst I was playing at another. There was a man as played on the clarinet as used to be a favourite among haymakers, but they prefer the penny tin whistle, because it makes more noise, and is shriller, and is easier heard; besides, I'm very rapid with my fingers, and makes 'em keep on dancing till they are tired out. Please God, I'll be down among them again this summer. I goes down regular. Last year and the year before, and ever since I can recollect.

In the winter Billy returns to the city:

When I'm in London I make a good living at dancing and playing, for I'm the only one that plays the whistle and dances at the same time... When I dance in a public-house I take my shoes off and say, 'Now, gentlemen, watch my steps.' For the hornpipe I begin with walking round, or 'twisting' as the term is; then I stands up, and does a double-shuffle – or the 'straight fives' as we calls it; then I walks round again before doing another kind of double-shuffle. Then I does the Rocks of Scilly, that's when you twists your feet and bends sideways; next comes the double steps and rattles, that is, when the heels makes a rattle coming down; and I finishes with the square step. My next step is to walk round and collect the money....

He tops off his music and dance performance with a final trick:

When I plays the whistle up my nose I puts the end of it in my nostril, and blows down it. I can do that just as easy as with my mouth, only not as loud. I do it as a variety, first in my mouth, then in my nose, and then back again in my mouth. It makes people laugh.

Billy has all the advantage and confidence of youth, and has managed to parlay his vigor and talent to where he can sometimes even afford a luxury, such as going to the theater. So far in life he has achieved a modicum of success at a very early age.

Old Sarah's story is quite different. She was born in 1786 at a chandler's shop near Drury Lane, London. Her father was a hatter and mother an artificial-flower maker and feather-finisher. Soon after her birth her eyes became inflamed, a condition that persisted a few weeks. Her mother, who had to return to work soon after the birth, left Sarah in care of a dry-nurse, who attempted to alleviate the baby's suffering but who took bad advice from others and applied a patent

medicine remedy that soon had Sarah's eyes bleeding. She was blind thereafter. Her parents both had to work all day to earn subsistence, and there was no one to teach or care for a blind child, who developed poor coping skills as a result. Sarah remembers both parents fondly, and their kindness to her, but when they both died within weeks of each other when she was sixteen, Sarah found herself ill-equipped to survive. She was sent to Paneridge Union, a poorhouse, until the age of twenty. While there, the parish paid for her first music lessons:

It took me just five months to learn the – cymbal, if you please – the hurdy-gurdy ain't its right name. The first tune I ever played was 'God Save the King,' the Queen as is now; then 'Harlequin Hamlet,' that took me a long time to get off; it was three weeks before they put me on a new one. I then learnt 'Moll Brook'; then I did the 'Turpike-gate' and 'Patrick's day in the morning'; all of them I learnt in the Union. I got a poor man to teach me the 'New-rigged ship.' I soon learnt it, because it was an easy tune. Two-and-forty years ago I played 'The Gal I left behind me.' A woman learnt it me: she played my cymbal and I listened, and so got it. 'Oh, Susannah!' I learnt myself by hearing it on the horgan. I always try and listen to a new tune when I am in the street and get it off if I can: it's my bread. I waited to hear one to-day, quite a new one, but I didn't like it, so I went on. 'Hasten to the Wedding' is my favourite; I played it years ago, and play it still. I like 'Where have you been all the night?' it's a Scotch tune.

The woman who taught her to play at the Union took Sarah out on the streets and taught her how to busk, showing her good places to attract attention and money. This woman had a daughter, and when the teacher died Sarah took on the daughter as her guide. The two of them plied London for 25 years, but it was not altogether a happy arrangement. The daughter developed a habit for drink and stole or coerced money from Sarah, and was sometimes too tipsy to lead Sarah home.

Sarah had many guides after her, and, at the time Mayhew interviewed her, she was accompanied by a guide named Liza, whom she trusted and valued and with whom she was very close.

Yes, I've my reg'lar rounds, and I've kept to 'em for near upon fifty year. All the children like to hear me coming along, for I always plays my cymbal as I goes. At Kentish-town they calls me Mrs. Tuesday, and at Kensington I'm Mrs. Friday, and so on. At some places they likes polkas, but at one house I plays at in Kensington they always ask me for 'Haste to the Wedding.' ... We're very tired by night-time; ain't we Liza? but when I gets home the good woman I lodges with has always a bit of something for me to eat with my cup of tea.

Mayhew had Sarah and Liza transported to the studio of a daguerrotype photographer to have their pictures taken for his book. It was her first time riding in a London cab:

She felt about for something to lay hold of, and did not appear comfortable until she had a firm grasp of the pocket. After her alarm had in a measure subsided, she turned to her guide and said, "We must put up with these trials, Liza." In a short time, however, she began to find the ride pleasant enough. "Very nice, ain't it Liza?" she said; "but I shouldn't like to ride on them steamboats, they say they're shocking dangerous; and as for them railways, I've heard they're dreadful; but these cabs, Liza, is very nice." On the road she was continually asking Liza where they were, and wondering at the rapidity at which they traveled. "Ah!" she said, laughing, "if I had one of these here cabs, my 'rounds' would soon be over."

The author was obviously impressed with Sarah – “Her cheerfulness, considering her privation and precarious mode of life, was extraordinary. Her love of truth, and the extreme simplicity of her nature,

were almost childlike... she had a deep sense of religion, and her charity for a woman in her station of life was something marvelous; for, though living on alms, she herself had, I was told, two or three little pensioners."

It was with some shock that he was later informed that Sarah and Liza had been run down by a cab as it turned a corner. Both women were rushed to the hospital, with Sarah begging and shaking Liza to get her to respond, only to be received with silence; "and it was not until they reached the hospital, and they were lifted from the cab, that she knew, as she heard the people whisper to one another, that her faithful attendant was dead." Sarah herself lay in the hospital when Mayhew visited her, with two broken legs. Although she recovered after many weeks, she needed to walk with a crutch, and this and the shock of

the accident rendered her musicless. She continued for some months to hobble to the homes of those who had been kind to her, begging, "yet her little remaining strength at length failed her, and she took to her bed in a room in Bell-court, Gray's-inn-lane, never to rise from it again."

[Mayhew's book can be accessed on line at https://books.google.com/books?id=_87Bcd5DwCsC&printsec=frontcover&source=gb_s_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false]

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, *The Fiddler's Companion* (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers) and his current project *The Traditional Tune Archive* (www.tuneearch.org). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

Harlequin's Amulet

(In Sarah's repertoire)

Musical notation for "Harlequin's Amulet" in G major, 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody is written in a single line. Measure numbers 5, 9, and 14 are indicated at the start of their respective staves. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Rory O'More

(One of Billy's standards)

Musical notation for "Rory O'More" in G major, 6/8 time. The score consists of five staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody is written in a single line. Measure numbers 5, 9, 14, 18, and 22 are indicated at the start of their respective staves. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots. There are performance markings "qu" above the staff at measure 14 and "cr" above the staff at measure 18.