

Organ Grinders With Live Monkeys—A Dying Art

Vincent W. Morgan

A Short History of Organ Grinders in the United States

At the turn of the 20th Century it was said that in New York City there was an organ grinder and monkey on every block. Organ grinding, also known as dinging or busking, was one way many immigrants, mostly Italian, made a living in some of the larger cities, especially in New York and Washington, DC. The immigrants would rent or buy a Molinari street organ, made in Brooklyn, New York, (price about \$10) and then go to a pet store and buy a monkey for \$2—\$5. The next several months were spent in training the monkey. Sometimes the training was harsh and considered cruel, but sometimes it was gentle and enjoyable. It all depended on the personalities of the monkey and the immigrant. Once the monkey was trained sufficiently to ding for money, the immigrant and his monkey would set out to find a suitable street corner to entertain people while earning a living.



Figure 1. Joe Lopez and his monkey, Herman.

It has been said that a good organ grinder with a good dinging monkey could make a great living even during the great depression. One example of this was the great Joe Lopez, who, with his monkey, Herman, made several times more money in a day than most people could do in a week, if they could find work (Figure 1). The only problem was that

his income was almost entirely in pennies. In later years he put a sign on his organ that read “No Pennies Please!”

Once the organ grinder earned enough money he would often switch from the high-pitched Molinari to a mellower Bacigalupo, made in Europe. When Louis Bacigalupo moved to the US, he changed his last name to Bacigalupi, and produced organs in California that are prized by organ grinders to this day. Following Louis’ death, Lee Edwards in Atlanta bought the equipment and continued to produce these wonderful organs for several years. Unfortunately, his equipment and masters were all stolen so none are being made any longer.

After New York City Mayor LaGuardia was elected to office in 1935, he passed an ordinance against street noise, thus banning all street musicians—especially organ grinders. This law stood until the mid 1970’s when Mayor Lindsey repealed it. Today there are an abundance of street musicians in New York, but the organ grinders are still noticeably absent. After spending many phone hours with different people, being sent from one agency to another and, following up one lead monkey story, the reason for such an absence is still a mystery. Even organ grinders without monkeys are absent. A similar law to Mayor LaGuardia’s was passed in Washington DC about the same time. One organ grinder in Washington by the name of Pietro Battaglioli (Figure 2), who raised seven children with his magical music, wrote to President Roosevelt about his dilemma stating that he no longer had a way to earn an income for his family. The letter was intercepted by Eleanor Roosevelt, who made a quick phone call to the local

mayor, which resulted in the law being repealed within a few days of its initial passing. That particular instrument, a barrel piano, and its cart are now owned by Tim Trager.



Figure 2. Believed to be Pietro Battaglioli, and barrel piano.

At the beginning of this research it was believed that there were only six organ grinders with live monkeys left in the United States. After many phone calls and e-mails more have been located. Although people have mentioned others, but so far they haven’t surfaced. Most organ grinders were quite cooperative, but some refused to respond at all. Due to the anti-monkey laws in some areas and so-called animal rights activists, some organ grinders fear for their lives and basically operate “underground.” There have been cases of monkeys

being stolen and one case where the monkeys were shot. Of those, one died and the other is still living. The organ grinder, Lee Edwards, played dead in that incident, which saved his life.

It appears that there may be only two true dingers with real organs and live monkeys who still do this full-time for a living. Phil Monroe at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco and Lenny Schendowich in North Miami still ding on a daily basis.

Categories and General Information

In the United States organ grinders fall into four basic categories, which are:

1. Those with real organs and live monkeys,
2. Those with fake organs and live monkeys,
3. Those with real organs and imitation monkeys
4. Those with real organs and no monkeys.

Though I will mention categories two to four, the main text will deal with the first category, which is the reason for this article.

Those with fake organs and live monkeys are interesting. They call themselves organ grinders, but most of these people have very nice organ-like boxes with CD players inside. In some cases there is a crank attached to the box, which is occasionally turned appearing to look real, but the crank doesn't turn anything. Tony Monda in Las Vegas has a small street organ and a very ornate vehicle-mounted calliope, both of which are fakes with CD players and good speakers inside. Sony Rickson, a Las Vegas resident, simply has a CD player and doesn't hide it in a box. She is known around town as the "Monkey Lady." Jerry Brown in Lancaster, PA uses a concertina with his monkey act.

