

# **Sidewalk Saints**

## **life portraits of New Orleans**

### **Street Performers**

## Sample Sections

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## Maria from Boston

I grew up with the typical miserable Catholic upbringing back when the nuns could still hit you if you didn't shut up and keep still. Maybe that's why I'm good at being a statue. At least now nobody smacks me with a ruler. My mother, daughter of immigrants, told me that when I graduated high school I had to go to college or else I'd get kicked out of the house. Then when I started college she said I better study something that would get me a job, because she wasn't going to support me when I was done – cut off from the family. I would have loved to have studied art or English. But no, I knew I needed a guaranteed job, so I became a nurse.

For ten years I worked as a nurse in Boston, New York and finally New Orleans. I hated every minute of it, the smell, the schedule. The worst was being around death all the time. It was horrible. In 1995 I decided that I'd had enough, so I quit and started tending bar.

There was this one fellow who worked as a statue out in the Jackson Square who used to come in every night and change all of his coins into bills. When I saw how much money it was, I thought it sounded pretty good. I love to sew, so putting together the outfit was a lot of fun. Some people say I look like Ms. Havisham from Great Expectations, but I really wasn't trying to represent anyone in particular. I was just looking for something that would cover the most amount of skin so I'd need less makeup. This stuff isn't cheap.

Once in a while some drunk will try to do something lude to get me upset, but I just keep quiet. Sometimes I have to smack somebody with the flower pot, but that's pretty rare. Once there was a guy who tried to light me on fire, but one of the Tarot card readers jumped on him and put it out. After the storm I had to quit for two years, because their weren't as many tourists. I just started up a few weeks ago and things seem to be picking up. All and all I'm pretty satisfied. Back when I was a nurse I was running all over the place, and I never had a chance to really enjoy looking at the world. Now I just stand back and watch the crazy people through the glasses.



## Jim Iut from St. Louis

I first came here in January of 1971 traveling around in a van selling hippie jewelry. Back then the sidewalks were a paradise, no T-shirt shops and junk stores to compete with. I set up at the old flea market right next to a snake charmer with a cobra in a basket, and money just came from every direction. It was a real art scene back then, not like the redneck tourists we have now. For a while I used to draw portraits of the tourists, then I started doing oil paintings of Elvis and Mother Theresa that I used to sell for hundreds of dollars. I must have done thousands of portraits. It's good to know that long after I'm gone my art is still gonna be around.

It was good back then, but we still had problems. One night I left my art cart parked in front of a bar and bunch of skinheads started messing with it. I went over there and tagged one of them in the face. I must have been fighting nine or ten of them off, then one of them got on top of me and was holding me down and bit my nose right off. It was flipped over hanging off to the side like a piece of ground beef. They sewed it back on, but I had to spend two months in the hospital fighting off the infection. I had a painting on commission that I needed to finish before Christmas, so they let me paint it in the recreation room with the IVs sticking out of my arms with all the nurses watching. I always liked painting in front of a crowd.

Six or seven years ago I got burned out on painting, so I just started coming down to the river to play my guitar. I like the solitude. The other street musicians don't fool with me because nobody wants this spot anyway. The only thing that bugs me is that damn calliope on the steamboat. That thing's so damn loud that you can hear it all the way in Metarie. Sometimes I crank my amp and try to play it down, I never win, but at least I put up a fight.

Since Katrina I been living in my van. I got a girlfriend who lets me stay with her sometimes. I'm in love with her and its tearing my heart out. She won't love me the way I want to be loved, but she won't let me loose. It hurts. It hurts real bad.

The only thing that really and truly loves me is this here guitar. Sometimes people stop and listen, sometimes I don't make a dollar all



day. Sometimes it's just one person that makes it worthwhile. The other day I was singing Old Man River, and this lady just sat down next to me and started crying. She told me that that's the song they played at her mother's funeral. After Katrina, they never found the body, so they didn't have the ceremony for a long time.

Times like that are the reason why I'm out here. That's something that I can only get by playing music. Yeah it's a living, but it's not about the money in the jar.

## George Blackman from New Orleans

When I play this here, I ain't bragging on myself and I ain't boasting, but to me I think I'm a ten out of ten. I have a lot of copycats riding up behind me. Trying to catch on to me, trying to catch my beats, but they can't catch it, because I switch it up all the time. I be in that zone. When I go out on Canal and put my buckets over the grates, that sound travels underground for ten blocks. I got people walking a mile to come hear where it coming from. I'm the sound of New Orleans. I'm telling you bro, I get funky on this here. But I thank God first, because this ain't me, it's the God in me that makes me play.

I picked up my first pair of drumsticks when I was seven years old. My momma played organ at the church and my daddy was a drummer too, so it's in my blood. But what really got me going was playing in the marching band at Dunbar Elementary. My band teacher Mr. Melvin Washington taught me everything he know. I was his best student. I remember right before we was gonna play at the Poseidon Parade on the West Bank, Mr. Washington's daddy died and he had to go to the funeral. He took me into his office and he handed me the bell chase, and he said he wanted me to lead the band. So there I was a little twelve year old boy, leading the whole band. We came in second place. I felted good that day. I'll never forget it.

Coming out of school I was still playing drums in a band. We never made it big and I got to the point where I was feeling depressed, ain't loved and ain't wanted. Pretty soon drugs started getting in the way, and I wasn't focused on my music anymore. I wasted years of my life trying to go into programs, but each time I got out I'd go back to the same thing. When Katrina hit I was living at my mother's house going to a program called Jesus of Mircale Power.

I evacuated to Sulphur Springs Texas, and that's where I met my wife Audrey. I lost a lot of people lost a lot in that storm, but it weren't for Katrina, I never would have met my wife. It was beautiful being a part of her family, but pretty soon I was going back to my old ways. I guess I still had New Orleans in the back of my mind. Audrey couldn't take it anymore, so a year ago I decided I wanted to come back home.



## Sidewalk Saints

At first I was staying with my mother and thinking maybe I could get me a little job, but the Mexicans done got all the jobs. My pain and my anger made it hard to be around my family, so I ended up going down underneath that bridge over the I-10. That bridge was wild, bro, drug infested and everything. Being in that world you gotta have some sort of hustle. I ain't in to robbing people or stealing from people, so that's when I found me some buckets and started taking em down to Canal Street to make me some money. It was good to be back to making my music and making the people smile. But my friends was always saying lets go get high, lets go get high. It felt like my music was destroying me.

