

MUSIC AND HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

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MUSIC AND HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

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Homelessness is a critical problem in America today. In Austin, some homeless people attempt to earn income by busking, playing music for monetary donations. In this thesis I will present findings based on field research among homeless buskers in Austin taking care to include many of my own experiences as a former homeless busker. Using a phenomenological framework, I will present case studies of three key informants that illustrate their subjective lifeworld experiences as they have been explained to me. In addition to reflecting upon these individuals' life stories, I will place their narratives in the context of American homelessness. This thesis will add an account of the life experiences of these three homeless buskers to the ethnographic record.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Strolling along down the boulevard
Lit by the headlights of passing cars
Sidewalk engulfed by warm neon lights
Typical Sixth Street Saturday night*

*A group of strangers gathers from near and far
A street corner man plucking his guitar
What will he sing for the crowd who stands?
Leonard Cohen maybe Townes Van Zandt*

*His case lay open for the world to behold
Please leave a bill for to save a soul
He might be hungry, he might be sick
He might just have to get his three chord fix*

*You never know how far a man has been
Till you walk in his shoes and you talk to him
The next time you hear the street corner man play
Let him sing all of your blues away*

*Street Corner Man
by Eric Dees, 2011*

BACKGROUND

This thesis is an analysis of homeless street musicians residing in Austin, Texas. Though my fieldwork, the time I spent as an interviewer and participant observer, led me to encounter homeless individuals who make a living playing music, this will not be a work in economics. Instead, this thesis will provide insight into the lived experiences of three modern day troubadours. Using a phenomenological foundation, I will provide a

biographical account of these three men making sure to recall some of my own experiences as a street musician. My research will fill in the gaps of the modern anthropological literature on homelessness, specifically as it pertains to musical performance.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines a homeless person as:

An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and...who has a primary nighttime residence that is - a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations; an institution that provides temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (HUD 2011).

Irene Glasser and Rae Bridgman (1999:3) define the homeless population as being either visibly homeless or precariously housed. The visibly homeless are "those in homeless shelters and living on the streets, in encampments, in abandoned buildings, and in places such as subway stations." The precariously housed are "those doubled-up temporarily with other, usually poor, families, or those in inexpensive lodging who pay by the day or week."

Ida Susser (1996:417) observes that in the United States, homeless people are significant not because of their numbers but because of their visibility in the public

space. All one has to do is venture into the downtown area of any major American city to find homeless people.

How many homeless individuals can one expect to see? The most recent HUD Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR) was published in 2011 with data from 2010. The authors of this report state that nearly 650,000 homeless people were counted in the United States on a single night during the last week of January 2010 (HUD 2011:5). In 2005, however, some estimates had been as high as 2.5 million (FAS 2005:1).

Approximately 63 percent of the homeless counted in 2010 were individuals and the remaining 37 percent were persons in families. Of the individuals counted, 52 percent were sheltered¹ and 48 percent were unsheltered² (HUD 2011:3,5-6). Two of the six chapters of the 2010 AHAR are related to the sheltered homeless while there is virtually no information on the unsheltered homeless. This occurs because shelters are places where homeless people congregate and are easier to count whereas the unsheltered are scattered randomly across the urban terrain.

According to the Austin/Travis County Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), on January 23, 2011, there were 2,357 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals

¹ living in emergency shelters or transitional housing

² living in places not meant for human habitation

living in and around Austin, Texas (ECHO 2011). A point-in-time (PIT) count, such as the one in which this number is based, is normally undertaken during a single evening and lasts about six hours. I participated in the PIT count of Austin/Travis County in January 2011 and discovered multiple reasons why this count resulted in an underestimation. The ECHO website acknowledges that they could not account for homeless individuals who are "incarcerated, in mental health facilities, or in health facilities. It also does not count those individuals and families who are living temporarily in motels or doubled up with others" (ECHO 2011). Further, many of the encampments were located on large tracts of wooded, undeveloped land, which made the search for individuals quite difficult if not treacherous. For all the reasons listed above, in addition to the limited amount of time to count and the number of volunteers available, ECHO estimates the actual number of homeless people in Austin/Travis County to be between 7,000 and 9,000; several times the figure reported to HUD (Jessie Aric, personal communication).

There is no way of confronting homelessness without entering the political debate. According to Courtney Cronley (2010:324-325), those on the right of the political spectrum tend to place responsibility on the individual for

his or her success or failure. An example of this reasoning occurred in December 1988 when President Reagan stated that homelessness in America was not an economic problem; "by sleeping in the streets, the...homeless were merely revealing their preference for the great outdoors" (Davidson 1989:164). Cronley goes on to write that those on the political left tend to adhere to a structural perspective of homelessness. For example, Quigley, Raphael, and Smolensky (2001:50) conclude that "relatively small changes in housing market conditions can have substantial effects upon rates of homelessness." Even though this debate has gone on for years, in the 1980s researchers began shifting their focus toward the structural perspective. However, more recently researchers have begun to merge both theories "in their recognition that polarized perspectives are not producing productive prevention strategies" (Cronley 2010:329). Though homelessness is seen in this context, this thesis will not focus on politics.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

In the summer of 2005, shortly after reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*, I went on a walkabout of sorts. Having finished the year

as a para-professional instructor at a Dallas area middle school, I boarded a Greyhound bus and headed west. Because of the nature of my employment, I planned on living off of my summer paychecks for an extended vacation. With no formal itinerary, I ended up in Denver, Colorado.

After arriving in town, the first thing I did was find a pawn shop and purchase a used acoustic guitar. Residing in a cheap motel on West Colfax Avenue, I spent my days playing guitar in the park adjacent to Colorado's capital building. For those few weeks I was living the dream. Unfortunately I let the time get away and when August came around, I realized my checks had stopped coming. Not being one to give up, I began searching for a job. However the momentum of where I was headed was too great - it can often take weeks to find employment and I did not have that kind of time. Before I knew it my bank account was empty and I could no longer afford the motel. I was homeless.

I then decided my guitar was not merely an instrument of entertainment; it was to be my method of earning income. Since I had begun sleeping in the park anyways, I remained there during the days and started singing more assertively. By assertively I mean that rather than sit alone writing and playing to myself, I began trying to get the attention of people walking by.

One day while playing in the park, a man with a guitar walked up and randomly asked if I could spare a pair of socks. I had seen him playing in the park a couple of days prior, but this was the first time we had met. He told me his name was Mark. Mark wore faded Levi's jeans with a matching denim jacket and the guitar he played was a nice Taylor acoustic. He was a confident rhythm player and had a booming voice. Mark exclusively played Leonard Cohen songs with a few Neil Young tunes thrown in for good measure. It was from him that I first heard the word "busker."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BUSKING

Busking, also known as street performing, has been identified in artwork dating as far back as ancient Egypt (Bruno 1979). David Cohen and Ben Greenwood (1981:12) state that Dio Chrysostom, who was born in Bithynia in AD 40, wrote of seeing street performers while walking through the Hippodrome: "one playing the flute, another dancing, another doing a juggler's trick, another reading a poem aloud, another singing and another telling some story or myth." In urban Rome, the traditions of agricultural festivals were carried on in the streets. They included

"troupes of mime artists, solo musicians, and street poets" (Cohen and Greenwood 1981:15).

Even though the majority of musicians were without rights, street entertainment continued into the Middle Ages. Some time during the 13th century, Alfonso X of Castile offered insight into three distinct classes of entertainer:

The first group, the *bufos*, are the men who hang around village greens and marketplaces, combining slender musical talent with more coarse abilities, such as tumbling, juggling and buffoonery. The jongleurs are the second group, musicians and singers fit to appear before noblemen. Finally there are the troubadours, composers of music and poetry. It is probably more accurate to class jongleurs and *bufos* together in the English term 'minstrel', as a class of entertainers from whom the troubadours hired as musicians. (Cohen and Greenwood 1981:40)

The nomenclature of these individuals seems confusing at first, but in that society one's profession determined one's place.

During the eighteenth century, in England and particularly in London, factors such as "trade with the colonies and industrial development" created a wider gap between rich and poor (Cohen and Greenwood 1981:131). Because many families had to live on the streets, playing music was often the only means of gaining attention or annoying the wealthy until they were paid to leave. Street music was seen as a last resort for a lot of people, right before begging or being sentenced to the workhouse. Love,

politics, and death were the favorite themes of many of these ballads (Cohen and Greenwood 1981:135).

Around the same time, in colonial America, street performing served as a way of delivering the news among other things (Tanenbaum 1995:37). Even though street music existed all across New England, much of the history of American street entertainment is centered on New York City. Due to waves of immigration in the late 19th century, German bands and Italian hurdy-gurdies were a common sight in New York. "As late as 1923 the license department of that city reported eight hundred organ grinders and an equal number of itinerant street musicians" (Campbell 1981:11). In the postwar years of the 1920s and again in the 1940s, African Americans increasingly migrated to northern cities in search of employment and, due to racial discrimination, there was an increase in black musicians who performed on the streets (Tanenbaum 1995:38). In January 1936, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia banned street music in New York and street musicians were outlawed as beggars (Campbell 1981:11; Tanenbaum 1995:24).

During that same decade, American folk music was used by the Old Left to "build populist and labor movements" (Tanenbaum 1995:43). William Roy (2006:15-16) designates three subgenres of the American folk music of this time

period: union songs, political songs, and non-topical folk songs. This was the era of Woody Guthrie, who rode freight trains across the country spreading the message about the plight of the working man. Guthrie, a prolific songwriter, was also known to be a busker.

Following the McCarthy years, in the late 1950s and 1960s African Americans and young white college kids began protesting racism in the nation's foreign and domestic policies. "The streets of major American cities became political forums, where activists expressed their views through protest songs" (Tanenbaum 1995:12). According to Roy (2006:8), folk music was adopted by the American Left as much for its racial inclusion as it was for its populist connotations. In fact, he mentions a fourth category of American Folk music that emerged at this time: freedom songs (Roy 2006:20). In Washington Square Park during the 1960s, protestors from the New Left began staging gatherings reviving folk music "as a vehicle for expressing solidarity with civil rights and antiwar movements" (Tanenbaum 1995:43). Many modern buskers credit the "folk music and antiwar movements as the catalysts of the street performing revival in America" (Tanenbaum 1995:43).

The history of busking has led us from ancient Egypt to the present day. As I have illustrated, there has never

been just one class of performer. From the wandering jongleur performing for nobility to the itinerant musician seen as a vagabond, the street entertainer has persisted through the centuries.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES II

My first guitar was a loaner I borrowed from my grandfather when I was 23 years old. Though the first song I ever learned was *Wish You Were Here* by Pink Floyd, it did not take long for me to start a love affair with folk music. However, I refrained from learning to play many folk cover tunes. Instead I merely enjoyed folk music on the stereo and took to writing my own songs. I am the first to admit that I do not have a good singing voice and I still miss notes when I play guitar, but my passion is in writing lyrics.

More than three years passed from the time I strummed my first chord to my bout with homelessness where I met Mark, the man with the Leonard Cohen repertoire. During that period I had written numerous musical compositions. In fact, I initially gained Mark's respect when I played him a song about homelessness I had written while homeless. Not long after that, Mark decided to teach me how to be a

busker. I will go into more detail on what it means to be a busker in Chapter 5.

At the time I met Mark he had been living on the streets for almost two years. He told me that before becoming homeless he had been the front man in a rock band for nearly a decade. It was during his tenure as a lead singer that he taught himself to play acoustic guitar.

Mark was in his late forties and he was friends with a guy named Alex, who looked to be a bit younger. Alex carried a Fender Stratocaster and a little battery-powered Marshall amp that he clipped to his belt. The two performed on the streets together, Mark played rhythm and sang while Alex played lead. Because the two seemed pretty close, I was surprised when Mark quit performing with Alex and took me on as his understudy. Not only did I begin busking with Mark, he invited me to live in The Squat with him and Alex. The Squat was an abandoned house about a mile south of downtown Denver. It had no running water or electricity, but did have a roof, four walls, and a front door that locked.

I learned that when you have a support network of people who care about you, being homeless gets easier. You do not have to sleep alone in a park, you are less likely to be robbed, and you have someone you can count on if you

need something. Also, Mark and I never split the money we made busking together - we always combined our earnings and collectively bought food and split that. I think the reason for pooling our funds in such a manner was so that there would never be arguments about money. When you split money it almost implies that you do not trust the other person to be responsible for your funds, which may not be healthy for an egalitarian relationship. Instead of saying, "You have yours and I have mine," everything was ours.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have introduced the concepts of homelessness and busking. I have integrated some of my personal accounts in order to place my experiences into the larger context of this thesis. Before I lived on the streets or took an interest in studying the homeless, I admit that I had some preconceived notions about this population. I believe these stereotypes, which are mainly shared by middle class Americans, are the product of the mainstream media's representation of homeless people. First, whenever I thought about what homeless people eat, I imagined all of them lining up outside a soup kitchen every morning. This idea changed in 2005 while, as a homeless

man in Denver, I ate at a soup kitchen only once. Most of my meals were given to me as leftovers from patrons leaving restaurants in front of which I was busking. The rest of the time I ate with the money earned from playing music. A few dollars can go a long way on a fast food Dollar Menu.

Second, whenever I imagined where homeless people sleep, the two locations that came to mind were either a park bench or a shelter. Once again, in 2005 I learned that many municipalities have ordinances forbidding people from lying down at night. The implications of these laws are that the local police often harass those trying to sleep on park benches, stairways, or other horizontal spaces. As for shelters, when I was in Denver I never slept in one. I went from sleeping in a cheap motel (until I ran out of money), to sleeping on the ground in city parks, to sleeping in parking garages, to eventually making friends with Mark and sharing the abandoned house he called The Squat.

By the time I decided to undertake fieldwork for this thesis in Austin, most of my old ideas of how urban homeless people survive had been erased by my previous experiences. However I still had a lot to learn.

CONTENTS OF THIS STUDY

This thesis is presented in nine chapters. The second chapter will introduce phenomenology and several of the integral concepts of this research method. I will also demonstrate how phenomenology ties in with anthropology, ethnography, and this thesis.

Chapter 3 will introduce my informants Rocky, Lemac, and Willie. I will outline the occasions in which I met each of them, which will place them in the context of the Austin homeless community.

In Chapter 4 I will illustrate what camp life was like for two of my key informants. I will explain the social hierarchy, sense of security, and unwritten code of honor that exists in their encampment.

In Chapter 5 I will discuss many of the ways homeless people survive. I will open a conversation about busking as a profession and art as well as some modern day challenges. I will also describe in detail many of my informants' experiences performing music on the streets.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 will be devoted to the respective life experiences of my key informants. I will present case studies covering their lives before becoming homeless as well as present day issues pertaining to busking and homelessness in general.

In Chapter 9 I will open a discussion on the similarities and differences between the experiences of my three informants. I will provide a reasonably up-to-date account of what has transpired from the termination of my fieldwork to the present day. Finally, I will make suggestions for future research on this topic.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND METHODS

THEORY

The reason that phenomenological analysis is appropriate for this study is because at first glance, my informants seemed like regular everyday men and, for the most part, they were. However, these men have had unique subjective experiences that, for someone who has never experienced homelessness, might seem foreign. Phenomenology is an attempt to break down the barriers separating the distinctive experiences of these individuals from our own.

One of the most basic definitions of phenomenological research comes from Max van Manen (1990:9) who says it is "the study of lived experience." Daniel Schmicking (2010:42) helps by writing that "phenomenology studies the ways various cognitive (mental and bodily) operations (including, of course, emotional processes) combine to constitute an object as having meaning for human beings."

Anthropologist Michael Jackson (1996:1) further describes phenomenology as a way of "illuminating things by

bringing them into the daylight of ordinary understanding." Schmicking's 'object' and Jackson's 'things' are both descriptions of phenomena, hence the word phenomenology. Webster's II New College Dictionary (2005:845) defines a phenomenon as "that which appears real to the senses, regardless of whether its underlying existence is proved or its nature understood." So, phenomena are not so much things as they are, as they are things as they appear to us.