People who have real organs and fake monkeys or no monkeys at all abound at the various COAA sponsored organ rallies and events around the country. No further mention needed here, except that they really have a lot of fun without the hassle. Some perform regularly in shopping malls, train stations, and in other public places. Some of these organ grinders have mechanical monkeys.

An interesting anecdote is told by Ingmar Krause in Vancouver, British Columbia. He said that many people continued to ask him where his monkey was. So one day he took his cat. The same people who asked for the monkey told him that he was cruel and should be reported to the "authorities" when his very friendly cat was with him. Go figure!

Today organ grinders with live monkeys are found mostly along the eastern seaboard, but at least one is in Texas, one in Ohio, and three in California. There may be others hiding somewhere, and undoubtedly, as soon as this article is published others will come out of the woodwork somewhere wondering why they weren't included.

Sadly, during the past ten years the number of organ grinders has diminished by half, due either to death or retirement. One very promising young man in Texas was murdered. On Oct. 31, 2003 Robert "Pops" Howd of Pete and Pops in Ohio died (Figure 3). Rachel Lopez and Glen Buckner are

Figure 3. Robert "Pops" Howd of Pete and Pops in Ohio



both in senior citizen facilities and are no longer working. Lee Edwards died in 2004. Don and Beth Natt have retired. Bob Candido, the last of the NY City organ grinders has disappeared.

Some states and cities are monkey friendly and others are not. The so-called animal rights activists are taking their toll on this and other animal professions. In some cities animal acts are totally forbidden. For example, the city of Denver passed a law banning all animal acts, including circuses. Don't get caught training your cat or dog, especially if you want to do a public performance, even for your neighbors.

All owners of exotic animals, animal acts, and animal farms must be registered and licensed by the USDA. In some places, such as New Jersey, every performance must be registered with the Fish and Game Commission at least two weeks beforehand. They will then scrutinize the location, event, etc. and hopefully issue a permit. In New York City it is possible to get a permit, but most organ grinders tell their friends not to list them in any advertising for their events. Commercial airlines will not allow monkeys to fly on passenger planes. They must fly separately on a cargo plane. For this reason organ grinders with monkeys will fly only in private planes with the monkeys sitting on their laps—no exceptions. There is a wonderful website www.monkeymaddness.com, managed by Robin Sloan of Monkey Madness in Florida, which has a plethora of information including most local laws concerning monkeys throughout the United States. She is doing a wonderful job of educating people about monkeys and is to be highly commended for her work. Judie Harrison in Maryland is actively training monkeys and chimps and will train any monkey for organ grinders to ding, doing tricks or whatever the organ grinder wants.

Most, if not all, current organ grinders with live monkeys have been on Saturday Night Live, Late Night With David Letterman and in several movies, TV commercials, magazine ads, etc. They all perform at private parties, parades, fairs and special events. A few, very few, actually ding for money on the streets anymore. Most of them on the East Coast have performed in the stage production of *Inherit the Wind*.

The organs of choice were originally Molinaris, which were made in Brooklyn, inexpensive and readily available. If a person couldn't afford the \$10 price, he could rent one. These were sturdy, easy to handle and lightweight. The basic problem was that they were pitched rather high. When organ grinders made enough money they often switched to Bacigalupos, which had a much more mellow and pleasing

tone. When Louis Bacigalupo(i) moved to the US and began making Bacigalupi organs. Many organ grinders liked being able to buy domestically. There are still many of these organs around. Today, many organ grinders like Pell's 21-note Harmonette, as it is easy to play and doesn't require rolls, but uses "smart" cards instead.

Some of the Organ Grinders Currently Performing

In the Northeast, Tony Lupo (with two monkeys, Coco and Miki) works mostly in the Boston area (**Figure 4**), but travels throughout New England and sometimes as far south as NY City. His monkey, Coco, is the only monkey Elvis impersonator in the world (**Figure 5**). Tony and Coco are acclaimed to be the "George Burns and Gracie Allen" of the monkey world. They perform on stage, on the street, in shopping malls and just about anywhere where they can get an audience. However they no longer ding. They also have a great education program for schools.