Thank God the city cleaned up that bridge, because that wasn't a place for nobody. Once I got myself outta there, I started realizing what kind a hurt I was putting on my family. I got on the phone and I called Audrey and told her how much I loved her. She said that if I could get my life together and get off a them drugs, that I could come back to Texas and we could be reconciled. I got off that phone and I got down on my knees and thanked the Lord that she still had it in her heart to take me back.

Right now I got two months, eight days, and, let me see what time it is, eight hours clean. I'm renting me a little room, and I call Audrey every day so I can stay focused on my goal. I know I'm gonna get her back, but it ain't easy because the temptation is out here. When it get on my mind, I stop on the middle of the street, it don't matter where I am, because I ain't ashamed of nobody, and I get on my knees and I pray right there where I'm at. Before I get off my knees and walk to the next corner that urge is gone.

In my future I feel that God gonna prosper me. When God give me back my wife I could see a whole lot further. Like they say once you was blind now you can see, now I can see. Today I can see that my wife completes me. I don't want my wife. I need my wife. When I have my wife, you ain't gonna see me on these streets no more.





## Meshiya Lake from Piedmont, South Dakota

The first time I sang in front of an audience was at a honky tonk called the Elk Creek Steakhouse and Lounge. My mother had just left my dad, so she used to go out dancing and sometimes she'd take me along. I had the time of my life drinking Shirley Temples and learning how to two step. One night they announced that they were gonna have a singing contest, so I said sign me up. I guess they thought that it would be cute to have a little nine year old girl on stage, but when I got up there with the Wilkes Brothers Band and sang Walking After Midnight, I tore the house down. I won five hundred dollars.

My mom loved it. She used to drive me in the pickup truck halfway across the state to sing at Star Search competitions. She thought I was gonna be the next Tanya Tucker. Then puberty hit and I started getting into punk rock and skater boys, and I didn't think country music was so hot anymore.

I got my first tattoo when I was thirteen. My mother didn't find out for two years. Then I got another one at fifteen, and one day I was bending over to scrub the bathtub and she saw it. She grounded me for like three months. I thought it was stupid, because it wasn't like it was gonna go away.

The day after I graduated high school, I jumped on a bus to Chicago to apprentice at a tattoo parlor. I was really miserable there, so I moved to Atlanta and worked a shitty job. I felt like some woman in an old country song waiting to be rescued. Then one day a traveling circus was rolling through town and their bus broke down. I begged them to let me join. For the next six years I toured with the circus as a Nurse Nasty the Clown spinning fire and eating lightbulbs and worms. When we weren't on the road we wintered in New Orleans.

I'd always been depressed and self conscious about being an outsider, but in the circus I could take that alienation and turn it into something to be proud of. That's why I got my facial tattoos. I wanted to take that defiance and wear it outwardly. When my mother finally saw them she cried.

In 2005 I decided to visit some friends at a squat in New York City. That ended up being not such a good thing, because I got strung



out on heroin - total self destruction. Then Katrina hit. I was like fuck, my home is gone. I kept thinking about all my friends who might be dead and it shocked me. That night I made up my mind that I was going to detox and go back and help rebuild this city. I knew that I couldn't do that by being a clown. If New Orleans was going to stay alive it needed music, and I was coming here to sing.

It wasn't easy. It's one thing to shock people eating worms and light bulbs, but to stand on a corner and get people to listen to your music you really have to be getting true joy out of that moment. I guess for me it's about honesty, getting rid of all my fucked up emotions so I just be honest about who I really am. That's why I love singing old folk songs and Negro spirituals, the honesty. Those songs were what kept people going through hard times, and they do the same thing for me.

In the last three years I've sang with a bunch of different bands and even went on tour in Europe with Loose Marbles. I've reconnected with my mother and she's proud of what I'm doing. I've even learned how to play my own instruments so that I don't need to rely on a band anymore. Tomorrow I'm getting on a plane to Germany to tour as a solo performer.

Music saves people. It's saved me. New Orleans is the town that made it happen.

## Micqual Le Anne from Newport News, Virginia

I like to freestyle. If I'm in a happy mood, I'll sing a happy song. If I'm in a slumped up mood, I sing like it is. It's about having the freedom to share whatever I'm feeling. You see the sign on my case says, "My Music is Free." I mean that. That just doesn't mean that it's free for people to listen to, it means that I'm free when I sing it. I don't make a lot of money, but I always feel appreciated. There's a lot of love out here on these streets.

I never would have imagined that I'd be doing this a year ago. I was in Virginia with my two kids living in the projects, working two jobs and going to my kids' school everyday trying to be a good mom. One night my neighbor got in an argument with her boyfriend and he ended up stabbing her seventy two times in front of her kids. After that I knew I had to get out of there.

We ended up living in a shelter in Baton Rouge for three months, but that wasn't good for my kids. So from there we came down to New Orleans. Almost as soon as I got here I found me a job and an apartment. What's even better I met the love of my life, Óne. He's a street magician and he plays the guitar. He can make that thing talk. I wish he were out here now so you could hear him, but he's home watching my kids and our puppy dog. He's actually giving my little Tequan guitar lessons. Anyways, one night we were at a party and I started to sing along with Óne. He was like, "My God woman, you can sing. You gotta let the people hear you."

That weekend Óne took me, Tequan and my daughter Nautica out on Royal Street and we sang Christmas carols. It was like the most exotic and explosive feeling just to have people stop and listen to you sing and complement you as an artist. Since then I've been coming out here whenever I can and meeting all sorts of wonderful people. Yesterday, I even got to sing with Grandpa Elliot.

Tomorrow I'm starting another day job. Don't get me wrong. I love my music, but it don't pay the bills. They call this the Big Easy, but you really have to be on your grind to make sure you don't fall behind. For now, I'm just thankful that I'm blessed enough to have the freedom to share my gift on these streets.



## Lazy Louie from Ohio

I'm stoked. This is the first time I've played this banjo on the street since I rebuilt it. A few weeks ago the head got stuck in the spokes of my bike and snapped right off. It didn't take long to fix, it was just a matter of going to different people's houses to find the tools I needed. The good thing about New Orleans is that when you got a problem people are always gonna help you out.

I been playing on the street for three years or so. I'd just got out of high school and I was working up at Glacier National Park. This girl told me that she was quitting. I was kind of sweet on her, so I said I'll go with you. We drove out to Seattle and started playing music on the streets. Made thirteen bucks or something. I was like this is bad ass. What's the point in working when I can just do this?

I rolled into New Orleans like a year and half ago. First night me and my buddy ended up staying in a house with like ten other people we just met. Fed us beans and taters and everything. I was fartin up a storm, but I was like damn, these are my people - all my long lost friends that I'd never met.