There are several other concepts that have definitional overlaps with phenomenology. For instance, van Manen (1990:9) cites Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, and Thomas Luckmann as saying, "Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, and reflect upon it." This definition of phenomenology introduces the concept of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelten*). According to Robert Sokolowski (2000:6), a lifeworld is "the world inhabited by the self...within which we immediately experience the things around us."

Jackson (1996:7-8) also takes care to thoroughly explain the notion of the lifeworld:

That domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical

knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend.

A second, briefer definition Jackson gives is "the world of our everyday goals, social existence, and practical activity." Schutz and Luckmann (1973:3), who authored two volumes on lifeworld studies, define it as "the region of reality in which man can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism."

Van Manen (1990:184) and Jackson (1996:4) both emphasize the taken-for-granted, commonsensical knowledge of the everyday lifeworld. My undergraduate mentor, Dr. Michael C. Robbins, used to say, "We do not see the lens through which we look." The lens we look through *is* the taken-for-granted knowledge of our everyday lives.

So how do these concepts relate to anthropology and this thesis? The lifeworld is a person's experiencing of culture. Clifford Geertz (1973:15) writes that "the line between culture as a natural fact and culture as a theoretical entity tends to get blurred." This dichotomy between culture as it is and culture as it is described drives the anthropologist to strive to find meaning in the lifeworld of his informant. Geertz (1973:20) goes on to say, "We are not actors, we do not have direct access, but only that small part of [the social discourse] which our

informants can lead us into understanding." So when the anthropologist interviews his research subject, he must interpret the transcript to the best of his ability. As Geertz (1973:20) so eloquently states, "Cultural analysis is guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses."

Phenomenology is relevant to anthropology in that it illuminates things by "bringing them into the daylight of ordinary understanding" (Jackson 1996:1). In order for this illumination to occur, the anthropologist practices ethnography. If my informant's lifeworld exists within the physical manifestations of his culture, it is my job as an anthropologist, to summarize Geertz (1973:16), to "clarify what goes on" and "reduce the puzzlement."

This clarification can be especially difficult for an anthropologist who has previous experience with the phenomenon he is researching. He must try to enter his informant's lifeworld while doing his best to retain a certain amount of naïveté. To accomplish this feat, his social skills are just as important as his scientific methodology. Jackson (1996:9) mentions it as a "shift from standing *outside or above* to situating oneself *elsewhere within*" the informant's field of knowledge. For an

anthropologist, situating oneself within another's field of knowledge is no easy task.

The phenomenological reduction is a method of "suspending inquiry into 'objective' reality in order to explore the reality of human consciousness" (Jackson 1996:10-11). This method involves "bracketing," or "setting aside," questions regarding the "hidden determinants of belief and action in order to describe the implications, intentions, and effects of what people say, do, and hold to be true" (Jackson 1996:11). In other words, the phenomenological reduction process reduces the study of consciousness to the subjective formation of meaningful experience. Jackson (1996:10) explains how the phenomenologist focuses on the "facts of consciousness," taking care not to attempt to explain these facts away by reducing them to "antecedent conditions, biogenetic explanations, unconscious principles, or invisible causes."

More methodical in his approach, van Manen (1990:185) describes several levels of the phenomenological reduction:

First, [it] involves the awakening of a profound sense of wonder and amazement at the mysteriousness of the belief in the world. This fundamental amazement animates one's questioning of the meaning of the experience of the world. Next, in the reduction one needs to overcome one's subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon or experience as it is lived through. Third, in the reduction one needs to strip away the theories or scientific conceptions and thematizations which overlay the phenomenon one wishes to study, and which prevents one from seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstracting manner.

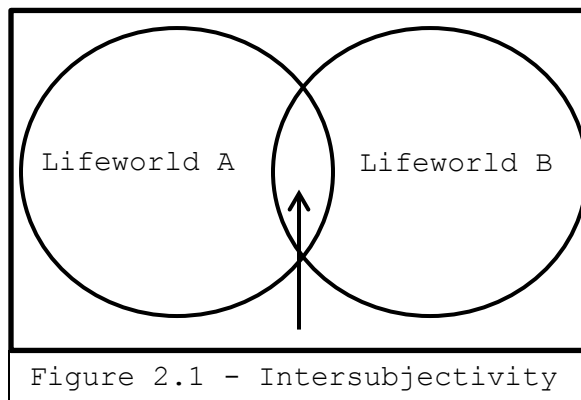
I was once asked what makes the reduction different from cultural relativism and I, in turn, inquired as to why the two concepts cannot live together. Serena Nanda and Richard Warms (2011:11) define cultural relativism as "the notion that cultures should be analyzed with reference to their own histories and values, in terms of the cultural whole, rather than according to the values of another culture." So, when an anthropologist uses the reduction process on a cultural phenomenon, he must actively account for his own cultural biases and attempt to withhold judgment when analyzing that phenomenon. In this way, the phenomenological reduction helps add structure to cultural relativism thus making the process more systematic.

Ultimately, the phenomenological reduction is an attempt to get close to the lifeworld experiences of informants. There are three ways to analyze the relationship between the reduction and cultural relativism. First, an ethnographer can practice cultural relativism and *not* the phenomenological reduction, such as when Marvin Harris (2012[1966]) wrote about India's sacred cattle. Second, someone can practice the phenomenological reduction and *not* cultural relativism, such as Martin Heidegger (1962) who was a member of the Nazi Party. Finally, a researcher can practice *both* the phenomenological reduction

and cultural relativism, such as Geertz (1973) and his use of interpretive anthropology.

As described by Jackson (1996) and van Manen (1990), practicing the bracketing of reality is a foundational requirement for the phenomenological ethnographer and is one of the first priorities on his list of things that must be done during fieldwork and data analysis. The bracketing that occurs not only involves questions asked of the informant, but also requires the anthropologist to try to set aside his own biases and judgments about the subject matter of his research.

The final concept I will address that crosses the boundaries of anthropology and phenomenology is that of intersubjectivity. This component of phenomenology is not a method but rather a way of recovering "the sense in which experience is situated within relationships and between persons" (Jackson 1996:26).



In Figure 2.1, let us imagine that Lifeworld A on the left belongs to me, the researcher, and Lifeworld B on the right belongs to my informant. Intersubjectivity occurs where our two lifeworlds intersect.

It is within the realm of intersubjectivity that occasionally a single phenomenon can be experienced by two individuals. On two people experiencing the same phenomenon differently, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann apply this concept to reality itself. They posit, "What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:3). Berger and Luckmann (1966:23) go on to write, "[O]thers have a perspective on this common world that is not identical with mine. My 'here' is their 'there'. My 'now' does not fully overlap with theirs." What these authors are saying is that each individual exists within his or her own sphere of reality or lifeworld. When two people hear a song for the first time, for instance, that song affects each individual differently based on his or her lifeworld up to that point in time.

Jackson (1996:27) cites R.D. Laing:

Social phenomenology is the science of my own and of others' experience. It is concerned with the relation between my experience of you and your experience of me.

In other words, intersubjectivity is not a one way street. During my fieldwork, when I was conducting interviews or participant observation, my informants were also learning about me as a person.

The two primary subjects my informants and I talked about were music and homelessness. During our conversations, I shared with them some of my own experiences as a homeless busker. We also discussed music in general and my informants learned what genres of music I prefer to listen to as well as play. When it came to playing, my informants discovered that I am not only an anthropologist, I am also a songwriter.

After taking inventory of my fieldwork experience, I realized that I talked just as much as they did. In fact, most of the time I was with my informants, we conversed and hung out rather than going over interview questions. After concluding the data gathering process, I occasionally returned to Austin and maintained contact with most of the men.³ I am happy to say that not only did I find good informants, I also gained friends.

For the rest of this thesis, I apply phenomenology to my analysis of the lived experiences of my informants as well as to my own brief tenure as a homeless person. Step

³ I will discuss the present statuses of my informants in Chapter 9.

One in Schmicking's (2010:50) phenomenological toolbox is the "bracketing" of reality. When I arrived in the field, I had to strive to suspend judgment of my informants. This was difficult because I have been homeless before, so I had to fight the tendency to make assumptions based on what I already knew. I also struggled to not make assumptions based on all of the literature I had read on homelessness. In practicing the phenomenological reduction, I worked hard to devise interview questions that reflected a certain naïveté of my previous knowledge. I will admit that I was not always successful.

The next step I took in my research was to attempt to enter the lifeworlds of my informants. This is actually another way of stating that I gained rapport. I cannot say I did this before or after bracketing since most of these tools are used in conjunction with one another. I started out simply walking around different areas of downtown Austin looking for buskers. After a couple of days of this I encountered my first informant, Rocky. A week later I met my other two informants, Lemac and Willie.

Upon gaining rapport with my informants, I created intersubjective relationships with them. We talked and got to know one another before my pen ever touched the page. This bonding was essential in gaining trust with these

individuals to the point where I eventually felt comfortable asking them for interviews.

Of course, there are some limitations to the use of phenomenology as a research method. For one, the degree to which an anthropologist can actually enter the lifeworld of his informant seems to be debatable. Sure, I can create an intersubjective relationship with an informant where my lifeworld intersects with his, but am I really entering his lifeworld? As for the phenomenological reduction, the degree to which an anthropologist can really escape from the bonds of his own culture and upbringing to set aside his own biases seems to be a daunting task as well, and it is not truly achievable. In fact, the researcher must imitate naïveté because he cannot *be* naïve. When I was conducting fieldwork, as hard as I tried, I could not forget my previous homeless experiences and I certainly could not unlive them. In addition, I am a graduate student and an analyst, so I can only *try* to see things anew. Therefore, phenomenology should be seen as an ideal; a model to strive for.

METHODS

Although there are several methods of recruiting informants (see Bernard 2011), as mentioned above, I chose

to improvise and simply walk around searching for buskers. The main reason I felt improvisation was the best means of informant recruiting was because I knew that homeless people can be very mobile. I tried speaking with social workers, and even the receptionist at the front desk of a local shelter, but no one could tell me where I would find buskers. Walking through downtown Austin allowed me to find three homeless guitar players, of which one (Rocky) became my first key informant. Encountering Lemac (and subsequently Willie), on the other hand, was simple luck with the help of a classmate who tipped me off to where some other buskers might be found.

As I mentioned above, trying to enter my informants' lifeworlds, or gaining rapport, was my first step. Once I began scheduling interviews with my informants, I started using qualitative anthropological methods to gather data. I decided not to use a tape recorder because I felt it would be too intimidating for the particular population I was researching. Therefore all of my interview notes were written with pen in a composition book.

All of my interviews with Rocky took place in a fast food restaurant because that was the most convenient place we could comfortably meet. In contrast, I interviewed Lemac and Willie within the boundaries of their encampment,

which I will describe in detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

I prepared a preliminary semi-structured interview guide for each informant that asked simple questions about homelessness and music in general. Every evening when I returned home, I transcribed the interview results for each informant. I then proceeded to derive a custom interview guide for our next meeting based on the answers to the previous one. In this way, the subsequent interview guide for each informant tended to be unique for that particular informant. Often I asked for clarification or elaboration on concepts from previous interviews.

As for participant observation, I never scheduled a moment to play music with my informants. Because I interviewed Rocky in a fast food restaurant, the two of us did not do any jamming. However since I interviewed Lemac and Willie in their camp, we put together several impromptu jam sessions. I should add that throughout most of my fieldwork, I carried a guitar with me just for these moments. I did not always uncase my guitar but as far as I was concerned, I would rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it. I will further elaborate on my participant observation in Chapter 4.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have explained phenomenology and some of its key components. This review of phenomenology is by no means exhaustive; I merely described some of the core concepts that I used for my research.

My research methods were simple. After locating my informants, I used semi-structured and eventually some unstructured interviews to obtain data. I took on the role of participant observer as well. By playing music with my informants, I gained insight into their abilities as musicians and established trusting relationships with them. In the next chapter, I will provide detailed descriptions of my first encounter with each informant.

CHAPTER 3: FIRST ENCOUNTERS

It was a warm night in early June. I had just spent a couple of hours talking with a homeless man who called himself Mr. Mariachi. Although Mr. Mariachi walked around downtown Austin with an acoustic guitar, after spending some time talking and playing music with him, I realized he was not what I consider to be a busker. He appeared to be oblivious to the fact that he might make decent money playing guitar on the streets; instead he just seemed to play for enjoyment. Playing music for fun is perfectly alright, but he was not what I was looking for in a key informant. At around 10:30 pm, Mr. Mariachi had to leave to catch his bus. I gave him a few bucks and we parted ways.

In this chapter I describe my path into fieldwork in downtown Austin, Texas. I will outline how I met and initially built intersubjective relationships (i.e., gained rapport) with each of my three key informants. I will also

briefly describe the camp occupied by two of my informants, which I will further discuss in the next chapter.

Feeling a bit let down yet hopeful at the same time, I crossed Little Bourbon Street⁴ to begin the westward journey back to my truck. I had my guitar, which was strapped to my back inside a soft case with backpack straps. On the opposite corner of the intersection where Mr. Mariachi and I had our song swap, I spotted another guitar player. He was a younger man who appeared to be in his mid-to-late twenties and he was playing the Aerosmith song, *Angel*. The busker had 10 to 15 dollars in his soft guitar case, which was open in front of where he was standing. After he finished the song I introduced myself and he told me his name. Rocky had a large bag with him and I do not know what was in it, I assumed clothes. This was a sign that he was possibly homeless. I asked if I could interview him at a time when he was not working and he said yes and asked for my email address. The fact that he communicated by email caused me to believe that maybe he was not homeless, but there is always the possibility that he stays with a friend who has internet or that he uses the library. We exchanged email addresses and I departed.

⁴ To retain confidentiality of my informants' locations, I do not use actual street names in this thesis.

A few days later I got an email from a classmate informing me that he had seen buskers on Broadway Street. So I packed up my guitar and drove up to Austin arriving at around 7:30 pm. I parked several blocks north of the main area so any buskers would not see what kind of vehicle I was driving. I do not know why I do this, but for some reason I feel I have more credibility if I show up on foot.

I walked to the street corner my friend had suggested and found what I presumed to be a homeless man sitting on a milk crate in front of a shop playing harmonica. Not exactly what I was looking for, but it was a good start. I introduced myself and he said people call him Outlaw. I put a dollar in his tip container and asked if he knew of any guitar players who hung out nearby. He dodged the question and said he plays guitar and asked if he could play mine. I very reluctantly agreed, uncased my guitar, and handed it to him. He aggressively strummed it, not seeming to know how to form chords. It appeared that he in fact did not know how to play, that he was just mimicking what he had seen guitar players do. Still, he insisted he played harmonica for a Texas Country band.

As I was warning Outlaw to take it easy and not to break any strings, a man wearing a beret walked up on my right. He was carrying a loaf of bread in his left hand

and had a soft guitar case strapped to his back. I saw this as an opportunity and asked if he played. He quickly replied, "No! I just carry this guitar around so I can look good." I joked, "So do I." I retrieved my guitar from Outlaw and began talking to the other man. He took out his guitar and played a nice blues song. He was a very good guitarist and told me he had been playing for 43 years. I asked if he played around here and he said he played everywhere, including Europe, South Africa, and a number of other exotic locations. I could tell it was going to be difficult getting a serious answer out of him.

While we were chatting, Outlaw offered to buy the man a beer if he would walk with him several blocks south down Broadway to a convenience store. The man, Lemac, declined, saying that he was going the other direction and did not want to walk all the way back that way. I chimed in and said I would buy each of them a beer some place closer. So I put my guitar back in its case, Outlaw packed his belongings, and the three of us headed a block or so north to a restaurant with an outdoor patio.

We arrived and secured a table and Lemac struck up a conversation with a man and woman sitting at a table next to ours. The waitress eventually came by and Outlaw ordered a margarita. Lemac and I each ordered a beer; him

a Negra Modelo and me a Shiner Bock. Lemac kept talking to the couple and I heard them say they were from Finland. Lemac seized the opportunity to inform them that he had worked for the Swiss military and had traveled much of Europe, though not to Finland. This statement explained the beret that he was wearing as I had taken for granted that he may be a veteran.

Lemac was still chatting with the Finnish couple when I heard him insist that before they left he wanted to play a song for them. By the time Outlaw finished his margarita, I had emptied my Shiner and Lemac was still working on his Negra Modelo. The couple hinted that they wanted to leave so Lemac downed his beer, I paid our tab, we gathered our belongings, and walked about 50 feet north of the patio as nobody is allowed to play guitar in front of the restaurant.

The five of us sat on a brick ledge that bordered some shrubbery overlooking the sidewalk. Lemac uncased his guitar and played two love songs for the couple. I was sitting to the right of Lemac, the couple was to his left, and Outlaw was to their left. After the songs and some more chatting, the couple insisted that they had to leave. Because of where I was positioned I could not tell if they

gave Lemac any money, though I am certain he was hoping they would.

After the Finnish couple left, Lemac asked me what kind of music I play and I told him I only do original folk songs playing three or four of the Cowboy Chords⁵. He said that I would like this song and he played a folk-rockish original tune. He was correct, I enjoyed it immensely. He asked me to play one so I uncased my guitar and played a song I wrote in the spring of 2011 titled, *Street Corner Man*⁶. Because of the nature of the lyrics, I was hoping he would listen to them. Instead he listened to my chords and played some nice leads in accompaniment. It was actually the first time I had ever played a complete song with someone else accompanying me, as I usually get distracted and have to play solo.

That moment was a personal milestone for me and there are two reasons why it was important. First, as I stated in Chapter 1, I have only been playing guitar for a few years. Accomplishing the feat of playing in a duet had both physical and psychological implications. Psychologically, I felt a certain sense of pride in being able to concentrate and focus on playing with another

⁵ The open guitar chords you see people play while sitting around the campfire in old cowboy movies.

⁶ See lyrics, page 1.

person. Physically, and this may be difficult to explain, I felt a touch of euphoria circulate through my body as a direct result of this act. The only other phenomenon I can compare this to is runner's high, where long distance joggers experience an almost orgasmic sensation during certain times of an intense workout or race. Second, part of the frustration I have faced when trying to play in a duet also included disappointment experienced by the other party who wanted to jam with me. As a result of finishing the brief jam session with Lemac, I felt validated as a musician. Further, although I did not know what Lemac was thinking, I feel the experience gave me legitimacy from his perspective in that he was engaging with a fellow musician. In other words, at that moment Lemac did not know that I had always had trouble playing music with other people. As far as he was concerned, what I was doing came naturally.

It was around 9:30 pm and Outlaw was getting restless. During our previous conversation at the restaurant, I had told Outlaw that I lived in San Marcos and drove my pickup truck to Austin. Armed with this valuable information, he asked if I could drive him to the convenience store before it closed at 10 pm. I hesitated because I wanted to talk to Lemac about my project. However upon thinking for a moment, I decided I should take it slow and work harder to

gain Lemac's trust. He said he could always be found on Broadway. I revealed to the two men that my truck was parked up the street then offered Lemac a ride and asked if he needed anything. He said he needed a couple of bucks so, while Outlaw was not looking, I slipped him a five dollar bill. Lemac thanked me profusely and I told him I would see him later.

After a couple of days, I stayed true to my word and returned to Broadway Street. True to his word, Lemac was there busking. Without Outlaw around I felt more comfortable speaking with Lemac about my thesis project. I told him that I am an anthropologist researching street musicians in Austin. I explained that I would like to interview him for multiple hours and would pay a little more than minimum wage in cash after each session. Lemac agreed to be interviewed and we arranged to meet at his busking location the following morning.

The decision to pay my informants in cash came to me somewhat spontaneously. I had originally planned to compensate them with food and socks⁷ for taking the time to allow me to interview them. However after watching Lemac's behavior with the Finnish couple, I realized that my

⁷ A common anecdote among war veterans is that good socks are essential for outdoor living.

informants were hardworking individuals and were taking time from their busy schedules to let me ask personal questions about their lives. The hours I would need to interview each man were hours he could otherwise spend busking for cash. Therefore, I felt the only fair way to resolve this issue was to pay them a decent, even amount; 10 dollars per hour.

When I arrived the next day, Lemac and I got into my truck and drove to an office space belonging to a local nonprofit. I had gained permission from the person in charge to use the space as an interview headquarters. But when we arrived, a large group of people was inside and we did not want to interrupt. So Lemac gave me directions to the encampment where he lived and we went there instead. He explained that he and two other men had consent from some landowners to reside on their private property.

Following Lemac's instructions, I drove to an empty plot of land and he directed me to park in the shade under a tree's overhanging branches. We exited my truck and he told me to wait while he talked to his two friends for a minute. Lemac returned and he brought me to the central area of the camp behind an abandoned building. There sat two bearded men who were clearly older than Lemac. He

introduced me to Willie the Fiddler and Dave. Our initial introduction was brief and uneventful and at the time I was unaware that Willie would be my most seasoned key informant of this project.

The men's camp (Figure 3.1) was originally located on the northeast corner of Main Street and Jennifer Lane, though it has since moved to another location. Main Street is a busy road that runs north/south with two lanes going each direction and Jennifer Lane is a quieter residential street that siphons off the traffic of people headed to Broadway, which is parallel to Main. My newfound friends occupied some private property on two plots of land bisected by a row of trees under which lay a wire fence. There is nothing but grass and gravel on the east plot, which is where I parked my truck. On the west plot there is an abandoned building with boarded up windows and padlocked doors. The building is positioned on the southwest corner of the land facing Main Street, which allowed Willie, Dave, and Lemac to congregate behind the edifice between the back of the building and the trees that separate the two lots. In the center of their occupied space, halfway between the back of the building

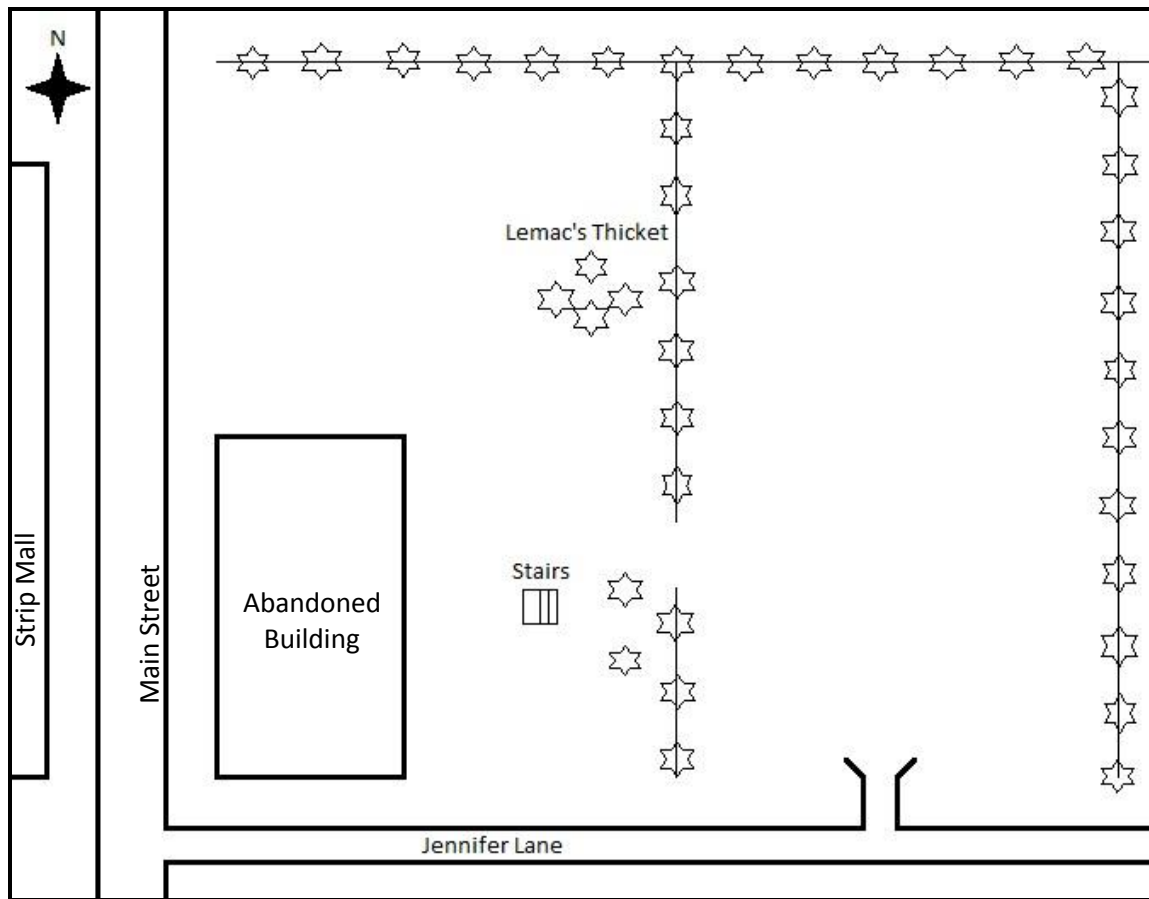


Figure 3.1 – The Camp (Not drawn to scale)

and the wire fence, is a three-step concrete stairway protruding out of the ground and leading nowhere. Depending on the position of the afternoon sun, my informants placed their lawn chairs near this stairway so visitors passing through could sit on the steps.

SUMMARY

There is an old cliché: *Luck is where preparation meets opportunity*. I was fortunate to meet Rocky while

wandering aimlessly through downtown Austin looking for guitar players. Meeting Lemac, though somewhat random, was a result of strategic planning based on information given by a classmate. My introduction to Willie was a combination of sheer luck and the willingness of Lemac to ask his partners to allow me to enter their encampment. In the next chapter, I will further describe the camp inhabited by Willie, Lemac, and Dave.

CHAPTER 4: CAMP LIFE

If you're ever in a camp, know who the top gun is and get on his good side.

-Lemac

Although Rocky was the first key informant I encountered, this chapter will account for the living situation of Lemac and Willie (and Dave). I will provide a description of the social hierarchy in place at their encampment. Then I will cover some of the material aspects of their lives there such as the sleeping arrangements, personal facilities, and why the landowners allowed them to reside at this particular location. I will also discuss how these men have visitors almost daily, both housed and unhoused.

In order to grasp the dynamics of the intersubjective interactions between Willie, Lemac, and Dave, I must first differentiate between egalitarian and stratified society. Morton Fried (cited in Flanagan 1989:246) is given credit for defining the term "simple egalitarian society" as a society "in which there are as many positions of prestige in any given age-sex grade as there are persons capable of

filling them." Ten years earlier, however, Marshall Sahlins (cited in Flanagan 1989:246) insisted that "truly egalitarian societies" do not exist. According to Sahlins, even the most primitive societies cannot be described as being unranked. He presents "the universally employed minimal stratification criteria" as being "age, sex, and personal characteristics"⁸ (Flanagan 1989:246). Because these three characteristics exist between persons in any group, I believe we can comfortably conclude that Sahlins was correct in positing that there is no such thing as a truly egalitarian society.

James Flanagan goes on to distinguish social stratification from hierarchy. Social stratification belongs to the domain of *social structure* and "requires that a society be divided into institutionalized categories of persons (be they groups, classes, or castes) and that these categories be ranked" (Berreman cited in Flanagan 1989:248). On the other hand, hierarchy implies "the existence of inequalities between persons" and falls into the domain of *interpersonal relations or social organization* (Flanagan 1989:248).

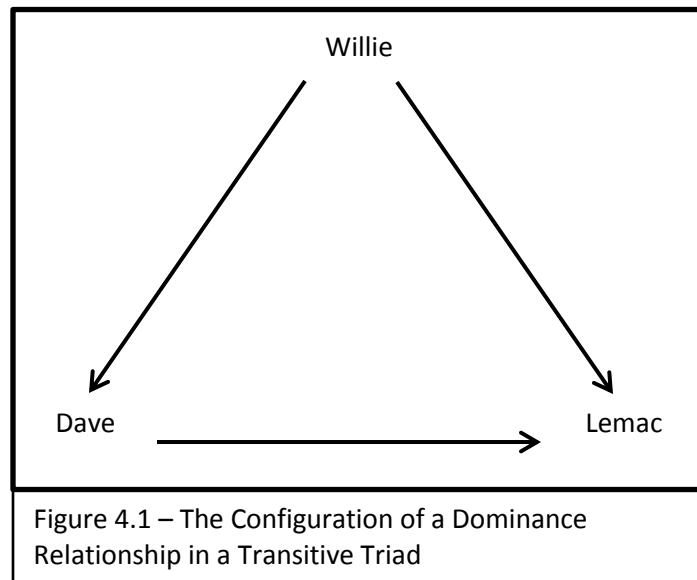
⁸ P.T.W. Baxter (cited in Flanagan 1989:256) adds a category of seniority, which though it can be counted as a personal characteristic, is important as I will address shortly.

How does all of this relate to my informants? If we follow Sahlins's idea on the non-existence of truly egalitarian societies, then we can accept the fact that Willie, Dave, and Lemac did not share such a relationship. But did their group exhibit social stratification or hierarchy? If we take social stratification to reflect "institutionalized categories of persons" in ranked order, then I argue that our group was not large enough for stratification to emerge from within; there were only three people. However there existed inequalities between the three individuals, so a hierarchy was in place.

This hierarchy was manifested in a triad with a transitive dominant relationship. Transitive dominant relationships occur when "A dominates B and B dominates C" so that "A also dominates C" (Chase 1980:909-910). Figure 4.1 below illustrates how Willie was in a dominant relationship toward Dave and Dave likewise toward Lemac so that Willie was dominant over Dave and Lemac while Lemac was not dominant over anyone.

The relationship between Willie, Dave, and Lemac formed a linear hierarchy where "all individuals can be ranked from top to bottom by the number of group members they dominate" (Chase 1980:910). In other words, Willie

dominated two persons, Dave dominated one, and Lemac dominated none.



By my best estimations, the hierarchy was formed in such a way as to award dominance to seniority. Willie was the “top gun” for two main reasons. First, he had originally established permission from the landowners to live on the vacant property. Second, Willie had been homeless the longest; since 1976. A third possibility is that Willie retained seniority because, at 62, he may have been the oldest member of the group. Dave remained somewhat of an enigma during my study. Regrettably, I did not ask Willie how long he had known Dave, though by their conversations I established that the two had been friends for several years. Lemac, by contrast, was the youngest of

the three (55 years old) and had only been living in the camp for a few months, which is why he was the lowest ranking member of the group.

For Willie, being the dominant member of the group meant that he commanded the most respect. Although he was top gun, Willie was the only one of the three who did not have military experience. Because Dave and Lemac both had served in the armed forces, it is possible they fell into this dominance pattern naturally since respecting one's superior(s) is part of everyday life in the military. Also, Willie maintained certain privileges that were exclusive to him, such as having permission to sleep in an abandoned house across Jennifer Lane immediately south of the camp (see Figure 3.1). Finally, Willie was the ultimate decision-maker of the group; the judge and jury if you will. For instance, Lemac once told me that no one could reside in the camp without Willie's permission. I will return to the irony of this statement below.

Describing task-oriented behavior, Cecilia Ridgeway (1978:176) wrote:

The primary basis for awarding status to a task group member will be the behavior that a member is perceived to have contributed towards the accomplishment of the group's task.

Ridgeway was interested in the group's perception of the member rather than the member's perception of himself.

Following this logic, Lemac was allowed entrance into the group because Willie and Dave accepted the contributions he made. For example, Lemac received food stamps and shared his bounty with the other two group members. Also, on one occasion Lemac had an old friend wire him some money and he proceeded to pay tribute to Willie by buying him a pint of whiskey. Essentially, Lemac was trading resources for entry into the group though he only achieved a low status. What makes this behavior significant is that, according to Willie, Lemac never formally asked his permission to live in the camp. At the time I heard this it came as a surprise and proved to be a sensitive subject during my interviews with Lemac because he told me that he *did* have Willie's permission to live there. The discrepancy in their stories caused me a bit of discomfort since it meant that Lemac may not have been as welcome in the camp as I had originally perceived him to be.

As an ethnographer trying to interpret this delicate situation, my first instinct was to attempt to determine who was telling the truth, Willie or Lemac. However upon further consideration, I realized that finding out "the truth" was unnecessary and perhaps even impossible. I did not feel comfortable seeking elaboration from either Willie

or Lemac, so I only had their contradicting stories to work with.

Renato Rosaldo (2012[1989]:537) posited that "one must consider the subject's position within a field of social relations in order to grasp one's emotional experience." Truth or no truth, my task was to understand Willie and Lemac's accounts of whether Lemac actually had permission to live in the camp. Lemac's position as a low ranking group member meant that he was constantly trying to find legitimacy in the eyes of the two higher ranking members. Because of my position as a resource, from Lemac's perspective it probably worked to his advantage to find legitimacy in my eyes as well. If he really did not have Willie's permission to live there, then Lemac may have (wrongly) feared that I would no longer take him seriously as an informant.

Willie, on the other hand, had nothing to gain or lose by claiming that Lemac did not have permission to live in the camp. Whether he realized it or not, Willie had already solidified his legitimacy with me by the mere fact that he was the most experienced busker of the group. His attempt to delegitimize Lemac did not diminish my respect for either of the men. However as I mentioned above, I did become uncomfortable with the whole situation.

Further, although the threat of physical violence never manifested during my interview sessions, there was an unspoken element of aggression that hovered over the camp and I did witness a couple of verbal confrontations between Willie and Lemac that usually ended with Lemac storming away to sit by himself and cool off in his thicket. I never felt like I was in danger of seeing a violent eruption, but only a person who has been in a fight or witnessed one first-hand can describe the tension that occasionally filled the air.

One afternoon when I finished my interviews, Willie and Lemac started a song swap. Willie played a couple of songs on his violin and Lemac took out his guitar and belted out some tunes as well. They even talked me into playing two songs on Lemac's guitar. It was a Friday and the men were a little drunk. Eventually Willie ended up with Lemac's guitar and he was doing a very good job at keeping us entertained. Willie was sitting on the concrete steps in the middle of the camp and at one point stood up, lost his footing, and bumped Lemac's guitar against the corner of a step. Although there was no visible damage to the guitar, Lemac immediately started fuming in anger because of what happened. "That really pisses me off," I heard Lemac mumble under his breath. Willie, who saw

Lemac's change of temperament, began playing a comedic song with the chorus of, "Fuck you!" After that display, Lemac asked for his guitar and walked back to his thicket.

Since I cannot read Willie's mind, I can only speculate as to why he treated Lemac this way at that particular instance. One thing I can say is that Willie appeared to consistently exhibit this type of behavior toward Lemac. On a different occasion, Willie and Lemac had a verbal confrontation which ended the same way: with Lemac storming off to his thicket. After Lemac was too far away to hear, Willie proclaimed, "Lemac's an asshole. He won't be here much longer." I will return to this foreshadowing of events later in the thesis. The important thing, though, is that as my fieldwork carried on, the rift between Lemac and Willie seemed to increase. My speculation was that Willie was indeed planning to expel Lemac from the camp when the time was right. By treating him this way, Willie may have been trying to coerce Lemac into leaving on his own accord. Who would want to remain in a camp where they were treated with such disrespect? Lemac's tolerance of Willie's despotic behavior may have demonstrated Lemac's willingness to accept his lot as a low ranking group member as well as the fact that he had no other place to go.

Throughout these tumultuous encounters between Willie and Lemac, the one constant was Dave's loyalty to Willie. Dave and Willie had known each other for several years and had even worked together driving delivery trucks at one time. One may wonder why Lemac did not try to create an alliance with Dave in order to overthrow Willie's dominance. Since my time spent at the camp was limited, I did not see such an incident occur. However in all the time I was in the camp, I knew that Dave would not take sides against Willie. One simple explanation I have for this is that Dave simply liked Willie more. Lemac used to spend a lot of time telling stories relating to his tenure in the armed forces. While I seldom had reason not to believe Lemac, one time Willie and Dave both told me that Lemac was being less than honest about his military experience. As a veteran himself, Dave was as good a judge of the truth as anyone.

Another reason Dave could have favored Willie over Lemac is that, if forced to choose one or the other, Dave would live a better life being teamed up with Willie than with Lemac. Yes Lemac had food stamps to offer as tribute to the other two men, but Willie provided a place to call

home. The privilege of living in the camp may have been more important to Dave than anything food stamps could buy.

A final explanation for why I never saw Dave challenge Willie's authority is that the two had been friends for so long; no one could come between them. Their relationship may have been more of an egalitarian partnership than what existed between either of them and Lemac. Research has shown that "even rigidly hierarchical systems may contain egalitarian subsystems" (Flanagan 1989:262). If this is the case with the men in the camp, then the bond between Willie and Dave had egalitarian tendencies while still retaining a hierarchical dominance pattern. In other words, Willie and Dave had mutual respect for one another. Lemac, though forced to respect both Willie and Dave, did not receive much in return from either man.

As stated above, Willie had gained permission from the landowners to allow the men to reside on their property (see Figure 3.1). The privilege of staying on this land did come with a couple of conditions. For one, Willie, Dave, and Lemac agreed to keep the camp clean of garbage. While I was doing my fieldwork and interviewing the men, there were a few times that the landowners stopped by and I had the opportunity to meet both of them. They were a

middle-age man and wife and were quite friendly. The husband would drop off a couple of large contractor's trash bags for the campers to fill and the men would throw the full bags from the previous week into the back of the man's truck. His wife came by in a separate vehicle one time just to check on them.

The three campers also agreed to do their best to prevent graffiti artists from tagging the building on the west plot of land. They never came out and said this, but I gathered that Dave was the one who was mainly responsible for keeping people from spray-painting the building. The reason I am making this presumption is because Dave's sleeping spot was on the ground under the overhanging roof of the building on the east wall. In other words, he was closest to the edifice at night and could hear the unmistakable sound of the shaking spray cans of the perpetrators.

As I have already briefly mentioned, each man had his own space to sleep at night. Willie had permission to sleep in an empty house directly across Jennifer Lane to the south of their camp. Dave slept on the ground against the east wall of the abandoned building in their camp. And Lemac had a makeshift hammock in his own private thicket of trees northeast of the same building.

When the men had to urinate, they would walk to the trees along the fence line on the northeast corner of the west plot of land. Lemac told me that in the mornings he would hike up Main Street a short distance to defecate in a portable outdoor toilet located on the grounds of a local trailer park eatery.

One common stereotype I once believed about homeless people was that they are typically lonely. Although some of the literature (Desjarlais 1997, 1999; Biswas-Diener and Diener 2006; Lafuente and Lane 1995) reinforces this idea, I found that the men in the camp had a wide network of friends. Nearly every time I was there interviewing, people would stop by just to say hello and check in on them. Sometimes it was a big biker on a Harley Davidson motorcycle who would bring by a six pack of beer, other times a man who was in the film business (Willie's producer) would drop in to see Willie, occasionally a young local glass blower would stop in to chat, and frequently other people who lived on the streets would come by. Willie and company were quite well-known amongst a wide group of individuals of all shapes, sizes, and socio-economic categories.

SUMMARY

I started out this chapter discussing the social hierarchy in place at the camp. At first glance, what appeared to be a simple egalitarian group turned out to hold a "pecking order" with Willie at the top as the most dominant and Lemac at the bottom as the lowest ranking group member. Each man followed a code of responsibilities that included keeping the camp clean and preventing graffiti artists from spray-painting the building. I also covered camp visitation practices and conclude that, although they may not have homes, these men are prominent fixtures in Austin's artistic community. In the next chapter I will go into more detail about earning income and busking.

CHAPTER 5: MAKING A LIVING

Busking is a dying art, not flying signs. I'm trying to make an honest buck.

-Lemac

In this chapter I will discuss busking as a way some homeless people make money. In order to place busking within the context of street professions, however, I will first examine some of the other methods of survival and subsistence. Although the following list is not exhaustive, I will touch upon the income earning practices I have witnessed and have read about in the social science literature.

EARNING INCOME

Homeless people have many different avenues of earning income. In a city like Austin, the most visible method is flying signs. One can observe these individuals at certain intersections holding cardboard signs with various messages. I have seen signs asking for sympathy on account of some disability or unfortunate occurrence. I have also seen signs with witty quips asking for beer money. Sign

content can range from pious to profane and everything in between. Regardless of the extraneous items that may be scribbled on cardboard with a Sharpie marker, the common thread connecting nearly all signs is that they ask for something. A sign may specifically ask for money or a job. Other times a sign may simply ask for help.

When I participated in the Point-in-Time (PIT) count for Austin in 2011, I met a homeless man flying a sign at the intersection of an interstate overpass. He told me the people at that particular intersection work shifts. I was astonished to hear how organized the group was. The man would fly signs for a specific amount of time, his girlfriend would come out and take his position, and they had several more individuals in the rotation.

Another method of earning income is known as panhandling, begging, or spanging⁹. The people who participate in this method are not quite as easy to spot as the sign flyers for the simple fact that they do not carry around a piece of cardboard that can be used to identify them as homeless. Therefore panhandlers are less visible and more mobile than those who fly signs. Where a sign flyer stays at one intersection for the duration of a shift, a beggar can walk up and down any street or sidewalk

⁹ (spān'jǐng) A combination of the words "spare" and "change." Asking for spare change.

he or she chooses. That being said, a lot of times I have seen panhandlers loiter in front of or next to convenience stores. Though I have never asked why, I presume beggars do this for two reasons. The first reason is that people coming out of the store will be more likely to have change in their pocket. The second reason may be so they can take their newly earned money inside to buy whatever it is that they intend to buy.

In some ways flying signs can be compared to fishing and begging can be compared to hunting. When a person goes fishing, he or she does not normally go after a particular fish. Rather the fisherman will stand on the shore or sit in a boat and cast a line and wait for a fish to come. This is how flying signs occurs. A man or woman will stand on a street corner, hold up a sign, and wait for a car to come by that has a driver who is able and willing to give money. In contrast, a hunter may indeed see a particular animal that he or she wants to overtake. The hunter will follow the prey or attempt to place him or herself in a position to intercept the animal on its way to some future location. In this way the panhandler, rather than wait for people come to him or her, will actively seek out and approach people to ask for money. So beggars can be seen

as a bit more aggressive or assertive in seeking income whereas the sign flyers tend to be more passive.

Not all modes of income involve asking strangers for money. As Teresa Gowan (2009) points out, recycling is an important activity shared by many homeless individuals.

Her research revealed the following:

[M]oneymaking rarely appeared to be the sole purpose of [the recyclers'] work. In fact, the more time and effort that men spent on the job, the less primary appeared their money motive...To the contrary, the San Francisco "pros" used their scavenging work to create a space for self-respect and solidarity (Gowan 2009:234-235).

According to Gowan, money was a secondary goal of the population of San Francisco recyclers that she interviewed. These men knew they could make as much, if not more, income panhandling but took pride in cleaning up the streets. As Gowan's (2009:238) informant Luther stated, "If you go on the bum, that's about as low as you can go." In other words, the recyclers felt certain superiority toward those who did not work for a living.

Of course I would be ignoring the negative aspects of some people's situations if I did not mention illegal activities such as drug dealing, theft, and prostitution. In his article *Scrutinizing the Street*, Loïc Wacquant (2002) makes the case that too many urban ethnographers look at their homeless informants through rose-colored glasses thereby ignoring the illegal activities so many of

these people allegedly participate in. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to confirm or deny Wacquant's claims. I can only acknowledge that some homeless individuals do earn income illegally whether it is through drug dealing, theft, prostitution, or simply by working cash-paying, tax-free jobs.

Despite so many examples of income earning activities that occur outside the realm of social services, there are still a lot of street people who use social service agencies and shelters (Desjarlais 1994, 1997, 1999; Snow and Anderson 1993; Glasser and Bridgman 1999; Lafuente and Lane 1995). According to the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH), their organization shelters up to 215 men each night (ARCH Overnight Shelter 2012). About half of the residents of the ARCH shelter are part of the case management program where the men sleep in reserved bunks. The ARCH case management program caters to individuals who may have problems with "mental illness, substance abuse, medical needs, criminal history, lack of education or job skills, cognitive impairments, and social isolation" (ARCH Case Management 2012). The remaining sleeping spaces are distributed nightly in a lottery system. The fact that a lottery system is in place means there is a greater demand for beds than there are beds available.

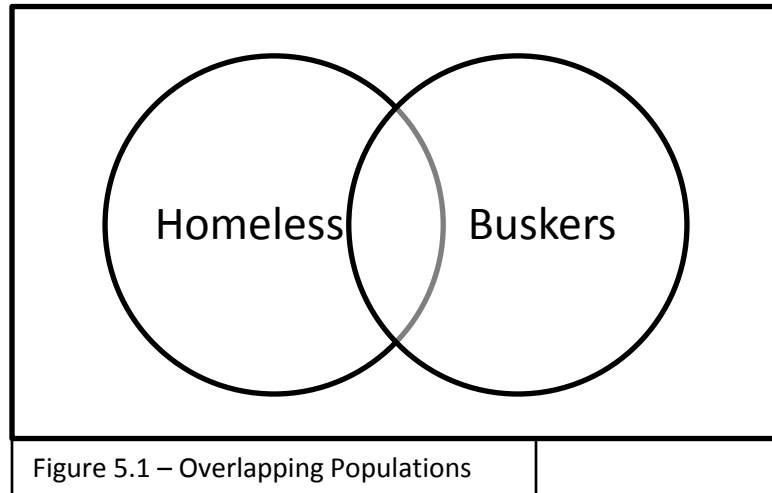
Lisa Hoffman and Brian Coffey (2008) address many reasons why homeless people choose not to use social services. The complaints about shelters range from being treated like a number or like a small child to having their dignity and self-respect taken away. An example of this occurs when the employees of a shelter enforce a strict list of rules. "By controlling resources and access to goods and services, staff attempt to elicit certain kinds of behaviors" (Hoffman and Coffey 2008:214). Many of Hoffman and Coffey's (2008:215) informants preferred to "hold onto their humanity and dignity" by leaving the system and living on the streets. Ronald Paul Hill and Mark Stamey (1990:307) reinforce some of these ideas when they write, "Most homeless persons differentiate themselves from shelter inhabitants and feel that shelters are the choice of the most destitute or the insane." While "destitute" and "insane" are strong words, there is still no escaping the fact that shelters can only hold a finite number of individuals. Therefore I argue that most homeless people do not use shelters.

Other services such as food stamps, soup kitchens, or food trucks may be more commonly used than shelters. Lemac was a recipient of food stamps and Rocky knew the routes of several agencies that drive trucks around town to

distribute sandwiches, fruit, and beverages (e.g., Mobile Loaves and Fishes). The difference is that food stamps require a social security number while food dispensaries do not. So while many social service organizations require that a client have a case manager, there are other entities that give out food or services to anyone who is homeless. This distinction means that users of the latter (e.g., food trucks) have fewer obligations and commitments to the organizations than users of the former (e.g., food stamps).

BUSKING AS A PROFESSION

Up until this point, I have outlined some of the common means of earning income for homeless people. None of the aforementioned income earning activities are mutually exclusive. So on any given day a person can move into or out of any of the roles. That being said, a homeless individual may have a single preferred occupation he or she uses (more than others) to get by. Busking is one of those activities that may draw non-homeless people into the realm of street performance. The following diagram illustrates the relationship between buskers and homeless people:



As the diagram shows, not all buskers are homeless. Many buskers are music students rehearsing for a show and some are merely amateur musicians who want to live the dream of performing for a live audience. My research, and this thesis, concerns the area where these two populations overlap.

In some cities, buskers can be very territorial. When I was in Denver, territory was not a big issue because the 16th Street Mall¹⁰ was so large. However, I spent a few days and nights in Boulder and the situation was quite different. Boulder has the Pearl Street Mall, which is smaller than Denver's tourist plaza. When I was in Boulder, Pearl Street Mall was saturated with buskers and some of the men would chastise other musicians who played

¹⁰ A mile-long strip of retail stores and restaurants that attracts many pedestrian tourists to downtown Denver.

too close to them; they did not want a competitor to steal their business.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, when I was homeless in Denver a man named Mark took me under his wing. Not only did he let me live in the abandoned house he stayed in, he also taught me the fundamentals of busking. Mark always emphasized that how you ask people to stop and listen was just as important as the actual song you play. I used to ask passersby, "Do you want to hear a song?" However Mark told me that this question makes it too easy for people to respond negatively. Asking, "Can I play you a song?" proved to be a better line and when I made the change, I noticed more people would stop to listen.

During my fieldwork in Austin, each of my informants gave me some nuggets of wisdom on being a successful busker. Lemac told me that some days are diamonds and some days are dust. When I asked him to elaborate on the two, he said a diamond day is when everyone is having fun and somebody hands you a 20 dollar bill. Lemac said the dust days are when you are cold, wet, miserable, and do not make a dime. It is important to understand this dichotomy because if a busker has too many dust days, he might think about giving up and finding a different profession. A busker must live for the diamond days and believe that

however many bad days he has, a good one is just around the corner.

Rocky told me he learned through trial-and-error that the farther he stands from his guitar case, up to a couple of feet, the more money he makes. Rocky attributes this phenomenon to an American mindset of personal space where people do not want to feel like they are getting too close. I found this observation interesting, though I never thought about it while I was a busker. But I can see how standing too close to one's case can cause an onlooker to think twice before dropping in some money.

When I interviewed Willie, he made it clear that he had played paid gigs at a plethora of established music venues in Austin. However he told me that he always made more money busking than playing those gigs, which is why he never gave up performing in the streets.

BUSKING AS ART

The 16th Street Mall in Denver can get very loud with the constant stream of shuttle buses driving by. Because of this, Mark taught me the importance of raising my voice so people could actually hear me singing. Of course the sound coming from one's guitar and vocal cords is only half the performance; Mark also taught me about playing with

passion. If you can get into the music and sway your body while strumming, people are more likely to pay you and pay you well. It is not acting as much as it is just being conscious of your body and aware of your enthusiasm towards the audience.

My informant Rocky emphasized that the chorus of a recognizable song can be your biggest moneymaker and that he would love to sing 70 percent chorus and 30 percent verses. He told me that his most profitable song is Don Maclean's *American Pie*. Rocky said often, when nobody's around, he will properly sing the verses to the tune but when people come up he will break out into the chorus. He joked that recently he stood and played the chorus over and over for 30 minutes because people kept walking by giving him money.

One common criticism I have heard when playing an original work for a real musician is that my songs are too long. I seem to have trouble getting a story to fit into the three minute formula for modern radio music. Lemac echoed this sentiment by telling me the importance of keeping a song short, sweet, and simple. He told me a man he knew once quipped that nobody wants to be on the dance floor for 20 minutes with someone who can't dance.

There seem to be two schools of thought about which songs a busker should play: covers or originals. Some people believe a recognizable cover song will reap the best profits for a busker. Others feel that as long as a song is catchy, it makes no difference whether it is a cover or original. In my own experience, the best idea is probably to play both. On one hand, when I was busking, I mostly played originals and it hurt my profits when I could not play a request. On the other hand, the only time anyone gave me a 20 dollar tip was when a man specifically asked me to play one Bob Dylan song and one original.

Willie said his secret to making money busking is that he is unique. He told me that most buskers these days play guitar. Willie chooses to play fiddle or mandolin. He knows how to play guitar, and I can confirm that he knows how to play guitar well. But Willie said being able to be different is an advantage when everyone else is doing the same thing.

Another perspective is that the guitar seems to be a more mainstream instrument, so it is easier to learn three chords and play a few songs than it would be to master the violin or mandolin. In other words, to play fiddle or

mandolin arguably requires a better knowledge of music than does the guitar. People may appreciate this and pay Willie more than they would if he played guitar on the streets.

BUSKING CHALLENGES

In Chapter 1, I gave a historical overview of the busking profession. Over the past century, this activity has been met with some serious challenges. Before the days of records, cassette tapes, CDs, and mp3s, people enjoyed live performance because it was the only way they could get that type of entertainment. Once we gained the ability to listen to music (and watch television) in the comfort of our own homes, the amount of people willing to stop, listen to, and pay buskers began to dwindle (Cohen and Greenwood 1981:164).

According to Willie, in the previous decades he could make 100 to 200 dollars a night busking in downtown Austin. It is easy to see how he could earn more this way than playing in bars. Willie directly attributes this unusually high income to the fact that they did not yet have open container laws in Austin. This meant that there were more drunks on the street, who not coincidentally paid more money to buskers. Willie told me that once they passed those laws, his profits decreased greatly. Open container

laws are not the only regulations that affect buskers. Many cities¹¹ have anti-begging laws, which often include busking.

Today young people can be seen walking around with their mp3 players and ear buds in their ears. Rocky told me that when he is busking, more and more people are doing this and do not even pay attention to him. Also, Rocky and Willie both complained about the increased replacement of cash with debit and credit cards. Not as many people are carrying paper money anymore and buskers suffer because of it.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I started out discussing the various methods that homeless people use to earn income. Flying signs and panhandling only differ in the way the person approaches the potential donor. Recycling, on the other hand, requires patience and a lot of hard work for not much more money than begging. But the recycler can be proud of cleaning up the city and earning an honest dollar. There are many homeless people who participate in illegal activities such as drug dealing, theft, and prostitution. However it is important to point out that not all street

¹¹ Austin is not one of those cities.

people do these things. Then there are the people who use social services either solely or as a supplement to other modes of earning income.

The rest of this chapter was dedicated to busking. I examined busking as a profession by revealing knowledge given to me by Mark in Denver and my three informants in Austin. I did the same when discussing busking as art as well as the modern day challenges to this profession. In the next three chapters I will tell the life stories of my three informants beginning with Rocky.

CHAPTER 6: ROCKY

Reinvention is probably the most important thing human beings do differently. When you fail, you learn a lot.

-Rocky

This chapter will follow my first informant, Rocky, from the time before he experienced homelessness to the present and includes his hopes for the future. At times Rocky's experiences are similar to my own encounters with homelessness. At other times our experiences have differed. Using the phenomenological reduction on my own familiarity with homeless life was essential in gaining a complete understanding of where my informants come from. As I stated in Chapter 2, by trying to bracket my experiences, I attempted to set aside my own preconceived judgments and biases so I could peer into my informants' lives with fresh eyes.

LIFE BEFORE HOMELESSNESS

Because his family has roots in the Midwestern United States, Rocky said he inherited a strong work ethic. He told me that he comes from a musical family where his

mother and father were both musicians. At the time I interviewed Rocky he was 33 years old and had been playing guitar since he was 16. He told me he also knows how to play the flute, saxophone, piano, drums, trombone, and violin. He has been in several bands that have released albums. Rocky said he was a straight-A student in school, which had earned him scholarships to college. Despite these accolades, all he ever wanted to be was a musician. At age 19 Rocky had a good job, a car, and a girlfriend. Eventually Rocky and his girlfriend split up, his car broke down, and he got kicked out of his mother's house. So he left it all behind and took a bus to Austin.

There are several reasons Rocky came to Austin. He had lived there for part of his high school career so he still had some friends and connections. Also, another girl he knew wanted him to move in with her and her grandparents. Rocky told me that it seemed like he was running away but he was actually running toward something. After he returned to Austin Rocky got kicked out of the girl's house because her grandparents wanted him to marry her and Rocky refused. That was the first time he became homeless.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STREETS

The time I spent doing fieldwork in Austin coincided with Rocky's third bout with homelessness. His first period of living on the streets occurred for a few months in late 1998 and 1999. Rocky's second time being homeless was for several months in 2005. As of early June 2011, he had been homeless for a few weeks.

Rocky told me that living on the streets is an "evolved"¹² (i.e., gradual) process. I know this from experience because when I was homeless it took me several weeks to go from living in a house to staying in a motel to sleeping in a public park to eventually residing in an abandoned house. Rocky said for many people it can be a "sink or swim" situation and that some turn to crime. He said when he first became homeless, he would occasionally steal things like sausage and cheese from the grocery store. Rocky told me when you go down that path you either get arrested or start using resources like churches.

Eventually during Rocky's first bout with homelessness, another homeless man started helping Rocky and introduced him to the Angel House, which provides sandwiches, fruit, and showers. The Angel House is a ministry of the Austin Baptist Chapel, which is a 501-

¹² In this chapter, words in quotes are the exact words used by Rocky.

(c) (3) nonprofit corporation that functions like a church. This organization has been providing daily meals for the homeless since 1990 (Angel House 2008). The Angel House was Rocky's first introduction to social attempts to provide for people in need.

THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE

According to Rocky, the most important thing about finding a place to sleep is whether or not it is going to rain. When one first becomes homeless he or she must be creative. Sometimes churches will let people stay the night, especially when there is inclement weather. Rocky said a homeless person must know the laws. It is against international law to deprive someone of sleep (UN 1998) so many locales create loopholes where, rather than write a regulation against sleeping, they do what Austin does and create a law against sitting or lying down in public. Because of this prohibition, Rocky said there have been several nights where he simply wandered the streets looking for shelter without wanting to break any laws.

Of course it can often be difficult for a homeless person to find a place to sleep without breaking a law. Rocky has slept in abandoned houses and has even taken refuge in a storage unit at an apartment complex. He told

me the most common thing to do is to find an isolated spot. At the time of our interviews, Rocky had been sleeping under a bridge. He said that he had never stayed in a shelter.

A Typical Day. When I asked Rocky what his typical day was like, he told me that he had two or three patterns. Rocky normally slept under a bridge or occasionally at a local church. Usually he was awake by 5:30 or 6:00 am, ready to eat breakfast. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays Rocky would go to the Angel House, which serves doughnuts and coffee at 9:00 am. Then he would go to the library and get on the computer to check Facebook, Twitter, and the news. One thing that surprised me was when Rocky told me he owned a laptop computer. This was the first time I realized that the homeless person of the 21st century may have a use for such technology. Among other things, he uses his laptop for writing and editing a book.

Rocky has completed two books and is working on his third; he has two novels and a spiritual work. Rocky said when he self-published his first book he got a big boost in confidence. In fact, he told me it goes beyond confidence and becomes self-assurance. He does not write an outline,

rather he just lets the story evolve. Rocky said, "Everything that happens has to be believable for the character. It's about honesty and truth. There is a beginning, middle, and end. A resolution. Satisfaction." He assured me that one's confidence will go up when he or she is starting their second book.

Between 11:00 am and 12:30 pm the Angel House serves lunch and Rocky would go there to dine. He told me this is an important meal because the people at the Angel House will let you take a sandwich or some fruit for dinner later.

The rest of Rocky's day, he told me, was normally dedicated to wasting time. After lunch he would go to the park or return to the library. Rocky told me he uses the internet to play online poker and that he generally spends a lot of time on the computer. When I questioned the legality of playing online poker, Rocky explained that there is a grey area where it is illegal for financial institutions to send money to gambling entities but that there are currently no state or federal laws restricting people from gambling online.

Around 9:00 pm Rocky would start thinking about going to bed. All of these activities were intermixed with

making money for cigarettes or to put into his bank account. As with the laptop, the fact that Rocky has a bank account runs against the dominant narrative of homeless people. It is not unheard of, however. When I was on the streets I had a bank account as well, albeit an empty one.

There are several factors that went into whether or not Rocky chose to busk on any given weekday. First and foremost, he said it depended on whether he had any money in his pocket. If Rocky had enough cash on him, he would forego busking on that particular day. Also, during certain holidays or public events there would be too many live bands playing so Rocky could not get heard. All in all, if he believed there would be business, he did not mind busking during the week.

On a busking night, Rocky said he tried to play from 11:00 pm to 2:00 or 3:00 am on Little Bourbon Street. He told me his "power hour" was from 1:30 to 2:30 am. At around 3:15 am Rocky would catch a bus and go to his bridge or retreat to the University of Texas campus and plug his laptop into an outdoor electrical outlet. Sometimes during the day he would also play on Walnut Street. Rocky told me he made more money busking on Little Bourbon Street at night than he did on Walnut Street in the afternoons. He

broke down the figures: three hours on Little Bourbon Street would earn him 40 to 70 dollars or more; three hours on Walnut Street would earn between 10 and 40 dollars. Rocky estimated that he busked an average of three to five days per week (which almost always included Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights on Little Bourbon Street).

EARNING INCOME

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Rocky said a lot of homeless people turn to begging or illegal activities like hustling (i.e., drug dealing, scamming, prostitution, etc.). Rocky has never done any of these things; he told me he used to go to churches for food. Rocky started busking when, at one particular church, he began volunteering and a lady loaned him an acoustic guitar. He learned a few songs and took his music to Walnut Street.

When I asked Rocky what he likes about busking, money was not one of the primary factors. He said busking is liberating. "You have no one to report to and you don't have to ask anyone when to leave." Rocky told me he likes busking on many levels; it has all the perks of a job minus the money. He has never been a fan of schedules. Rocky usually sets aside a few hours to play but he knows that at any moment he can walk away. For him it is a true joy.

Rocky knows that you make more money at a job, which is more reliable and useful. But he also says that when you are busking, you have the opportunity to do things you really enjoy. Plus, you can take a smoke break at any time. Rocky claims that 30 to 40 dollars a day with no bills is a good amount of cash. Some days he has made 100 to 200 dollars.

Every busker has a repertoire of songs he or she plays for enjoyment as well as profit. Rocky's set list is an eclectic mix of classic rock and gospel favorites. His list includes Don McLean's *American Pie*, Steve Miller's *The Joker*, Aerosmith's *Angel*, The Eagles' *Take it Easy*, Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Lookin' Out my Back Door*, Mentor Williams and Dobie Gray's *Drift Away*, as well as gospel staples such as *Open the Eyes of my Heart*, *Amazing Grace*, and *I'll Fly Away*. Rocky told me that his number one song is *American Pie* followed by *The Joker* and *Angel*.

The one thing I find these songs have in common is that they all work well as sing-alongs. The classic rock numbers have memorable choruses or hooks, which audience members should feel comfortable singing (with the exception of *Angel* because it has some pretty high notes). These songs target young adults to middle-aged and older listeners who appreciate music from the 1970s. Whether

they like these tunes or not, anyone who grew up in the United States (or has lived here for the past few decades) should at least find them recognizable. Further, the gospel songs seem to be inextricably linked to American culture. One does not have to be a Christian to enjoy these compositions. Considering Texas' location on the Bible Belt, I do not think Rocky had to worry about offending anyone by playing gospel tunes. My friend Mark in Denver used to play *Amazing Grace* occasionally when he felt the time was right.

Rocky told me that about 90 percent of his listeners were aged 18 to 24 and that most of the remaining were aged 25 to 55. These age ranges appear to reflect the demographic of the areas Rocky played in. His observation was that the older listeners would typically pay more than the younger ones. The older people likely paid more for two reasons. First, the songs Rocky played were what that generation listened to growing up. Second, there is always the probability that due to income differences, the older group carried more cash than the younger passersby. Rocky said that he may get a 20 dollar bill from a 55 year old and get 20 one dollar bills from the 18 to 24 year olds. In other words, both age groups were an important part of his income.

BUSKING PHILOSOPHY

Before I initially met Rocky I was walking up Little Bourbon Street and came up on a young man sitting on a street corner playing guitar. He was singing so quietly that I could not make out any lyrics. The young man's head was down and he was not making eye contact with any of the people walking by. This man was playing guitar but I would not consider him a busker.

During my third interview with Rocky, I mentioned the young man sitting with his head down playing guitar. Rocky agreed with what I have already discussed in this thesis when he said you cannot be quiet when busking. In his opinion, music is like "sex": if you do not give the listener an orgasm, it is a waste of time. Rocky told me that sometimes there is even a "denouement," by which he meant the outro of a composition where the melody is slightly changed in the last line (Figure 6.1). He also felt that "with music you get stronger responses than you do with movies."

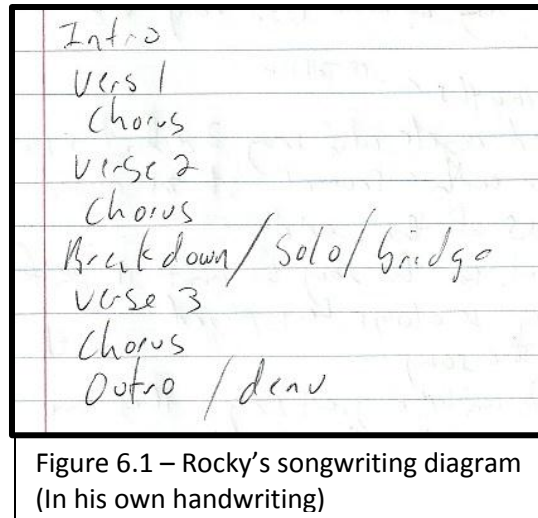


Figure 6.1 – Rocky's songwriting diagram
(In his own handwriting)

On the topic of songwriting, Rocky said that all songwriters are plagiarists. He believes there is one great song playing throughout humanity (it is cosmic, spiritual). On that dimension, there exists a higher form of music. Rocky said that great songwriters hear this song and bring it a little closer to earth when they write a great piece. Rocky is not sure how to quantify how it works, he just knows it works.

I asked Rocky to explain how he developed this idea:

I've always been a spiritual person; I grew up going to church...I remember hearing stories of angels in the choir, singing. The book of Psalms says to make a joyful noise to the Lord. Copernicus¹³ said, "Math is the language with which God made the universe." I see music as math. Therefore music is the melody with which God sang the universe.

Rocky then told me of some Norse myths he had read by way of J.R.R. Tolkien where God created angels who sang three different stanzas and then saw all three stanzas played

¹³ Actually, Galileo is credited with this quote.

out, which were equivalent to the three ages of earth. According to Rocky, God is perfect so the song he wrote is perfect. The universe is the song, which is always being played. This is why, Rocky said, when a human being writes a great song, he or she is writing down what they heard.

Upon hearing Rocky's songwriting philosophy, I recalled a Stevie Ray Vaughan interview I heard once where he said something similar about songwriters being plagiarists (but without the spiritual characteristics of Rocky's beliefs). Vaughan mentioned how we are all the products of our own influences and when we write songs, we are just borrowing from those influences. When I shared this with Rocky, he agreed. He pointed to a painting on the wall¹⁴ and said, "I'm looking at that painting through the filter of every painting I've ever seen. You're looking at that painting through the filter of every painting you've ever seen. So you and I are experiencing that painting differently."

What Rocky said about the painting was very phenomenological and, although he was talking about a piece of art, his intention was to apply it to musical influences. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, when intersubjectivity occurs, often the same phenomenon is

¹⁴ Our interviews took place inside a fast food restaurant. The painting was actually a framed print.

experienced differently by each party. What Rocky described was the intersection of our two lifeworlds and the differences in our subjective experiences, which caused us to experience the same phenomenon in a unique way.

Honest songs are high art, according to Rocky. These compositions are extremely simple but touch you on a serious level. He believes that this is what is missing in modern music. Rocky said, "On MTV everyone just gets all dolled up. What is your gift? Without looks all you have is your talent to carry you." Rocky and I share the same sentiment. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an in-depth critique of mainstream music. We know what we like and although Rocky and I may disagree on what constitutes a good song, we are likely to agree strongly on what makes up a bad one.

One of my personal experiences that does not seem to fit with those of Rocky (or any of my informants) is that when I was in Denver, Mark and I busked as a team. The two of us would stand on the sidewalk and take turns playing for passersby. There was a synergy where we had fun and made decent money; I played mostly originals and Mark played predominantly Leonard Cohen covers. However my time busking with Mark appears to be an exception to what I learned from Rocky (and my other informants).

Rocky prefers to busk alone mainly because of a differential in skill level; he told me he plays better than most buskers. I can understand his motivation for playing alone and often wonder why Mark chose to be partners with me, a novice musician. Rocky said that if someone had a good voice and they could do some harmonies, then he might consider playing with that person. However, he is not looking for another musician. Rocky feels that a girl/guy duet would be a great money-maker. He thinks girls in general are better at making money than guys.

An inherent part of busking that I have yet to cover is the interaction between the musician and his or her audience. Recall Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 of this thesis. The lifeworld intersection between the busker and an audience member is an example of intersubjectivity. An ideal situation is one where a person stops to take in a song or two, places some money in the busker's guitar case, and then leaves. This ideal, however, is not always a reality. Rocky brought up three scenarios where an individual decides to stick around thereby interrupting the busker's process. First there is the hanger-on (e.g., an old guy who hangs out for an hour). Rocky said if the hanger-on looks homeless, it gives off negative energy. Second there is the guy who wants to be in the band but

cannot contribute. This person may wish to sing or play an instrument but essentially just gets in the way. Third there is the bummed out person. This individual, like the other two, may be oblivious to the fact that the busker is trying to make a living; he will just want to sit there and tell sob stories. All three typically succeed in causing potential paying listeners to steer clear of the busker.

One time on Little Bourbon Street a drunk man told Rocky, "You suck! You gotta play with more heart." Rocky had not even started playing yet. The man asked Rocky to give him his guitar so he could show Rocky how to play with heart. Rocky said, "No thanks. I'll try to play with more heart." Rocky told me he was not going to give his guitar to the man nor was he going to stoop to the man's level. A serious busker must stand his ground. Rocky said he chooses to treat people the way they deserve to be treated. He told me, "If a drunk person comes up to me with a childish attitude, I'm going to be an adult and talk to them like a child."

The way Rocky deals with drunks, and/or those who wish to interrupt his busking, is an interesting insight. For one, Rocky has a stocky build. This coupled with his willingness to verbally stand his ground appears to me to prevent any actual physical altercations from taking place.

Rocky told me that fortunately he has never been a victim of, nor has he had to resort to using, violence on the streets. He is aware that the possibility is always there and he has witnessed confrontations between other men, but Rocky feels that one's attitude can go a long way in preventing such occurrences. His policy, if someone comes up to him in a threatening manner, is to invoke his spirituality and tell the person, "Faith in Jesus Christ helped me and it can help you too." Although Rocky has found success in verbally disarming people in potentially hostile situations, he is also a firm believer in trying not putting oneself in such circumstances to begin with. For instance, he avoids walking down dark alleys and will not address an individual who has a scowl on his face.

FUTURE GOALS

Throughout my interviews with Rocky, I gathered that he did not plan on staying homeless for very long. So one day I simply asked him about his future aspirations. Rocky listed three ambitions that he held for himself. First, his main goal is to have a wife and children as well as own a home and a vehicle. Rocky has accumulated credits at the University of Texas and Austin Community College. He said he would like to do something in mechanical engineering,

physics, or math studies. If Rocky goes back to college, he wants to provide for his family. He wishes to achieve the American Dream which does not include "working as a manager at [some fast food restaurant]."

Rocky's second, long term goal is to be able to look at himself in the mirror and be proud of who he sees. This particular goal is noteworthy because it reinforces my presumption that Rocky does not want to remain homeless and also implies that he may not be happy with who he is. It is a good goal for someone to have because even if one does not accomplish the lofty goals he sets for himself, he can still look back on his life and be proud of who he is for trying.

The third goal Rocky has, his "pie in the sky" dream, is to be a bestselling novelist or have a bestselling album. His parents used to say, "If you can't make a living, you can make a killing." Rocky said he got a big boost in confidence after he printed his first book. He believes it goes beyond confidence and becomes self-assurance. Rocky told me that you cannot be successful if you are not willing to fail. This statement comes full circle from his quote I used to begin this chapter. Although I do not feel I have reached my full potential, I

have lived through failure and believe, like Rocky, that there is a lot to learn from it.

SUMMARY

This chapter has recounted Rocky's homeless experience. I started out with his life before becoming homeless, which led into Rocky's introduction to the streets. I outlined his typical day and details on how he earns income by busking. Then I provided Rocky's busking philosophy and touched upon his future aspirations. In the next chapter, I will open a window into the life of my second informant, Lemac.

CHAPTER 7: LEMAC

Well I don't leave home without my guitar, so I've always been a busker.

-Lemac

This chapter surveys my second informant, Lemac, from his life before living on the streets up to our final interview in June 2011. Lemac was an interesting character in that, from the first time I met him, he put forth an air of confidence that was unmatched by my other two informants. He was about my height (5'10"), lean yet muscular, with greying hair and a mustache/goatee combination. Lemac had a sense of humor that at times was overshadowed by an abrasive demeanor that was borderline intimidating.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Lemac told me he was a veteran. I learned early on, however, that his stories were often so implausible that the line between fact and fantasy seemed to blur. Lemac loved to tell tales of long stretches of time spent overseas participating in top secret missions and barely escaping death. I wanted more than anything to believe him but often found it difficult

to do so. For one, Lemac's age tended to exclude him from some of the activities he allegedly embarked upon (e.g., time spent in Southeast Asia). Also, Lemac told me things that he claimed were dangerous for me to know. In those instances, I could not help but think that if those stories were so secret, he would not be telling them to an anthropologist. Finally, Willie and Dave told me outright, "Lemac is full of shit." While I had no reason to believe Willie or Dave over Lemac, it was just another reason to proceed with caution when listening to some of Lemac's stories.

Now that I have offered insight into Lemac's personality, I would like to add that although some of the things he said seemed improbable, he was still a valuable informant. As I will illustrate below, Lemac gave excellent advice on homelessness in general and his musical talent helped him gain credibility from my perspective. In other words, though he may have had an over-active imagination when it came to certain aspects of his lifeworld, Lemac was the real deal. He knew how to survive on the streets and was a busker through and through. So for this chapter, I have worked hard to paint a picture of Lemac as a person with solid experience as a homeless

busker who also happened to spin yarns with a limited amount of believability.

LIFE BEFORE HOMELESSNESS

Lemac told me he has travelled the world, including South Africa and Europe, working for various government agencies. When he was not traveling the globe as a soldier, Lemac had several musical projects he was dedicated to. At one time Lemac had an agent and was a "hired gun"¹⁵ with guitar and bass. He told me that in the late 1970s he did some studio/session work in London. During the 1980s he was in a duo with a female singer/songwriter/guitarist and also had a band on the side. Eventually, the woman joined his band and they toured locally in and around their hometown in the Pacific Northwest as well as Alaska and Canada. Lemac said they were an average cover band. One time the group won a battle of the bands competition and had a chance to play the King Dome in Seattle followed by a tour of Japan and Russia. But the guys decided not to do it so Lemac quit the band.

A prolific songwriter, Lemac said two of his songs have been recorded by other artists yet he still has not

¹⁵ In this chapter, words in quotes are the exact words used by Lemac. A hired gun is a musician-for-hire.

been paid for them. One song he wrote is being performed by him and his band as a video that is posted on YouTube. The video is dated from 1989 and the song was in the soundtrack to a low-budget movie. I have watched the video and it is indeed a younger Lemac. However, since he wishes to remain anonymous I will not share the title of the song.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STREETS

Lemac told me he had always had a job and a house but lost it all five years ago when he was escorted out of Switzerland at gunpoint by their government as a result of a conflict with his former wife. When I asked him what happens when people are first on the streets, Lemac said, "Fear and panic." For him, homelessness was not an evolved (i.e., gradual) process like Rocky said; it came on rather suddenly. Lemac told me becoming homeless was a shocker. He disappeared into the woods because he knew he could survive there. Lemac has stayed in shelters but does not like them because "there are too many different personalities" and "they are like prisons."

For the past five years Lemac was homeless in Washington State and for part of that time he lived in a camp with around 25 other people. He told me the first year was tough. "Being homeless is about survival. You

can die when it gets cold." I asked him how he subsisted and he told me that he has always had the guitar to fall back on. Plus, he got food stamps; "everybody had different avenues."

On the streets Lemac is a busker. He used to catch the bus or ride his bike to town to play music. Eventually Lemac made friends with another man, which he said was important because there is strength in numbers. I do not know how long Lemac remained partners with the other man but in a search for warmer weather, Lemac took a passenger train to Austin and has resided there since January 2011.

When Lemac first got to Austin he lived by the airport. He did not like that area because it was nearly a two-and-a-half hour walk into town. Lemac and another man built a compound out of eight cedar trees that were in a circle. However the other man was a violent drunk, so Lemac left the airport camp after a couple of months. As of our interviews, Lemac had been living in Willie and Dave's encampment for a few months. He said he was really glad to be in this location: "I'm in a good spot now. It's close to where I work, I have permission to be here, and it's close to the beer store."

THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE

Lemac and Rocky share some things in common. First, neither man currently resides in shelters. Rocky decided early on that he never would and Lemac has stayed in shelters but does not like them. Second, both Lemac and Rocky emphasized using creativity in finding an isolated spot to sleep. I did not get the opportunity to see Rocky's preferred sleeping location but I did see Lemac's and the latter was invisible when he was protected by the shade of his thicket (see Figure 3.1). Finally, both men claimed to be against the use of violence. However, Lemac did say that it was okay to resort to force in order to protect yourself or your property.

Lemac's assertion that he did not approve of violence stood in stark contrast to much of his behavior that I witnessed. Although I cannot prove or disprove the validity of any of Lemac's war stories, I can confirm that he has had at least some martial arts training. On several separate occasions Lemac attempted to, and often succeeded in, demonstrating certain martial arts techniques on my body. For instance, one time the two of us were in his thicket sitting side-by-side on his hammock, talking. Lemac said he wanted to show me something and he suddenly grabbed my left wrist and contorted my arm into an

uncomfortable position. That act gave me a boost of adrenaline and my heart started pumping because I did not know what he was going to do next. Lemac told me he could break my arm at the elbow if he wanted and, at the moment, I believed him. Even though it was not the first time Lemac did such a thing to me, it was the last. For the rest of my time spent in his presence, I avoided getting close enough for Lemac to catch me off guard.

A Typical Day. One difference between Rocky and Lemac is that Lemac busks nearly every day while Rocky busks weekends and only on weekdays as needed. I attribute this behavior to the fact that Rocky does not drink alcohol, which can be quite an expense for a homeless person. Lemac, on the other hand, is a daily drinker and therefore needs a steady income to finance his habit.

Every day, Lemac said, he will wake up and go to a nearby outdoor café and use their portable outdoor toilet. If it is not too early he will hike to Broadway Street and start busking for beer money. Lemac calls the morning beer his "motivational cylinder" or "breakfast cylinder."¹⁶ He said, "Look, I'm an alcoholic but I've earned my stripes." After he makes a few bucks Lemac will buy some beer, return

¹⁶ By cylinder he means a 24 ounce can of beer.

to camp, and get drunk. Lemac told me that all he needs is one meal a day and he is good to go. "I'm one happy motherfucker. I don't have to worry about anything."

When Lemac is not busking, he said he normally sits around the camp "shooting the shit" with the other guys. On a "big" day he will go to the library and check his email even though he said there will be nothing on it. Lemac has a friend in California who is supposed to make him a Facebook page. With supposedly over 300 original songs under his belt, Lemac said he wants to start making some money with them.

Free Advice. I asked Lemac what guidance he would give to someone who was newly homeless. The following is an excerpt out of my field notes using Lemac's own words.

First and foremost, find a place you can call home; a camp or a good-sized tree. Some place you can feel safe. Safety is a big issue when you're homeless. Some people will rob you blind; they'll kill you for your shoes.

Stay low key. You have to stay invisible. That's why I chose that spot [points to his thicket]. Don't look homeless. You don't want to call attention to yourself. If you look decent and can carry on a conversation, you'll be okay.

Pay attention to people; your intuitive antenna must be at attention. People will put a knife in your back.

Stay clean, have clean clothes, and don't be drunk all over town. It comes down to morals and ethics. I can't do that [be drunk all over town].

Four-hundred years ago people were living out in the woods and we didn't have all this shit going on. Treat people nice. I never look down on somebody unless they're a shithead. I can't be around shitheads.

My dad used to say, "If you're broke, look like you got a million and if you got a million, look like you're broke."

Go a half hour late to the food shelter because the line won't be as long.

I don't want a job; I prefer busking. Every day is a new day. When you're homeless, it's easy to get complacent. I try to achieve a better lifestyle. That's why I want a laptop; so I can burn my CDs.

The day you think you know it all is the day you fail miserably in life. I have the tendency to learn something new every day.

You have to have an open mind. When you're homeless, keep all avenues open. When you're a musician you have to know how to hustle¹⁷ between gigs, but you can't hustle falsely. I'm a jack of all trades, master of most. One time I walked up to several businesses and asked if I could pick up trash for a couple of bucks. I can't sit on the corner and say, "Woe is me."

When you're homeless, never steal from somebody. That's even a commandment: Thou shalt not steal. I feel that it's better just to tell them your situation and ask.

The first thing I noticed after reviewing Lemac's words is that he seemed to be rather paranoid about the impending violence of the streets. While I witnessed aggressive acts during my own time being homeless, I usually did not fear for my life. I do not believe Lemac

¹⁷ By using the word "hustle," Lemac does not mean illegal activities.

is wrong to feel this way. Perhaps he has seen enough violent behavior to warrant such caution. As for staying low key and invisible, I have to agree that buskers in particular should be presentable in their attire and their cleanliness is probably more important to them than for panhandlers.

Lemac's advice to treat people nice runs counter to how he occasionally treated me, although his definition of nice may be different from my own. He does seem to say a lot about how to treat people as well as how to act if you want to be treated with respect. Unfortunately, practicing what one preaches was not part of Lemac's list of strategies.

Interestingly, Lemac mentioned having jobs other than busking. During his interviews, Willie did not talk about having any other jobs besides busking. However, our non-interview conversations revealed that Willie had, in fact, worked paying jobs in the past including driving a delivery truck for a t-shirt company. Apparently, Lemac was on to something.

BUSKING

As mentioned above, Lemac has always had the guitar to fall back on. "Like I said, I used to have gigs. Once I

became broke and homeless in America, [busking] became a necessity." Lemac told me that busking is absolute fun. As I addressed in Chapter 5, Lemac feels that "some days are diamonds and some days are dust." One time a guy threw two pennies into Lemac's guitar case. So Lemac pulled a five dollar bill out of his pocket, handed it to the man, and said, "You need the money more than I do." Another time a man asked Lemac why he does not get a real job. Lemac told the guy that he cannot afford a cut in pay.

Lemac has a handful of musical influences. He listed The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Who, Led Zeppelin, Grateful Dead, Frank Zappa, Hank Williams Sr., Elvis Presley, and Chuck Berry as being some of his favorites. When he is working, Lemac plays both originals and covers. He told me that he knows a lot of Beatles and Rolling Stones songs. At one point he played the Stones' *Paint it Black* and I was quite impressed. As I stated above, Lemac claims to have written over 300 original tunes. He told me his typical set is 45 minutes or 15 songs.

Sometimes Lemac will play with other people but he usually prefers to play solo. Lemac echoed Rocky's sentiment that he is a better guitar player than most buskers but he also stated that he does not like splitting his earnings. Lemac said,

I love being a musician. I feel confident anywhere I go. I can hold my own. I'm not the best in the world...I'm third [chuckles]. Let's see, there are Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Al Di Meola, and Willie over there. If you're in the top ten you're hanging in there.

SUMMARY

This chapter has followed Lemac from his time before becoming homeless through the present day. In my adult life, I have rarely come across an individual as confident and uncompromising as this man. Lemac has seen a lot of hard times and his catlike caution reflects it. I have already mentioned how Lemac tried to demonstrate his martial arts moves on me. When I attempted to show him some wrestling moves I had picked up, he was not open to allow me to get that close to him. In the next chapter, I will provide a narrative of Willie the Fiddler's life and some of his extraordinary experiences.

CHAPTER 8: WILLIE

One night I was closing up my fiddle case and a little Mexican guy ran up and grabbed a handful of money. I used to keep my fiddle case closed with a piece of bungee cord, so I wrapped that bungee cord around the guy's neck and dragged him to the ground. My buddy grabbed my legs and was trying to pull me back. Every time he pulled my legs the Mexican guy's tongue stuck out about four inches [Willie laughed]. The cops were across the street and saw the whole incident. They just shook their heads and walked away. The important thing was that the guy didn't get my money!

-Willie

This chapter follows my third informant, Willie, across the United States and around the world. Of all three of my research subjects, this man is by far the most seasoned busker. Willie is tall and slim; a true country gentleman. His knack for telling stories went unrivaled during my fieldwork. Whether we were playing music, going over interview questions, or simply hanging out and talking, time seemed to fly when I was with Willie.

There was a point during my fieldwork where I had to make a decision on whether what my informants told me was factual and how it should reflect in this thesis. As I mentioned in Chapter 7, it was difficult for me to have confidence in many of the stories Lemac told. Where Lemac used to tell me how tough he was and then try to demonstrate his toughness on my body, Willie never came

across as having something to prove. Willie was humble, respectful, and his southern charm made him very easy to talk to.

I understood Willie by how he presented himself to me and Willie presented himself as a man who has at times brushed elbows with the rich and famous. Although some of his tales may seem far-fetched, I spent several hours online comparing names, dates, and locations with what Willie told me. Aside from a couple of simple spelling errors on Willie's part, his accounts were consistent with what I was able to find online.

LIFE BEFORE HOMELESSNESS

When Willie was 11 years old he occasionally played guitar on a syndicated television show. As an adult, at one time he was married with a house, two cars, and a motorcycle. Not long after his wife passed in 1976, Willie became homeless. At the time of our interviews he was 62 years old and he chose not to share much about his life prior to 1976.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STREETS

One thing Willie and I have in common is that we both first became homeless in Denver, Colorado. The town has

changed a lot since Willie was there. According to him, in 1976 there were still quite a few hippies in Denver and you could get a three-finger sack of marijuana for 10 dollars. Willie told me that he was a drunk so no employers would hire him. Still, he was a union musician and started busking while living in a warehouse with a group of hippies. Willie said he made 25 or 30 dollars a day, which was apparently a lot back then. Originally from Austin, Willie said he grew tired of Denver and came back home.

THE MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

At one time Willie was a touring musician and a "hired gun."¹⁸ He can play bass, guitar, mandolin, Dobro, pedal steel, and violin. As I mentioned above, Willie said he started busking one day when he needed money. He had seen guys in downtown Denver do it and he told himself, "I can do that." Willie continued, "It beats working for some asshole. There are little or no responsibilities. I like it like that. I don't have to be somewhere."

I asked Willie what it is like busking and he said,

It's different every time. It's always different. I'll be hitting good, have a nice group of people hanging out. Instant gratification! Busking is all about the money. You're using the skills you have available to make money. It's a job like any

¹⁸ In this chapter, words in quotes are the exact words used by Willie.

other. Some days you're full of piss and vinegar and some days you wanna crawl into a corner.

While Rocky and Lemac seemed to talk more about the musical process of busking, Willie appeared to be my only informant to explicitly state that it was "all about the money."

While I appreciate Willie's honesty, it caused me to question whether Rocky and Lemac felt the same way. My intuition tells me that they do. Both Rocky and Lemac (and Willie) are very disciplined musicians, sometimes playing for hours just to earn a handful of dollar bills. The main difference is that Rocky was saving money to get an apartment and Lemac busked for the immediate indulgence of supporting his alcohol habit. I am certain that if I asked Rocky or Lemac whether busking was about income, they would both respond positively.

Willie told me that he used to make 100 to 200 dollars a night playing fiddle with a guitar player named Joe in front of a theater on Little Bourbon Street in Austin. He has busked Europe and said that people pay well over there, too. Willie has been to New York City where he performed in the subways, Washington Square Park, and Central Park by the fountains. He has also busked in Key West, Florida. Willie told me the worst town he ever busked in was Washington D.C. I will discuss Willie's time as a Colorado busker below.

After playing Willie a couple of my own original songs, I asked him if he is a songwriter. Willie told me that he has written 15 or so tunes but that he knows 350 to 400 covers on guitar, fiddle, and mandolin. Sometimes he can play a song on one instrument and not the other. Willie carries a little notebook with the titles to all of the songs he knows. He said, "I play old timey, country music. Most buskers play Crosby, Stills, and Nash...hippy stuff. I do old timey music; the stuff your grandpa listened to when he was 18." When Willie is busking, people like hearing *Ragtime Annie* (from circa 1910), *Cripple Creek* (a Flatt and Scruggs song), and *Jole Blon* (a Cajun tune).

There is a man around town with whom Willie used to play a lot. According to Willie, they can go without seeing each other for a couple of years, get together, and play for hours like they had never been apart. However, the man has an alcohol problem so Willie keeps his distance. Later in this chapter, I will go into more detail about some of the people Willie knows, knew, and has played with over the years.

In Leander, northwest of Austin, there is an annual bluegrass festival that Willie has participated in. He told me that musicians show up, put their names in a hat,

and they pick you by instrument. Once you are matched with some other players, the group has five minutes to put some songs together. This type of musicianship seems incredibly challenging yet very rewarding. People have to know their respective instruments quite well in order to be able to improvise on such short notice.

Willie speaks with a sense of nostalgia for the old days of Austin's music scene. He said Little Bourbon Street used to be cool. "As far as I'm concerned, everyone north of the Colorado River is a goddamned Yankee." As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Willie credits the passing of the open container law as directly leading to the demise of downtown Austin's reputation as a happening place. Willie went on to list the people from those days who had long careers in the music business, many of whom are still around: Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Willie Nelson, Gary P. Nunn, and the late Doug Sahm. He told me that it was cheap and easy to get a record deal in the vinyl days; a lot of people went national. In fact, many recording companies are moving here from Nashville. Willie believes this is occurring because Austin is more laid back and the quality of musicians is better. Willie said, "I spent 16 months in Nashville playing other people's shit

and trying to sell my own stuff. You couldn't pay me to go back to Nashville."

Although he has never gone national *per se*, Willie has produced his own CDs. With today's recording and printing technology, many people can do this affordably. Willie told me that he once had a thousand CDs but sold all of them in a couple of months. He autographed every single one he sold. On one occasion during our multiple interview sessions, Willie showed me a photograph of himself that was used for a CD cover. He joked, "I look like a hard ass." He has a friend, whom I met twice, who has two years' worth of Willie's master recordings on a USB drive.

Recently (as of June 2011), a busker died and left his instruments to his kids. Willie told me they are trying to give the instruments to other buskers. If Willie dies, he has arranged for Dave to give his violin to the Bluegrass Music Society¹⁹ who will, in turn, donate it to someone who needs the instrument.

At one point, Willie said he had a very nice French fiddle and a Peavey flat top guitar he got brand new. It was the first new guitar he had ever owned. Willie was crossing the street one time and someone hit him thus running over his guitar and violin.

¹⁹ He possibly meant the Central Texas Bluegrass Association.



Figure 8.1 – Willie in Colorado

The surgeon who mended Willie's leg gave him an Ovation Celebrity guitar. The Austin Chamber of Commerce subsequently bought Willie the fiddle he has now because he contributes to the art of Austin. Figure 8.1 is a photograph of Willie in Colorado playing the Ovation guitar his surgeon gave him.

COLORADO BOUND

During certain times of the year, Willie can be found busking in front of a retail store on Broadway Street in

Austin on the weekends. He has been playing at that location for the past 17 or 18 years. Willie informed me that other buskers used to play that spot but they were drunks and occasionally started fights, so the owner of the establishment made them leave.

In that same time period, Willie has been making annual trips to the Western Slope of Colorado. He prefers the Western Slope, the area of the state west of the Continental Divide, because of its numerous small tourist towns. It should be noted that many of the towns in the Western Slope are home to people of considerable wealth. Willie takes a local bus to north Austin and hitchhikes the rest of the way. "When people see you with an instrument, they'll pick you up." He said he has been making that trip for so long that he can stop in little towns and knock on people's doors who he knows are cool.

When Willie first started going to Colorado he went to Glenwood Springs. "They have tourist shit to do, shops, and genuine Indian artifacts made in Taiwan." The problem was that, according to Willie, the police there did not like him. He thinks it was because he was making too much money. Willie said that there were a lot of street people in Glenwood Springs.

In contrast to Glenwood Springs, there are not as many homeless people in Aspen because they do not allow panhandling. When Willie is in Aspen, he stays in a camp on the side of a mountain. Willie said the Aspen police do not allow paparazzi, so a lot of famous people go there to get away.



Figure 8.2 – Willie and the Aspen Police Department

Figure 8.2 is a photograph of Willie with the Aspen Police Department. The officer holding the guitar has been taking lessons from Willie for several years.

In Aspen, Willie told me that he has a tab at the local liquor store, grocery store, and bar. He makes all

his money on the weekends and pays his tabs on Monday. Thursday through Sunday Willie will be on the streets playing until 4 or 5 am. He also does kiddie shows at lunch time playing square dance tunes. Figure 8.3 is a newspaper clipping of Willie in Aspen.

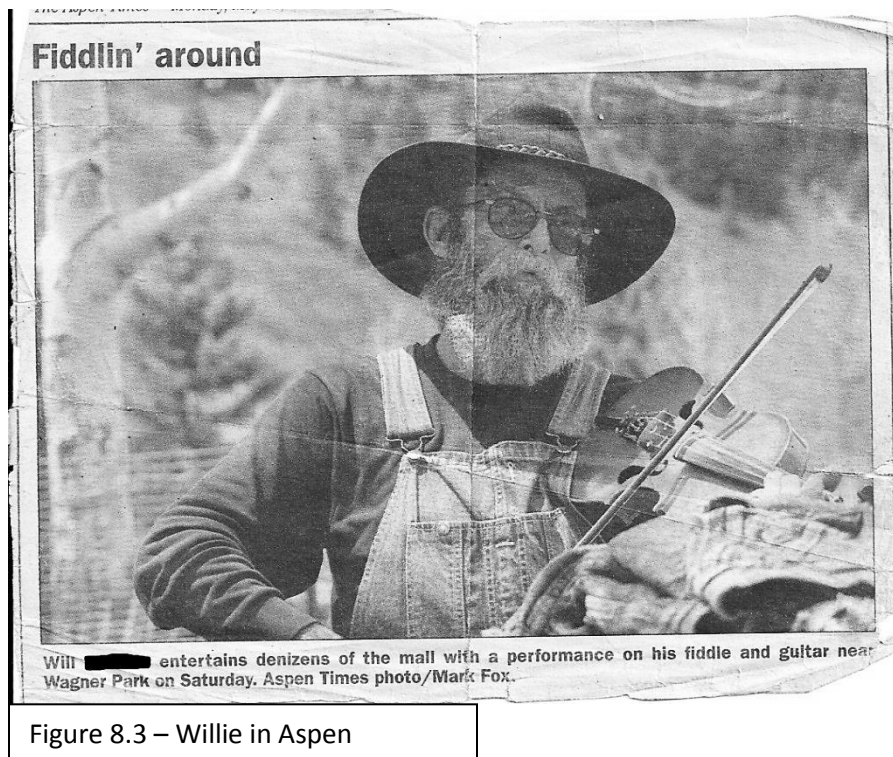


Figure 8.3 – Willie in Aspen

When in Colorado, Willie's costume consists of bib overalls, a cowboy hat, and his trademark beard. When he is not wearing his cowboy hat he makes half as much money (in Colorado as well as Austin). When I asked Willie if there are a lot of buskers in Aspen, he said there are not.

"If you ain't good, can't sing, and can't play, they run you out of town."

Telluride, Colorado has been another mountain destination for Willie. He told me that Telluride is an old silver mining town and its claim to fame is that it has the first bank Butch Cassidy ever robbed. Willie said Telluride is a quiet little town. It has a great stage at Town Park; they have dressing rooms and everything. It is an amphitheater and there is no place in town you can stand outside and not hear the music. Every year Telluride has a bluegrass festival and you cannot find a place to park for miles.

Willie also said that Telluride is a party town full of hippies. According to him, there is never any crime there, except drunks. Willie showed me his Telluride street performer permits from years past. He said he does not have to have a permit anymore.

A FRIEND OF WILLIE IS A FRIEND OF MINE

As a traveling musician, Willie has made a lot of friends and connections over the years. He has also played and performed with some big names. Willie said he played with country singer Porter Wagner after his bass player,

Speck Rhodes, died. Willie told me that he was also on Wagner's television show several times.

When Willie was in Nashville he met Minnie Pearl, who used to play the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday nights. He said he also got drunk with Grandpa Jones²⁰ a couple of times. Jones was known as a banjo player but Willie said he was a quality guitar player, too.

Willie has also played with Charley Pride, Willie Nelson, Doug Sahm, Etta James, Keb Mo, and Toni Price. He said he just runs into people. Willie played the Swamp Fest in Austin in 2001. He was warming up in the jam area and accordion player Boozoo Chavis²¹ asked Willie to sit in with his band onstage. That night Chavis died in his hotel room; it was his last show. In Aspen, Willie has opened for the Georgia Satellites and Eddie Money. He wanted to open for Doc Watson but somebody beat him to it.

While in Aspen, Willie said he would sometimes hang out with late gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Willie would have his fiddle, the guitar player for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (Jimmy) would bring his mandolin, Johnny Depp would come over with a guitar, and they would all sit around Thompson's house drinking, smoking pot, and playing music.

²⁰ Both Pearl and Jones are of Hee-Haw fame.

²¹ New Orleans' crowned King of Zydeco.

Willie said Hunter Thompson taught him how to shoot a pistol. Thompson had a huge house with an old silver mine on his land. According to Willie, Thompson was manic; he was constantly rushing around and could not sit still. Willie said Thompson always had a bottle of Wild Turkey with him. He would sit on his back porch drinking Wild Turkey and shooting at empty plastic bottles he had hanging in trees.

In Kerrville, home of the famed Kerrville Folk Festival, Willie said he met one of his favorite songwriters, native Texan Guy Clark. Willie was also friends, and played with, Texas folk legends Townes Van Zandt and Blaze Foley. Willie said he played mandolin with Townes at The Outhouse, The Hole in the Wall, The Broken Spoke, The Continental Club, and Antone's; all current or former venues in Austin. Willie would open for Foley, who in turn opened for Van Zandt. Willie told me he used to say, "I'm not opening for Townes, he's closing for me."

Willie told me that Townes and Blaze were great front men. They knew how to work the audience and get them involved. Willie said Townes really liked Thunderbird Wine, which Townes wrote a song about. Willie told me he would drink Thunderbird with Townes in the park. Though, if he was not playing, Townes would usually go home.

Blaze, who was homeless most of his adult life himself, had a reputation as an eccentric and odd character. According to Willie, Blaze wore duct tape boots, had a television antenna sticking up from his cowboy hat, and would carry around a cheerleader megaphone. Foley would talk to people through the megaphone and put it next to his ear to listen to them through it. Blaze used to walk by the dumpsters that had the initials BFI²² painted on the side and say, "You know what that stands for? Blaze Foley inside!" Blaze's favorite drink was vodka and Big Red, which his friends called the Red Foley.

According to several online sources, in 1989 Blaze was murdered by a friend's adult son. Foley was allegedly trying to protect his friend during an argument when his friend's son went into a back room of the house, retrieved a rifle, and shot Blaze in the chest. However, Willie told me that Blaze was shot by a 14 year old for a gram of cocaine he did not even have. This was the only time in all of my fact checking that one of Willie's stories did not match with what I found online. All I really know for sure is that in court, the story Blaze's friend gave did not match the story of his son, the perpetrator. Whatever the case may be, Blaze Foley died violently and his small

²² Browning-Ferris Industries, Inc. A waste management company.

catalog of original recordings portray a man who lived through his songs.

FREE ADVICE

I asked Willie what advice he would give to someone who was new to living on the streets. He said:

Get a job! There are enough people on the streets. Choose your associates carefully. Always have good gigs. Have a good backpack and a good sleeping bag. Whatever you do, don't bring a good, quality instrument to play in the streets - get a beater. I've had someone grab my violin out of my hands. I've had someone kick his boot through my guitar while it was leaning against the wall.

These are some great suggestions. The first part of that quote is probably the most insightful. Telling a newly homeless person to get a job, and essentially stay off the streets, is something that Lemac missed with his words of guidance. Willie has been homeless a long time and has probably encountered some newly homeless individuals. Choosing one's associates carefully and finding good gigs is similar advice to what Lemac gave. When I was first homeless, I was very fortunate to forge friendships with some other guys who happened to be buskers. I am eternally grateful that Mark in Denver was willing and able to teach me the art of busking while giving me a place to stay. As for carrying a "beater" instrument, Willie obviously knows first-hand the importance of taking care of his equipment.

FUTURE GOALS

When I first met Willie in June 2011, Lemac informed me that a couple of months prior Willie suffered a stroke and two heart attacks in one evening. During my fieldwork, Willie's feet were so swollen as a result that he could not wear his cowboy boots. In fact, Willie wore an old pair of thrift store hiking boots that he had cut to fit around his feet. For these reasons, Willie was unable to make his trip to Colorado that summer.

With his questionable health, Willie confided that he does not think he will be busking much longer. When I asked why, Willie said he has been doing it 40 years and is tired of it. He said that he wants to get a job training horses in the Colorado mountains. Willie's sister is a horse veterinarian and taught him a lot.

Although I can understand why Willie wants to give up his trade, it still made me sad to hear it. He has been busking on the streets since 1976 and has seen a lot of good and bad times. Willie has had the opportunity to meet and play with some well-known stars. However, for all his hard work and dedication to music, Willie never broke through as they say in the business.

THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER OF THE WINGNUTS

During my time spent interviewing, playing music, and generally hanging out in Willie, Lemac, and Dave's camp, I noticed Willie and Dave each wore a wingnut around their necks that was tied to a string. I asked Willie what it meant and he told me that he is the founding member of the International Order of the Wingnuts. Willie said that since most of them travel, they are able to generate more wingnuts. There are wingnuts in Holland, Germany, France, Spain, and England - all over Europe as well as in many states here.

I once heard Lemac practically beg Willie to induct him into this organization. Willie responded that he must first be interviewed by a psychologist before they can recommend his entry. By psychologist I gathered that Willie meant another member of the Order who had been given that title. Later, however, Willie told me that Lemac would not get in because people who ask for a wingnut never get one.

Homeless individuals are marginal by definition. When normal people have jobs, drive cars, and live under a roof, the homeless tend to be on the fringes and many of them go unnoticed. Willie's creation of The International Order of the Wingnuts could be his attempt to give meaning to the

lives of the men who wear one. The Order allows members to select certain personalities and create a seemingly elite community within the subculture of the marginalized. It probably gives these individuals a feeling of importance to be able to oversee a rite of passage for those who have otherwise been rejected by society.

In the end, I do not know the reality of The Order. When I asked Willie about it, he did not go into the meaning of the organization or the implications of its existence within the homeless community. All I can do is speculate. Regardless of what I think about The International Order of the Wingnuts, clearly for Willie it is about solidarity, camaraderie, and possibly a demonstration of power over Lemac.

SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed the colorful life of my final and most experienced informant on this project. Willie has busked in many locations and has accumulated a repertoire of narratives that paint a picture of a man who has tasted fame but has never partaken in it. The rich detail Willie gives adds to the authenticity of his tales in a way that makes it very difficult not to believe him. I spent a lot of time researching and placing Hunter

Thompson and Johnny Depp in Aspen and I have no reason to believe that Willie is making up any of his stories.

As I stated above, it makes me sad to hear that Willie may not be busking for much longer. He is a fixture in Austin as well as Colorado and has been recognized by many as nothing less than a living legend. I mentioned in Chapter 4 that Willie has an almost constant stream of visitors in his encampment. This is proof positive that he is well-respected in his community among the housed and unhoused. Willie's friend and producer once told me that Willie is the only man he will allow to stay the night at his house. I feel that statement speaks volumes to the trustworthiness of a man who many people would look down upon as a vagabond. I am proud to have Willie as an informant and am honored to call him friend.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

Ruth Benedict (1934:vii) once said that human culture is "personality writ large." Keeping that statement in mind, the phenomenological study of people tends to focus on the individual. I have painted a picture of three unique personalities in Austin who each have their own set of subjective lifeworld experiences. In addition to the three case studies, I have also included many of my own experiences as a homeless busker. The result is a thesis that takes music and homelessness and creates a narrative reflecting these phenomena from four distinct points of view.

In 2005, I was homeless in Denver for several months. I spent enough time on the streets to witness alcoholism, hard drug use, and violence. However, I did not remain in that situation long enough to become hardened or alienated from my family. Rocky has experienced three separate periods of homelessness during the last 10 or so years. He was homeless for months at a time and has demonstrated the

ability to be wise with his money and work his way into housing. Even though Rocky is off the streets²³, he has exhibited a pattern of alternating between homelessness and housed life, so there is no guarantee that he will not become homeless again in the future. This is a challenge faced by many people in America today. Given the weak social service system, lack of medical care, and aging population, a large percentage of Americans are one illness, one car wreck, or one missed paycheck away from homelessness. It is not clear whether people like Rocky will ever be free from street life.

Lemac proved to me that he could not manage his money very well. As of summer 2011, Lemac had been homeless for five years and showed no sign of being able to save enough to change his living situation even if he wanted. Willie has been on the streets since 1976, though, he did tell me that he would like to find stability in his life.

As I have established several times in this thesis, because each of my informants has their own unique set of lifeworld experiences, each of them has experienced homelessness differently. When I was homeless, I experienced the fear and panic that Lemac spoke of. I also experienced the liberating feeling of busking that all of

²³ I will discuss the present statuses of my informants in the next section.

my informants recounted. One thing I had in common with Rocky was that, when I was on the streets, I never gave up or succumbed to the complacency that many street people go through. I could have easily told myself that homelessness was my life's destiny. Instead, I assured myself that the situation was temporary and I eventually got my life in order.

One factor that played a role in my life while I was on the streets was the fact that I did not lose track of my immediate family. I knew that if the situation became more than I could handle, I had the option of calling home. This is exactly what I did after witnessing a bloody assault one night. Having a safety net of family is a luxury that many homeless people do not hold. Rocky was the only informant of mine who had such a safety net; he was in contact with his father. However, Rocky told me that he did not accept help from his family.

This is not to say that any of my informants choose this life. On the contrary, we all play the hand that is dealt to us and each of my informants has been dealt a different hand. Further, each of my informants approached his situation in a different way. Rocky was always optimistic and, though he has walked the tightrope between housed and unhoused life for the past 10 years, he appears

to be confident that he will one day have a wife, family, house, and car. Willie, too, is optimistic. At one point Willie told me that he was thinking about applying for Social Security, which would help him pay rent for an apartment. On another occasion, Willie mentioned that he would not mind training horses in Colorado on a ranch that provides room and board.

Lemac did not really mention coming off the streets, although he did tell me that he would like to make money with his music online. One reason Lemac may not be ready for housed life is that he claims to be trying to avoid the prying eyes of the US government. During some of our conversations, Lemac told me his life would be in danger if the government knew where he was. For this reason, he seems to be content living under the radar of Uncle Sam.

Although it is impossible to know the future, the odds are pretty thin that any of my informants will achieve a middle class lifestyle. Both Lemac and Willie have issues dealing with alcoholism and neither man hid this. I am no expert, but Lemac may also suffer from some mental health issues that have gone undiagnosed or that he withheld from me. The fact that Lemac and Willie are approaching old age is an immense obstacle to obtaining a steady job or permanent housing. Rocky seems to be my only informant who

is close to breaking the cycle of poverty, yet his future remains uncertain as well.

SINCE MY FIELDWORK

A lot has changed for my informants since the summer of 2011. Toward the end of my fieldwork I gave Rocky an old pay-as-you-go cell phone that I had loaded up with minutes. He was able to capitalize on this and use the phone to secure a job. Eventually Rocky saved enough money to get an apartment. The last time I was in contact with Rocky was February 2012 and he was still working and living in the apartment. He seemed to be doing well and his spirits were up as always.

Near the end of the summer of 2011 I was out of town visiting family and got a frantic voicemail from Lemac, whom I had also helped to obtain a cell phone. He said that Willie and Dave were kicking his ass and that he needed my help. Unable to drive to Austin, I decided to let nature run its course. I wished no harm on Lemac, but the way he began treating me toward the end of my fieldwork caused me to conclude that he may have deserved whatever Dave and Willie had in store for him. It may seem callous, but sometimes life on the streets can be rough. By the

time I made it back to Austin, Lemac was no longer present and had allegedly fled back to the Pacific Northwest.

When I was able to ask Willie and Dave their side of the story, they told me that Lemac had threatened Willie so Willie proceeded to beat him up. I do not recall the details, but apparently the next day Lemac crossed Dave as well, who in turn gave Lemac a second beating. Knowing Lemac's personality and his history of threatening people with violence, I have every reason to believe that Willie and Dave were telling the truth. Still, I never heard Lemac's side of the story.

As for Willie and Dave, I returned to their camp several times after I finished my fieldwork. Unfortunately, at the end of the summer they were forced to abandon their land. During our interview sessions I was told that the landowners had sold the property and so the men knew their time living there was going to come to an end. I stopped by one day and happened to find Willie and Dave with their bags packed and I gave them a ride to their new living area. The new spot is more secluded than the other camp and the times I have returned I have been unable to find where they are. In other words, I have lost track of Willie and Dave since late summer 2011. I still plan on returning to Willie's busking spot to try to find him

before he journeys to Colorado for the summer. I hope his endeavors find him well.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis has outlined and analyzed the lives of three homeless buskers in Austin. I have determined that there is much more that can be done in the way of researching this small and enigmatic subpopulation.

Providing services to the homeless is an enormous challenge. My hope is that this study can be a starting point for those wishing to include busking in the everyday vocabulary of community advocacy. The three informants I interviewed represent a range of possibilities. Rocky needed few resources to get off the streets. Lemac, on the other hand, needed more resources but was unwilling to accept most help. Willie, who was in ill health, probably required the most resources to provide for his medication needs. How are social service agencies supposed to assist those who refuse help? This is just one of the questions I feel future research can help us answer.

Also, I would like to expand the geographical area of research to do a comparative analysis of busking communities in different cities. Busking is an urban phenomenon and I feel that the behaviors and experiences of

these individuals are probably different depending on their locations. Some cities require permits and others have criminalized busking. Some cities may have friendlier audiences than others. All of these traits are worth researching to see if the busking experience is better or worse depending on the municipality.

Finally, I would like to see a phenomenological analysis of the song lyrics that buskers perform. I am convinced that, while homeless musicians have a primary goal of earning money, they also choose a repertoire of songs that reflect and add meaning to their lives. Looking at music through a phenomenological lens should be able to provide insight into the lives these people lead.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This thesis has been a learning experience. I went into the field not knowing what to expect and was awestruck with what I found. I had no idea I would encounter buskers with the stories these men had. I tried to treat my informants with equal attention and respect but due to the nature of being human, I was not able to accomplish this consistently. I felt I related well with Rocky because we are close to the same age. Willie, too, was easy to get along with and because of his history, I feel I looked up

to him not only as a musician but as a mentor of sorts. Lemac was a different character altogether. The first few weeks I knew him we got along fine. However he gradually grew more intimidating to the point where I could no longer sit too close to him without worrying about my own safety.

Although I was only homeless for a few months, I experienced enough to know that it is a hard life. Owning an instrument is a difficulty many take for granted. Walking around with a piece of equipment that can be sold or traded can make someone a potential target for mugging or theft. So as paranoid as Lemac seemed, his advice about watching one's own back on the streets does carry with it some validity. Also, buskers tend to have more cash than other homeless people, which means they must practice extra caution when walking around.

My fieldwork experience was a crash course in the methods of phenomenology and ethnography, which I used to not only learn about other people, but to learn about myself. Classes and readings can only go so far in preparing the novice anthropologist for the experience of doing fieldwork. The most important thing is to expect the unexpected.

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VITA

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