The organs that Tony uses are a Molinari, two Hofbauers, a Linaers street piano and an Alan Pell. He recently built his own replica with a CD inside that he uses most of the time simply because of its light weight. Tony and Coco also recently appeared as Pirates in a promo for the movie *Pirates of the Carribean*.

In New Jersey Joe (Boscio) Bush and his monkey, George, are seen (**Figure 6**) on the White house lawn with a Molinari organ. Joe now runs Monkey Joe's Big Nut Co. Joe and George have performed at the White House twice, once during the



Figure 6. Joe Bush and his monkey, George, in front of the White House.



Figures 4 and 5. Tony Lupo and Coco (above) and Coco dressed as Elvis (below).



Reagan years and once with George Bush Sr. A third appearance at the Clinton inaugural ball was cancelled due to "animal rights" protestors. (The Democrat donkey was cancelled that night as well for the same reason.) They also performed in the Showboat Casino in Atlantic City for seven years. He left only because the casino was sold to Harrah's, who made many changes, one of which was to cancel all the strolling entertainers.

Joe is one of the most respected names in the "monkey" business and is revered by other organ grinders. Every time this author mentioned his name to organ grinders on the East Coast, they spoke of him with the greatest of praise. Joe and George still perform, but mostly at private parties in the NY, NJ, and PA area. If the legislators in New Jersey have their way, there will never be another organ grinder in that state. Even when George and his mate, Sasha, had a baby, the Fish and Game authorities showed up at his door demanding to see the third monkey. He was told that he didn't have a permit for three monkeys and that he had to get rid of the baby. He was able to stall them long enough for the baby to be weaned and then sold to friends in another state. Most of the time Joe now uses a Bacigalupo organ.

Bob Candido, was the last organ grinder who lived and worked in New York City (**Figure 7**). During the last few years he worked mostly at parties and Italian weekends in the Catskill Mountains in Upstate NY. His monkey, Minnie Rosa, has performed with him for many years. He used a Molinari organ that has seen years of use. Bob Candido disappeared in 2005 during the writing of this article. There is no obituary listed in NY City for him, so he may be in a retirement home or may have moved out of the area. I have not been able to obtain any further information as of this writing. If anyone has any information about him it would be appreciated if you could let this author know.



Figure 7. Bob Candido with Minnie Rosa.



Figure 8. Bob Cothran, "The Magic Organ Grinder," and Spanky.

Bob Cothran, "The Magic Organ Grinder" and his monkeys Spanky and Nikki live in South Carolina. In **Figure 8** they are on the movie set for *Glory Glory*, about the pre-Civil War South. Someone in Hollywood had the idea that organ grinders of that era looked like sultans. Normally Bob uses a Hofbauer organ, but for this movie he used an empty box with a crank. The music was added later in post production. Bob and Spanky have appeared in a number of plays and theater productions. Spanky's father, Finster, played "Dodger" in the movie *Monkey Madness*.

In Southern California Bob and Spanky worked for Ken and Roberta Griffin, who were magic entertainers. Through them, Bob and Spanky auditioned at Hollywood's Magic Castle. Bob and Spanky also worked for the Nethercutts at San Sylmar for several years.



Figure 10. Dennis Windsor and Sheila.
Figure 11 (below). Windsor's 40-key Bacigalupo organ.

Dennis Windsor, in Lynchburg, VA had a monkey named Sheila, who was probably the most famous monkey dinger ever (Figure 10). Unfortunately, Sheila died in Nov. 2005. She was previously trained by Lee Edwards (died in 2004) in Atlanta. She was later sold to Joe Bush, who then sold her to the Don and Beth Natt in Pennsylvania, now retired. Dennis bought her and she was performing for him until her death. She worked in the organ grinding business for over 30 years and traveled throughout Europe and Russia. She was rented by a performer, who was taught how to handle her and then took her on a great European tour, delighting audiences wherever they went. Dennis now has two monkeys, Joy and Jojo, and nine organs including a 40-key Bacigalupo, which is his favorite (Figure 11). He also has one of the largest collections of photos of organ grinders in existence. When not performing, Dennis



repairs and restores antique jukeboxes. He recently wrote "I couldn't go on without my monkeys."