They got some stuck up people here too. Some of 'em probably don't know what to think of me with my cutoff sweatpants and such, but fuck it man it's comfortable. If they've got a problem with that they can just buy me some new overalls. I don't have to wear a three piece suit to make me feel good, but I guess if wearing that suit makes you happy, then I guess you should go ahead and wear it.

I had this crazy dream last night. I was in a bar or something and these two dudes were doing choreographed dancing - two gay dudes doing this real gay type of dance. I ran right up and joined right in with 'em! It was really weird cuz I knew all my moves and shit. When I woke up I was like, damn where did that come from? I think maybe it's just saying that a guy can really do whatever he wants in life. Don't matter what people think about you. If I wanted to do a fairy dance, I'd do a fairy dance. If I want to play my banjo, I'll play my banjo. Most people don't realize that. They're scared. I might not have a lot of money, and my banjo might not stay in tune, but at least I ain't scared to do what I want to do in life.



## GONZO from St. Louis

Everybody has a beat. The first nine months of your life, all you hear is duh dut, duh dut. We've all got rhythm, even white people who think they don't. It's like a baby, you just have to feed it and it will grow. Like me, six months ago I never thought I could play the drums. Then I got stranded in Indianapolis, dead broke, I saw a kid banging on his drum on the street and I decided to give it a shot.

Since then I've been all around the country. I play for eight to twelve hours a day and I never go hungry. I get to meet thousands of everybodies - rich kids, broke kids, gutter punks, businessmen. I get to make little kids and their sixty-five year old grandmothers dance their ass off. My favorite is letting little kids beat on my drum. I teach 'em how to play and then their parents give me money.

My family thinks I'm nuts. They say I should go to school for heating and air so I can get a real job. They say I'm not getting my hands dirty. Look at my hands. My calluses are thicker than a goddamn steel worker. It's a fucking job. Spring break in Florida I can make a G a week. Tonight I might make eight bucks, but it's not about the money. Its about the beat. If I don't play for a couple days I feel weird.

Basically I'm getting ready for the apocalypse. God forbid in 2012 when the empire crumbles and this country is bombed to fuck, there's gonna be no radio, no TV, no fucking American Idol. It's already happening. Pretty soon it's gonna be like back in the caveman days when we made music by banging on rocks.

When that day comes I'm gonna be ready to keep that beat going.





## Jeremy Kerr Ph.D. from Lake Charles, Louisiana

Basically I got out and find people who are having a good time, take their picture and print them a copy on the spot with my portable printer. Sometimes they give me tips. I don't like to hustle people. There's a lot of good hustlers in the Quarter, but I'm not one of them. I'm assertive, but I'm not aggressive. It's not that hard to get people's attention, because I've got all these flashing lights on my hat, and in case you didn't notice I wear a skirt.

Sometimes people react like I'm a freak. I am a freak, but it has nothing to do with the skirt. Men wore skirts for thousands of years. It's the oldest unisex garment in human history. When Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden what were they wearing? A skirt! When David fought Goliath what was he wearing? A skirt! If there ever was a symbol of sexual equality it's the skirt. It's not since the invention of the fucking sewing machine that men wore pants. I'm just a straight guy who likes wearing skirts. It's the ultimate garment. Plus, I've got nice legs, so why should girls have all the fucking fun?

I've definitely taken a lot of shit. Leading up to Mardi Gras I almost got my ass kicked everyday. There's a lot of new people in town since Katrina and they don't quite grasp that this town is all about freedom of expression. Just before Mardi Gras I was ready to take every skirt in my closet, which I've got about forty, and just say the fuck with this, I'm giving it up, I'm done. But then Mardi Gras came along and you've got hundreds of half naked people walking down the street. It makes it crystal clear to the newcomers that this city is all about letting people be whatever they want to be.

I'm out here to document that spirit.



## Peter Bennett from Virgil, New York

It is a glass harmonica, young fellow. Twenty-six water tuned goblets forming a chromatically tuned instrument that spans two octaves and a major seventh. What tune would you folks like to hear on this glass harmonica? Come on folks, challenge me, name a tune I don't know. Where are you from sir? Tennessee? Perhaps you'll recognize this tune. The Tennessee Waltz is the name of that melody. Dancing is encouraged. Big dip now. Oh nobody's dancing?

Sir, thank you for your kind donation.

I've been playing here on the streets of New Orleans since the early nineties, but it seems I've been playing with glass all my life. Sir, I have vague recollections of fifty odd years ago, some of them very odd years indeed, getting in trouble at Sunday dinner for messing with my water glass. I figure in a very real sense I've been getting in trouble messing with glass ever since.

Now it did take me two years to collect this set of goblets. I had to audition over two thousand pieces of glass to build the instrument, and although young fellow, I certainly don't recommend it, I DID HAVE TO DRINK A POWERFUL AMOUNT TO GET THEM ALL I FEAR!

They are all just common ordinary bar glasses. This glass came from my late mother's china cabinet. This glass came from the Salvation Army at Key West, Florida. This glass came from Smitty Restaurant Supply in Syracuse, New York. That glass came from the greatest mine of musical glass I've ever found, the Libby Glass Factory up in Shreveport. So you can see each of these glasses has a story all of its own. Unfortunately there are all kinds of reasons that glasses get changed from time to time, breakage not the least of them. One night I did have a young fella who was kind of off his rocker hurl himself at me from behind, and dropped the instrument on the deck. Much to my amazement it broke no glass at all.

I am something of a fanatic about talking to people when I play, especially when there are so few of them out on the street. That is one of the first things that I discovered when I took this instrument on the road. It's not good enough to be a virtuoso on your instrument, and



I'm certainly not a virtuoso. It's not good enough just to play. People want to be entertained.

I'm part of a small but very active community of glass musicians in the world. Out of forty serious players there are only three of us who are stupid enough to try and earn a living at it. We try to get together once every three or four years. The last time was in 2005 when I was invited to perform in Paris at Le Cite de la Music. It turned out that I am far from the best glass player in the world. But I'm a hell of a lot better entertainer than any of the rest of them are.

## Valentino from Macedonia

In Yugoslavia it was nice childhood. We were real free untouched by the system. Tito was one of the coolest dictators you ever see. Before the war there were no guns. We used to go with five or ten of us and make bonfires and play guitars on a hill where you can see the city down in the valley. It was good childhood, but to make a living, it is very hard to do anything honest and make it. I remember when I was seventeen I was on the hill and I looked at the full moon and said, “God take me to America please.”

I always saw America as better place than the rest of the world. I don't know why. Maybe it was the movies. We watched Bonanza and saw the guy get shot and he's still cool. That was the American thing, tough but smooth. I was always listening to American music.

When I was twenty and my hormones were kicking, I decided that I had to get out of my parents control, so I went hitchhiking in Europe playing music on the street. In France I saw a man do marionette on the strings like a violin player. No one would stop to listen to me, playing the real music, but this man with the puppet had a big crowd.

When I got back home I decided that I would make a whole puppet band. My dad he built all these shoes and constructions and everything. Black puppets, white puppets all smooth and cool. Then me and my brother and my best friends went on tour with a five-piece puppet band. We played Louis Jordan, Joy Jackson, a lot of swing. The people loved us. We didn't talk we just did the music. Everybody thought we were from the United States. When they found out we were Yugo it would be like a total disappointment.

The Balkans never had a great reputation. They've always been poorer than the Western Europeans. They always feel like a higher class than you. In Germany when the police see your passport they say, “We don't like Yugo here. If we see you tomorrow we will send you back to your country.” In Holland I had people taking my marionette like a football for fun. We had the best response from the American tourists there. That was one of the reasons we wanted to come here.

To come to USA is hard, but I had a girlfriend who was doing the puppets with us who could get us to Canada. I remember the first



time we played on the streets in Toronto I was thinking these people are so nice compared to Amsterdam. It was like another planet. We did some festivals, but then the others had been away from home for so long and they wanted to go back, so the band dispersed.

Me and my girlfriend went on to New York. It was cold there, so someone told us we could work in Orlando Florida. We hated it. We thought, man if this is America we're out of this country. Then a man said to put all of our stuff in a truck and come do our show at a bar in Pensacola. It was a Navy bar we were working in, nobody cared about puppets. The man said I can give you a ride back to Orlando, or I can give you a ride to New Orleans. So we came here.

New Orleans was immediately a winner. I was fortunate to come with attractive girlfriend, because the people here appreciate that. At first we had to negotiate with the other performers about the territory. I would always prefer to work on a very small space than argue and get in a bad vibe. If you want to entertain people you've got to be in a good mood. In time it worked out.

In 1991 we did our first Jazz Fest. Then we started working in clubs. Sixteen years later, I'm still here and I still love performing for the people of New Orleans. Whatever you desire usually happens to you. Sometimes I can't even believe I'm here.

## Mad Mike the Hippie Bum from New Orleans

*GIVE ME SOME MONEY SO I CAN BUY DRUGS!  
GIVE ME SOME MONEY SO I CAN BUY DRUGS!*

When somebody comes walking down the street I have ten seconds to get their attention. Every line out of my mouth has to be a hook, something to make them smile. I could be composing Rhapsody in Blue right here on this sidewalk and people would not give a fuck. Making money off of music is a fundamentally different process than making music for the sake of music. I'm not really looking for money to buy drugs, at least not right now, but I am pretty broke tonight, so that's the approach that I've gotta take.

I grew up in New Orleans, man. My parents were total right wing Christians, very anti free thought, very Republican — totally adverse to the whole New Orleans vibe. When I was ten we moved away. Then at seventeen I left home and became a homeless bum. I ended up hitchhiking down here and when I hit the Quarter, all the sudden I felt like I was back home. I think what turned me on was that my parents hated this place so much — pure teenage rebellion.

The Quarter seemed like Shangri La, man. Like one block away could be a whole other world — limitless possibilities. When I realized that it was possible to survive just by playing my guitar, it was like an epiphany bro. Sometimes I feel like that knowledge holds me back to a certain extent, because if I hadn't figured out real early in life how to be a good street bum, maybe I'd be a mediocre nuclear physicist. I'd probably be miserable, but I'd be making a whole lot more money.

But honestly bro, I don't really give a fuck about the money. Sure I need enough to buy food and beer, but that's not the reason I'm out here doing this. I'm out here to be a deprogrammer. Society is composed of people that essentially look like they've been pressed out of a mold. They all shop at the same stores, have the same haircut, the same greedy heartless ideology — totally cultureless, completely uninterested in anything that has any intellectual weight. Work work work, shop shop shop. My music is very essentially antithetical to that.





I give people a chance to dig the subversive point of view, to let them know that they don't have to be la part of that vicious white trash hellhole of irrational complacency. They have options.

Sure, a lot of people don't always appreciate it. I remember one time I was playing at Thenian's Pub in Jackson Mississippi. I sang all the hits: Sex at the Zoo, Smoking Crack, I Just Want Your Body, I Love the Devil. After the show this one guy wrote a letter to the management saying that he was going to burn down the pub if they ever let Mad Mike play there again. I still have that letter. It's is probably my most treasured possession. Sometimes people are so complacent that when that truth hits them it's a hard blow. For people to like it there's gotta be people that dislike it. I like those people just as much. In fact I like them even more.

It's a constant struggle, but think about how long it took to end slavery or for women to get the right to vote. It's a hard road. Sometimes I think about what my dad told me when I was thirteen. He said, "If you keep on this path you're going to end up giving blowjob to dirty old men." That's what he said. But look at me, I'm still on that path and I'm proud to say that to this day I haven't given one single blowjob.

Not a one.

## Dougie the Squatter Pimp from Detroit

*Excuse me sir can you spare some change for a song? Anything helps. Change? Thanks have a good night.*

My mom was a crackhead till I was four, then she tried to kill herself so I moved in with my grandparents and it was real chill till I was ten, then I lived with my dad till I was fourteen and he kicked me out. I died my hair black and he called me a faggot so I pushed him. I was already on probabtion, so I violated and had to go to juvie, then I got out and got kicked out of high school, so I just left home and started jumping freights. My childhood effected me a lot. I grew up around a lot of drugs. I do a lot of drugs. I grew up poor. I'm still poor. It's alright though, it's what made me me.

I talk to my dad on and off. He's an asshole. He wouldn't accept my calls last time I ended up in jail. My mother's fine now. She's a born again Christian. I didn't talk to her for a long time, but now that I'm a grown ass man, I call her. She's still as poor as I am, still on SSI. I call her to let her know I'm alive. She thinks I go to jail a bit too much, and I do.

Flying a sign is my most solid hustle. Today I made a hundred dollars in two hours uptown. I'd rather play music, but if I gotta get money, I'll get that money. It's stupid, because you think people would rather hear some music, but it's been true everywhere I go, you make more money panhandling. You just can't do it in the same spot all the time or else the cops kick you out.

In the Quarter you've gotta play music or the cops will bust you. I just jam out and freestyle until someone stops. Then I'll sing them a song. Sometimes other street musicians get pissed off at me, because they say I should just be signing songs. I'd rather try to get someone to stop, because then I know they're at least going to give me a dollar. A few weeks ago I got a hundred dollar kick down for one song. That's why it's better to get people to stop and listen, because then you can tell 'em what's going on with yourself. People understand. Anybody who's fucking partly human should have a little bit of compassion for someone like me.



## Regina Roates from St. Louis

I first came to live in New Orleans in 1975. My mother had a real bad case of the drunken meanies and it just got to the point where I figured I was safer on the street than I was in my own house. It was April and still pretty cold up in St. Louis. I didn't have much by way of clothes, so I figured I'd get where it was warmer. I was a very frightened, very hostile, angry at the world teenager and this city just took me in. People gave me food, a place to stay and got me a job waiting tables. Its been my home ever since.

I started reading palms in Jackson Square in 1984. The Worlds Fair was here so the city was full of tourists. I'd just left my old man and was working at a terrible bar on Decatur Street staying up all night dealing with drunks, which made it really hard to be at home taking care of my two kids. One night I was coming home at the crack of dawn, and I ran into Jerik setting up his table. I asked him what he was doing and he told me he was reading palms. I said oh I can do that. You mean you can get paid for it? Duh. We got to talking and Jerik said he would show me the ropes.

My father had taught me the basics of how to read, but Jerik really showed me showmanship and presentation – how to make a perfect stranger sit down and feel comfortable. I'll always be grateful for that. After working with Jerik for a few weeks he decided I was ready to set up my own table. At first I was terrified, but then I had a gentleman give me fifty dollars for a single reading. Pretty soon I was able to quit my job and start doing this full time. It worked out well because I could be at home when my kids needed me.

Most of the readings that I do for tourists are scaled down versions. A lot of the time people already know the answers that they're looking for, but sometimes the cards help them to look at things from a different perspective. Some of my best readings have been the freebees. Back in the eighties I did some readings for a runaway called Boogie. We looked at his cards and eventually we started talking about his problems with drugs. I didn't see him for twenty years, but then a few years ago he came back with his wife and kid and thanked me for helping him get his life together. That's what I do out here. Terminal



mom.

Over the years I must have done thousands of readings . People might not always remember me, but I'd like to think that some of what I see in people's palms and in the cards opens up a door so that they look deeper into what's going on in their own lives. Sometimes it has a ripple effect. It's like when you drop a pebble in a bucket of water the waves that hit the side are bigger than the original splash. Sometimes you can get a tsunami effect with just one pebble. That's what I love about being out here, seeing those tsunamis rolling.

## Yegor from The Ukraine

My whole family is doctors. I was going to be a doctor too, but when you grow up in a Russian intelligencia family they raise you like a samuri. You have to be good with the sword you have to be good with the flute. When I was six my parents sent me to classical piano school where they make you sit at the piano for hours a day. The Russian teacher would fucking beat you up. I hated it. All I wanted was to play soccer. But then two years later, I was playing Mozart and I closed my eyes and my fingers just started rolling over the keys. Just hands, no thinking. When I opened my eyes I saw my fifty six year old teacher was crying. At the time I didn't realize what I had done. At eight you don't appreciate that that's why you've been spanked and kept at the piano for hours a day. But when you're thirty five you're like fuck, that's what it is. I'm so thankful that it happened for me.

When I turned thirteen I graduated from piano school and couldn't think about playing Mozart ever again. I picked up a guitar and started playing punk rock. It was a beautiful time to be a musician because as the USSR was falling apart, the music was powering the social movment. I was the first person in my family to ever play anything other than Russian or classical music. All my songs were political. I wrote one song about Christams, which

TO BE CONTINUED

I was one of the first Soviet punk rockers.



## John Brown from Hollywood

My parents gave me my first telescope when I was twelve years old. I used to sit on the front lawn of our house in Hollywood and ask the people walking around looking for movie stars if they wanted a look at the real thing. I went to Disney Land all the time, but my favorite place was always the Griffith Park Observatory up in the hills. I think I always knew that I wanted to be an astronomer.

The only time in my life I didn't have a telescope was the three years I spent in Vietnam. I was a drafted, otherwise I wouldn't have gone. The last thing you wanted to do over there was look up. No thank you, not with bullets whizzing by my ear. I was damn glad to get out of there, but when I came back everything that I had was gone, my girlfriend, my job, my apartment. I haven't had a regular job since then. If it weren't for my parents I don't know what I would have done.

When I got discharged I had five hundred dollars saved up, but instead of buying a car like most guys I bought an old eight inch F7 telescope. I set it up in my parents' yard and spent my time looking at the sky. Mentally I was out there somewhere. I imagined what a quasar would look like or what it would be like to go through the center of a black hole. They say that black holes are just like a hurricane, if you go through the exact center nothing would happen to you, but if you entered through the walls you'd be devastated.

In 1974 I followed my parents to New Orleans. My dad was the jazz musician Pud Brown. He was on of the first white guys to play with Louis Armstrong. They were good friends. Back in the thirties my dad used to hide Louis in his house in Schreveport when he was hiding from the mob. I remember meeting Louis when I was six years old, and he said in his deep voice what a cute kid I was. My dad was always really proud of me. It didn't matter that I didn't become a musician.

When we moved down here I started setting up my scope in front of Café DuMonde. At that time the Moonwalk was a train yard four tracks deep. The benches used to be filled with hobos riding in on the freights. Back then people used to line up on the sidewalk to look through the scope. I guess they were really interested because the Apollo Program was still fresh in their minds. Now I just get an





occasional look, but it's still worth it. I've turned a lot of people on to astronomy that otherwise would never have discovered it. A few years ago I had an astronomy professor at UNO come by and tell me that my telescope was what got him started on his career. Then on the other hand there's the people who don't think that my telescope is real, and they get angry at me and call me a liar. They think I've got slides hidden inside the eyepiece. At first it hurt me a little, but now I'm used to it. I suppose that's how Galileo must have felt.

Once in a while Christians come by and their kids want to know if they can see God. I show them Signus the Savior Star. It's always directly over your head on Easter morning. One time I was explaining the meanings of the stars for the early Christians to the this elderly lady and she thought it was so beautiful that she broke down in tears.

Probably the best experience I've had out here was when a couple stopped by with a son who was autistic. Standing on the sidewalk he looked completely blank, but once he looked into the telescope and saw the moon, it just sparked something in his brain and he got all excited. His parents were amazed because nothing had affected him like that before. They said it was one of the first times he

## Sidewalk Saints

really vocalized. I hope they went home and bought him a telescope. Something like that would really make a change in his life.

Overall I feel that the city appreciates what I'm doing. Around 1980 the city council started passing laws regulating the street vendors in the Quarter. The council members took a vote on who should stay and who should go. The artists got some votes. The fortune tellers didn't get any votes at all. I got the most number of votes.

Katrina definitely put a dent in the sidewalk astronomy business. Right before the storm Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and Venus and the Earth were all lined up, so there was a big gravitational pull. Thankfully I had my telescope stored right behind the café so it didn't get damaged, but the roof on the house where I was staying got destroyed, so I had to find a new apartment. I used to pay \$425 but now I pay almost \$800 for one room. It's getting harder to make rent.

I just turned sixty, so I can't always work as hard as I used to. I have to take it easy sometimes. About four years ago I started having seizures for some reason, and I wound up in the hospital in a coma because I hit my head real hard. While I was in the VA they told me that I had PTSD and I show symptoms of exposure to Agent Orange. I had no idea. Since then I've been trying to get disability. For four years I've been kind of battling with the Veterans Administration. You have to jump through all the hoops. They always deny you at first. Then you have to hire a lawyer. It's like a nightmare.

I'm an astrologist not an astrologer, so I can't tell you exactly what I see in my future. Hopefully I'll be out here doing this till I'm ninety. As long as its not too cloudy you'll always find me right out here in front of the Cafe DuMonde. If I won the lottery, I'd still do this. I'd probably just buy a better telescope.



## Clarence Gallagher from Tacoma

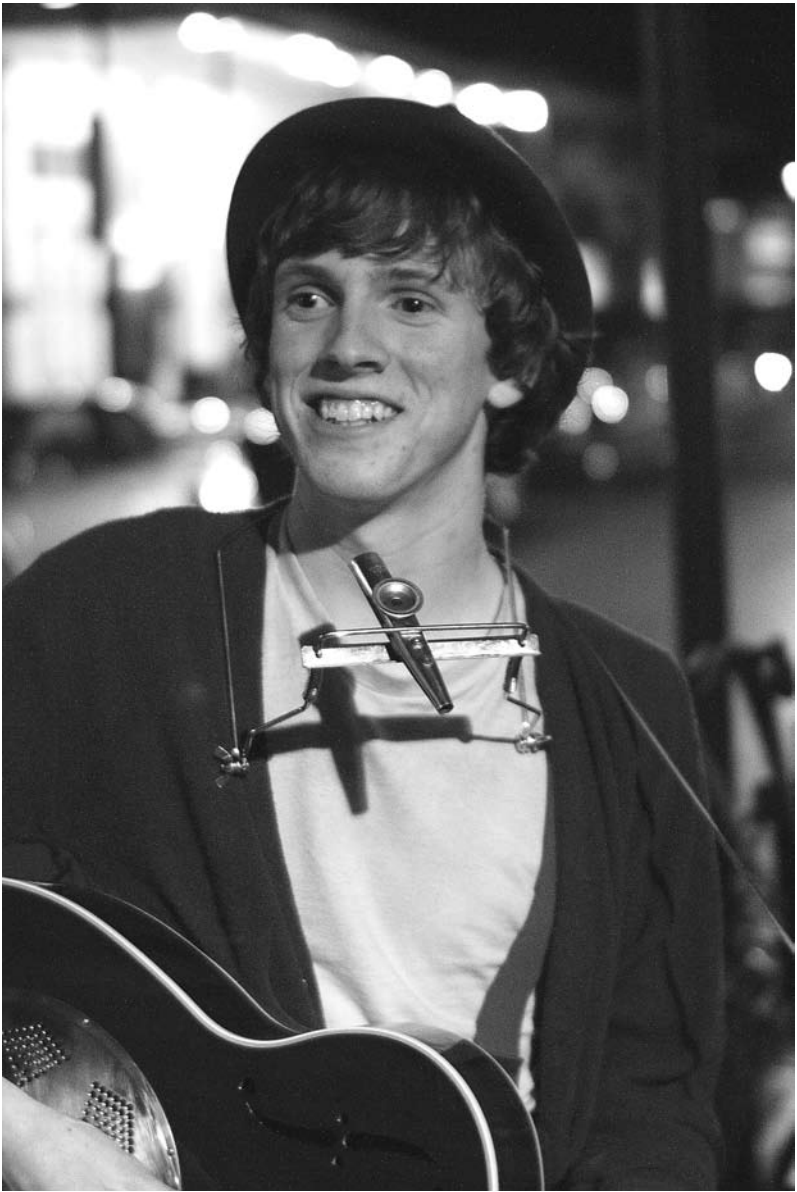
I got my first guitar when I was eleven years old. I'm eighteen now, so I guess that makes seven years that I been playing this thing. My grandmother gave it to me for Christmas, she used to be a singer in a psychedelic band back in the sixties, went to Woodstock and everything. She actually showed me some old tabs of brown acid from there that she keeps with her old albums. Grandma definitely formed my musical world. I started teaching myself guitar with her old records.

I'll never forget the day I heard Traveling Riverside Blues on Led Zepplin II. That song just about put me on the floor. I was like, who is this Robert Johnson character? I just started downloading all of his songs and figuring them out. It felt kind of weird to be learning how to play this old music clicking on a mouse and staring at a computer screen, but it was just so easy. It was like being in the biggest record store in the world and being able to have anything I wanted. From there I started downloading all the old blues players, Blind Blake, Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Boy Fuller. It was all straight from their heart. I couldn't get enough of it.

When I really started getting into the blues, I used to cut out of school and go back in the woods and play guitar all day long. I loved it. It was a great escape. In school I was always bored, but out there in the forest I felt like I was really learning something. Once in a while a teacher would call my house, but things were pretty crazy at home, so I could do whatever I wanted.

When I hit sixteen I knew I had to leave home. My stepfather wasn't really a good guy, so it was hard to watch him around my mom. My parents always did a lot of drugs, but there was never much food in the fridge. I figured if was gonna fend for myself, I might as well do it on my own terms. I got a couple suitcases, my record player and guitar and just walked out the door. Thank god I had my girlfriend Kaylee or I wouldn't have had any place to go.

Kaylee and I actually met back when I was in seventh grade and had been really good friends for a few years. Then one night we were tripping on mushrooms and we ended up sitting together in the



## Sidewalk Saints

back of her friend's car. I looked over and saw that long curly hair and those big blue eyes and I guess something just kind of clicked. I put my arm around her shoulder and that was it. I'd never felt that way before. We've been together ever since.

Kaylee and I lived together out in Tacoma for a while. We had a big old house with a couple of roommates and great big porch with a real comfortable chair and an ashtray. It was good, but I was still feeling kind of bad about my parents, especially my dad. I wrote a song about him called *The Pain and Misery Blues*. There was a line in it that said, "My father he told me, son you're going to be a bum, ain't gonna have no job, ain't gonna have no home." That's what he told me. That kind of hurt. A little bit after that, I talked to my dad. He'd been laying off the drinking, so he started acting more reasonable. Right now were on a good level, so I don't play that song anymore.

We were doing all right in Tacoma. I was helping my dad with some plumbing and Kaylee had a job painting cars. It was good, but deep down I was itching to get out of Washington and go see the world. That summer we went out traveling to visit some of Kaylee's relatives and we wound up passing through New Orleans. I took my guitar out on Royal Street and as soon as I started strumming it was like I could feel all those old blues players in the wind. A bunch of people came by and started dancing and clapping. By the end of the night I looked down and saw that there must have been forty or fifty dollars in the case. It was so amazing. I was used to unclogging shit from out of toilets and here I was doing something that I loved and getting paid for it. I didn't wanna leave. Kaylee and I made up our minds that as soon as we could save up enough money in Tacoma we were gonna move down here.

So that's what we did.

When we rolled into town two months ago we were sleeping at night in our car. Within two weeks we had our own studio apartment. I'd picked up a washboard for Kaylee back in Tacoma, so now she plays with me. She helps out a lot, it's a much fuller sound. Plus I think people tip more when they see a pretty girl. We're together just about all the time. I think it's really made us stronger. We're still just as much in love if not more. Last week I wrote a song about her called *I Got a Gal*. "I got a gal, love her so. Call her my sweet jellyroll."

The other street musicians have been real kind. A guy named DJ showed us the ropes about what songs to play and where the best spots are at. Other people turned me on to other little tricks, like wearing nice clothes so that I look professional and approachable. I think the other players get excited because we're so young. They always seem tickled when they find out I'm just eighteen. I guess I don't feel like I'm eighteen because I've been out fending for myself for so long.

It's definitely a struggle sometimes. It's hard to come up with money for rent and still have enough money for food. We just applied for food stamps to help us out with that. But all in all I can't complain. I'm out here playing the music I love with the woman I love. I'm not sure where it's gonna take me, but right now I wake up every morning and love being where I'm at.

## Coydog from Kentucky

*Excuse me ladies, I was wondering if you could help me out here by listening to this song. When pretty girls pay attention to me I do a lot better, especially being on the spot with this microphone. I stole this song. Oh shit there's the manager. Oh well I guess he's gonna let me keep playing cause he sees we're on the radio.*

*OH WHEN THE SAINTS,  
OH WHEN THE SAINTS...  
Thank you so much lovely ladies.*

I tell people all the time that I'm from here, but I'm fulla shit. I'm really from Kentucky. Came down here about seven years ago when I got out of prison. My buddy wrote me a letter in the joint telling me to come down here and play guitar in his band. Damn we were good, made so much money I couldn't even spend it all. Then ol' Katrina came round and duced this town out. Now the money's gone and so are most of the people. Hard times. Last night I had somebody come by and hit me with one of those big bike chains — blood running all







down my eye. Sure swung that thing pretty hard for a girl. I guess I get my ass kicked all the time cuz I'm no damn good.

You know what the truth is? I'm too scared to steal and too lazy to work. I'd probably make more money beggin than playing the guitar, but at least this way I can feel like I'm earning it. See how much money I got in my case right now? Seventy-five cents. I take the pennies out of the case and throw them on the sidewalk because that's what an old blues player taught me. Pennies make pennies. Dollars make dollars. Maybe somebody'll stop and pick one up and listen to a song.

I was up to two dollars, but then my buddy Curtis came and hit me up for a dollar fifty for a beer. Made me cry like a baby. Right now I'm just trying to get enough so that I can go to the store and get my medicine.

God, I need a drink like a dead man needs a coffin.

## John Lee from New Orleans

Can't nobody sing on this corner but us. The Eight District NOPD gave it to us. I been singing out here for thirty-eight years. It used to be something I just did for fun and maybe make some extra dollars, but now me and my wife are out here singing to stay alive. Before Katrina I had my own house in the Lower Ninth Ward all bought up and paid for. In the garage I had a mechanic shop with three people working for me. Big TV in the living room - closet full of clothes. I lost it all. Now I don't have nothing but my music and my family – what's left of my family.

When we got back to the neighborhood after the storm my house was gone. Nothing left. We was staying at the Salvation Army shelter but we had to leave cause of the violence. Nobody seems to want to help us out. The only people getting the help are the people who don't need it as bad as we do. In December Jamie gave birth to our little daughter Janeeka, but we still can't get no help finding a place to live. Right now Janeeka's staying with my sister, but me and Jamie are staying in a hotel for sixty-eight dollars a night.

What's even worse is that right after Katrina my eyes started getting bad. I go to the doctor and he tells me that I got glaucoma. I think I must have got it from swimming through that flood water. Sometimes I'll be out here singing on the street and people will look at my eyes and say, oh he's high, he's only out here singing for money to get drugs. I'm sorry my eyes is like it is, but I didn't ask to be like this.

Right now we singing on these streets to survive. Back when I was a young man I used to have people throw hundred dollar bills in the box. Now you got some people walking by and they kick the box right over. If we can make enough money for the hotel and a hamburger at McDonalds then that's a blessed day. Right now this our third day without getting no rest and I haven't had nothing to eat but a tuna fish sandwich since eight o'clock last night.

Tonight we singing gospel music because I know that our future is in the Lord's hands. Sometimes I wonder if God is really gonna answer my prayers. I hate to say it, but sometimes I wish I wasn't living. But then I realize that Jesus went through a lot of pain and torment



on this earth and God anointed him. Maybe God is gonna bless me. Sometimes when you're chosen by God you have to go through tests. I wish God in the name of Jesus would bless us right now.

Can you help us out?



## Jerik from New Orleans

In my young manhood in Hollywood, California, I was in a coffee shop and I saw a man who reminded me of Merlin doing exactly what I do now. I wandered over and asked him how he learned how to do it. His exact first words to me were, “Oh dear gods, it’s the sorcerer’s apprentice, I can smell them coming every time.” He was a hard ass, but he taught me well. After a year of apprenticeship he said, “My curse on you is that you will become me. Someday someone will come up to you and say that’s fascinating. Where did you learn to do that? And the cycle will begin all over again.” Sure enough his prophecy came true. In the thirty-five years I’ve spent as a reader on Jackson Square, I’ve taught more than a few other people how to do this.

One of the biggest misconceptions about what I do is that people think I can tell the future. I’m not a fortuneteller. There’s nothing paranormal about palmistry, it’s a rote skill like reading a map. The hand is a microcosm of a human personality. When I read a hand, I’m just sharing the benefit of my forty-one years of education in palmistry. Believe it or not I actually wrote a masters thesis on palmistry. I’ve even taught classes on palmistry at community colleges. Fortunately I make more money in Jackson Square than I did teaching college. When you’re a widower with six daughters to raise you have to do what you can to make ends meet. I feel fortunate that I’ve been able to accomplish that doing something I enjoy.

Another misconception about the readers in the Square is that we’re all hustlers. Sure there are some charlatans that do take advantage of the tourists, but the only person who sits in my chair is the one who wants to be there. I don’t beckon people. It’s karmically clean, because I do my readings by donation. I make it an exchange of gifts, the reading is my gift to them. What they put in the box is their gift to me. If they’re not satisfied with their reading I wouldn’t accept a twenty from them. I actually have ethics.

Mostly I’m an entertainer. That’s what I have to offer for four out of five people who sit down in my chair. But for that fifth person who’s looking for something deeper, I try to offer sound advice on the matter of living. Mostly it’s about common sense. When someone



## Sidewalk Saints

asks me advice on something, I'm not pulling it out of the beyond, I'm pulling it out of my life. Say you're having a problem with your daughter. Having raised six daughters, I don't need a Tarot deck to give you advice about it.

I suppose I'm something like a psychologist. Carl Jung actually wrote three essays on the Tarot in which he said the cards are nothing more than seventy-eight archetypes for the collective subconscious. When you shuffle the cards, your connection to the collective subconscious is setting the pattern. All the reader does is interpret them. I don't feel that the cards are all knowing. What do you expect from seventy eight pieces of printed card stock? When somebody comes to me and says they think that their grandmother is trying to contact them from the dead, I tell them that my cell phone doesn't reach that far. You've come to the least mystical reader on Jackson Square.

Basically I offer people a mirror of confirmation. Half the time the people already know the answers to their questions themselves. But here I am a complete stranger saying, yes you should hold out for the college of your choice. Yes, you should pick that as your career path. I just give them a little inspiration to follow through on their decisions. Do you remember the story of Walt Disney's Dumbo? Now Dumbo could fly because he had large ears, but the only reason he believed it was because Timothy the Mouse gave him a magic feather. It never hurts to hand somebody a magic feather.

Probably one of the most rewarding and challenging aspects of working out here in the Square is that I'm constantly talking with the street kids. Forty years ago, I was a street kid myself. I know what it's like to travel in a boxcar and hitchhike. A lot of these kids come from dysfunctional homes, so they really look to me to play that parental role. They call me Daddy Bear.

*Actual Conversation:*

*Heather\*: Daddy Bear, You don't need some help out here setting up your table?*

*Jerik: I've got all the help I need. This is not a high impact job.*

\* alias

*Heather: I'm supposed to be working for Jazz Fest, temporary of course, but I want something permanent.*

*Jerik: What kind of job would you like?*

*Heather: CAD. Computer Assisted Design.*

*Jerik: You're probably not going to find that on Jackson Square.*

*Heather: I don't come here that much.*

*Jerik: You're missing my point. If that's your dream, it's not going to be under the park bench over there darling. If you go back to school and study computer asisted design, get a degree in it, that would be the ticket to your dream, honey. You're not going to find it in the squat. You're not going to find it on the park bench. You're not going to find it with people smoking catnip on the river. If you want to make change in your life, you have to be the active participant. The other part is like waiting for the Easter Bunny or the Fairy Godmother. They don't exist.*

*Heather: I know.*

*Jerik: Well you would think that some people think that they do because they just sit there wishing their whole lives.*

*Heather: You think I could really go to college?*

*Jerik: That's not a difficult question, Heather. The answer is yes.*

I'm glad you got to see my little intervention with Heather. That's why they call me the Godfather of Jackson Square, which is funny, because I never planned on being an old person. But honestly over the past thirty five years, as much as this place has changed, it's still basically the same place. We had street kids then. We have street kids now. We had drunk tourists then. We have drunk tourists now. It's still probably one of the best places in the world to go and interact with all types of human beings. I just hope they don't put a fence around it and start charging admission.

## Alobar from New York City

In 1967 I was going to Cornell and got tired of mainstream Christianity, so I got my first Tarot deck and played around with it. It was mainly for my own exploration. I never thought anyone else would be interested, but before long people were coming to me for advice even though I still had the instruction book in my hand. I never thought I'd make a dime off of it, but it was a great way to pick up women.

When I left college I started working at an antiwar print shop in Ithaca. It was long hours and low pay, but I figured at least I was helping to change the world. When the war ended, the movement lost a lot of momentum and the shop moved out to California. I kind of had a shift of consciousness where I realized that the change the world needed was going to be on a personal level rather than a political level, so I bought myself a farm and started growing magic mushrooms. I did that for about ten years - made good money with it and helped a lot of people reprogram themselves.

Coming into the eighties you had Ronald Reagan with his War on Drugs. Every day they had thousands of kilograms of cocaine coming in from Columbia, but of course the government had to go after the hippies that weren't hurting anybody. Pretty soon we had surveillance planes flying over. When the cops started closing in we had to shut down our operation. At that time my wife and I had just gotten divorced, so I started going out dancing at the nightclubs to try and find somebody else. Eventually I got tired of that, so when a friend offered me a ride to New Orleans, I went.

I first started doing readings in the Square in 1992. At first it was difficult, because I'd hung out with so many countercultural people who understood paganism and magic, that I wasn't sure that I could relate to ordinary people in the street. Pretty soon I realized that everybody asks the same kind of questions. It's about their girlfriend or boyfriend. It's about their job. It's about their health or whether their going to have kids. Over time I've learned to be a little more direct with people with my answers.

A couple years ago I had I had one reading with a great big





obese lady chain smoking ciggarettes, asking me if her health is going to remain good. I looked at her and said you wouldn't know good health if it came by and bit you in the ass. She started getting tears in her eyes and then I said that she was on a fast track to being a cripple or dead. You've gotta lose weight, not by going on a diet, but by changing your entire lifestyle. She gave me a good tip.

I can't always be completely honest, last week I had a woman stop by and she wanted to know what the future was going to be like for her grandchildren. Now the way I see it with global warming and  
WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN RACE

WHAT DO YOU SEE IN YOUR FUTURE.