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Musicians launch careers from subway platforms

By Kristina Lanier, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

The sweet tones of the Ave Maria rise over the squeal of rush-hour trains. A cluster of commuters heading for Boston's Back Bay subway station pause to listen - the low rumble beneath their feet signaling they just missed their ride anyway.

On the platform above, baritone Wesley Thomas sings an aria by Mozart and then moves on to a musical theater number, unfazed by the flow of humanity around him.

But for the few who have stopped to listen, twice as many have rushed by. For a seasoned Bostonian, musical acts in the subway are as much a part of the city's landscape as clam chowder and Dunkin' Donuts shops.

Boston's subterranean level is host to a dynamic music culture. Of the other American cities with subways, New York is the only one with a comparable scene. Washington, D.C., and San Francisco ban performers inside their subway gates.

But in Boston, the streets and subways have become a veritable incubator for musical talent. Greats like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez launched their careers here. And Tracy Chapman was the reigning "queen" of the Harvard Square stop before grabbing the national spotlight.

Mr. Thomas, who is also a church soloist and performs with opera companies, says he frequents the "T" (short for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority or MBTA) to earn money and get his "name out there."

"I went down to do an audition on Broadway a couple weeks ago after a casting director saw me in the subway," he says.

These sorts of talent sightings aren't uncommon, says Danny Morris, a professor at Berklee College of Music in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood. "Record execs are looking for musicians who can create a buzz," he says.

The subway wasn't always an impromptu stage for developing performers, says Stephen Baird, founder of the Street Arts Advocate and a key figure in legalizing street performance in Boston.

"In the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, it was pretty barren down there," Mr. Baird says. "It was often just disabled people who played." Officials shooed would-be Baezes off, citing begging, disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct, and blocking the sidewalk as justifications.

But in 1976, the subway emerged as a viable venue when MBTA authorities organized musicians to perform there as part of Boston's first "First Night" (a citywide New Year's Eve celebration).

The idea was so well-received that T officials decided to continue a "Music Under Boston" program as a public relations tool to appease riders frustrated by the inefficient system. (The transit system has since been renovated.)

The Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center took on the program in 1979. But in 1986, it went bankrupt. The subway music scene hit the skids. "It got chaotic," Baird says. "No one was in charge; it was subject to individual interpretation and harassments started increasing."

The frustrated musicians called Baird for guidance. After three years of negotiations, the MBTA signed an agreement allowing musicians to perform and sell CDs. Performers have to pick up a permit and agree to keep amplification to a reasonable level.

For today's troubadours, an off-limits subway is the stuff of myth.

Bob Parins, a guitar student at Berklee, uses the subway several times a week for live-performance practice. "Nothing beats performing for people," he says. "I do it to try things out, and you can do it any time you want."

Professor Morris adds that it's an effective way to network: "You're meeting a new audience every five minutes."

Boston's subway has become a cradle for talent because of a confluence of elements, Baird says. "There's the independent spirit of freedom here," he says. "It's a love for music and the arts, and the youthful spirit of the town," home to thousands of college students.

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