Phil Monroe can be seen and heard at the old Custom House in Monterey near Fisherman's Wharf almost any day of the year. He currently has three monkeys. Pictured in Figure 12 is a Molinari that he says is very loud and does attract people. He says that he also has the last Bacagalupi organ that Louis Bacagalupi ever made, which was in 1952, and bears Louis' autograph. He is one of the few true dingers left



Figure 12. Phil Monroe and Gomez, aggressive in this photo.

today with a real organ and real live monkey. He also has a monkey modeling agency.

In the Miami, Florida area Lenny Schendowich (Uncle Lenny), another true dinger, is known as the Monkey Man and is well-known in that area and liked by young and old for his friendliness. He owns 16 monkeys and two organs. He says, "My organs are the real thing, not like what others use." He loves dinging so much that he rarely takes a day off. He can usually be found on city streets, in the parks or at Monkey Maddness. Lenny says that he enjoys grinding so much that it is a rare day that he doesn't go out to one of the parks. Sometimes he can be seen grinding the organ, handling the monkey and talking on his cell phone all at the same time. Lenny doesn't advertise and says that the "animal rights" people steal monkeys. He carries \$1,000,000 in insurance just in case one of his monkeys bites someone.

Art Howell in Sacramento works in a nearby casino. He hasn't responded to inquiries, so I don't know any more about him.

In So. Calif. Anthony and Steve Barbato, (father and son) of Monk 'n' Me, can usually be found near the Queen Mary in Long Beach. They too failed to respond to numerous letters even though I sent them several customers. Attempts to find a telephone number have been futile.

Norris Welch worked in Las Vegas for many years and has since moved to Fulton, Texas. Many other organ grinders praise him greatly. He failed to respond to several letters and no further information has been found.

There is an organ grinder with a monkey in Milton, Ohio by the name of Wally Durbin, but he didn't respond to contacts and therefore, it wasn't possible to find information about him.

Postlude

People say that there is a lot of money to be made in organ grinding. Monkeys are truly charming and do attract crowds. Similar to people, they do have different personalities and not every monkey can be trained or will work with a particular handler. Insurance is astronomical due to the possibility of the monkeys biting people. For this reason some of the handlers remove the teeth or at least the front teeth of their monkeys. While visiting in the home of one monkey handler I was very glad that the monkey didn't have any teeth as she decided that his fingers were quite tasty. Monkeys are a full-time proposition and can never be left home alone. There are no "monkey sitters" around and you can't take them to the local vet for boarding for the weekend or while you go on a cruise.

Unfortunately, unless a new generation of organ grinders comes along, this form of entertainment will die out in a very few years. Most organ grinders are now senior citizens. The

"animal rights" groups and many politicians are doing all they can to end this business forever. In late 2005 a young man in Philadelphia began dinging with a recently purchased organ and a trained monkey (a combined investment of approximately \$25,000-\$30,000). He didn't have either insurance or a license and the monkey bit someone. The City of Philadelphia confiscated and euthanized the monkey and the man is now out of business. A few years ago another young man began the business in the Southwest and was murdered shortly afterward. The history of organ grinding is filled with intrigue, mystery, murder, joy, tears, entertainment and fortunes made and lost. It is truly a dying art destined to become folklore. The next time you see an organ grinder with a live monkey, the chances are it will be the last. Take photos, listen to his stories and commit them to memory, because that may be all your grandchildren will ever have.

DIRECTORY OF KNOWN ORGAN GRINDERS

Jerry Brown, 604 State St., Lancaster, PA 17603. Web address: www.themonkeyman.com. E-mail: minstrl-man@verizon.net. Phone: (717) 299-1785. Monkey: Django. No organ. He uses a concertina instead. He also does magic tricks, stilt walking, fire eating, etc. Works mostly school assemblies, but also does birthday parties, office parties, fairs, church events, etc.

Joe Bush, 21 Westbury Drive, Cherry Hill, NJ 08003 Web address: www.JBEC.com or www.BigNutCo.com, e-mail: joebush@jbec.com. Wife, