

Curbstone Minstrels

A sunny day can turn the campus into a carnival. Jugglers start juggling, frisbees fly and laughter and conversation fill the air.

As you near the University Bookstore and weave through the steady press of sunglasses, bicycles and students lining the curb, chances are a street musician will be near.

For performance-minded musicians with anything from violins to conga drums, the south strip of the sidewalk between Alder and Kincaid streets can be a gold mine or a poorhouse, depending on the virtuosity they possess and the generosity of the people traversing 13th Avenue.

Eagle Park Slim, a regular on the campus musical scene, says he makes as much as \$40 a day from appreciative students welcoming him home after one of his minstrel trips up the northwest corridor from Eugene to Seattle.

This accomplished bluesman has played with such greats as Muddy Waters, Tina Turner, George Thorogood and Joe Cocker, and says he likes playing on the streets "to keep from gettin' worried. See, I can come down here and bring home the bacon during the day so's I don't have to worry at night."

His effect on the campus crowd is obvious as he glides in and out of rhythm patterns and syncopated foot-stomping, greeting passersby as he plays without missing a beat. People wave and say hello or stop and tap their toes to a bluesy ramble through "Sweet Home, Chicago" or one of the many other songs in his repertoire.

Slim believes more musicians should make it out to the streets. "Some musicians think they're givin' themselves away if they play on the streets, but they need it to stay in form, and it'll come back to 'em if they make somebody's day out here," he says.

One of the musicians who does make it out to the streets on a regular basis is Steve RavenStar, who frequents the Eugene mall and the campus more for honing his skills than for cash.

"I'm working on putting a band together, and I come here to get my playlist down," he says.

He likes the crowd reaction he gets on campus and notes that he occasionally receives free coffee from appreciative employees at Fall Creek Bakery.

RavenStar plays mostly '80s Top-40 tunes, songs he says will get him into clubs where he'll have a chance to work in his original compositions. In addition, he operates a four-channel recording unit from his home called Catharsis Studios, and he also participated in the now-defunct Eugene Street Performers Program.

The program initially was devised in 1980 as a kind of quality-control device to make area artists more responsible and to enable the city to keep track of those who repeatedly had complaints lodged against them. The program was a product of the Lane Regional Arts Council in cooperation with the Eugene Police Department and the Downtown Merchants Commission, which had several problems with transient musicians on the downtown mall in the past.

The program required performers to register with LRAC, pay a fee and obtain a permit, but it suffered when LRAC moved from the downtown area to its more isolated location near the Fifth Street Public Market.

According to Darnell Mandellblatt of LRAC, the move to the new location along with a lack of participation and enforcement as well as uncompensated administrative costs hastened the demise of the program during 1984-85.

Although the campus is one of the few places to play in Eugene, street musicians sometimes run counter to the policies of at least one campus establishment, the University Bookstore on 13th Avenue and Kincaid Street.

Bob Spencer, merchandising manager for the bookstore, said safety is the main factor in their policy of prohibiting musicians to play on bookstore property, which includes the area beneath the second-story overhang on 13th Avenue.

"The corner of 13th and Kincaid is an aspect of Eugene that is very unique," he says, "but there is just not enough room for musicians, pedestrians, bicycles, cars and the bake-sale table in front of the store."

Spencer says the corner is one of the busiest in terms of foot-traffic per hour in Oregon and California combined.

What Spencer would like to see is "a mall area, where 13th is removed completely, with grass and benches installed", to preserve the special ambiance of the corner, he said.

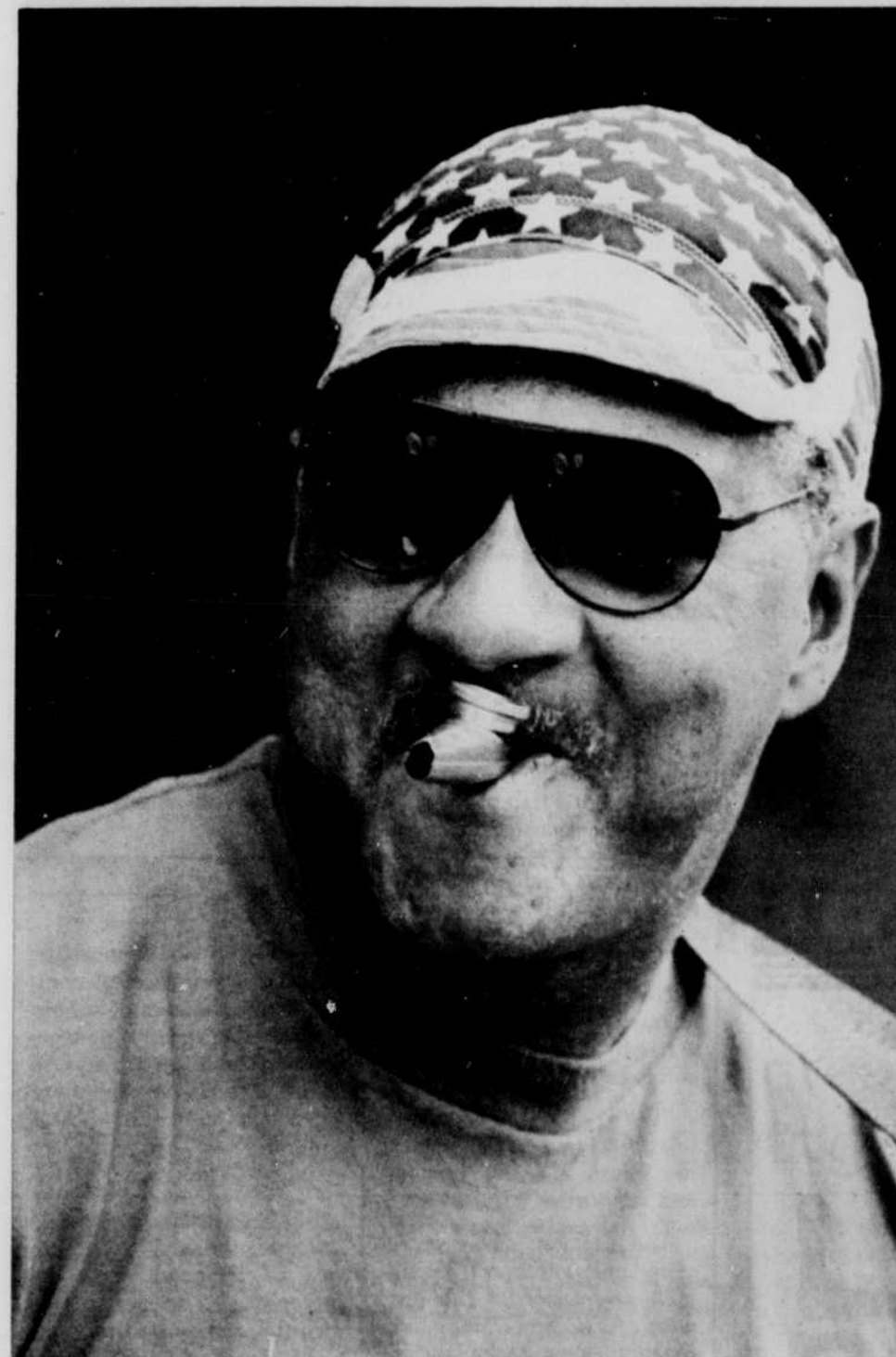
But the bookstore's policy usually only serves to move the musicians a few feet toward the street or down the block onto city instead of bookstore property.

Johnny B., a guitarist/vocalist on his fourth trip through Eugene, has found there are sometimes bigger problems for street musicians than simply property lines.

An easygoing, contemplative man in his late 20s who doesn't really live anywhere ("But I'm not a transient, don't get the wrong idea"), he cites drugs and relationships as two stumbling blocks he has come up against.

"Being a street musician is tough. Drugs are always there to mess you up if you're not careful, and women come and go, get you upset and ruin your state of mind. I have to approach it from a higher place, kind of like I'm a priest or something, or else I quit playing for long stretches of time," he says.

"I guess my life is kind of nebulous compared to most people, too. I mean, I don't work and collect a paycheck like everybody else. I didn't even ask for money the first year and a half I played on the street because I figured my karma would come back to me, and it did. I got a big government check, \$3,500, and I thought I was a millionaire, man. But then I got into the shopping trip and quit playing for awhile, so I don't know, maybe money's a problem, too."



Steve RavenStar plays outside of the University Bookstore, a location where he hones his musical skills (left). Eagle Park Slim, a regular on the campus music scene, frequently plays the northwest corridor from Eugene to Seattle (Above and right).



Story by Tim Chauran
Photos by Maria Corvallis

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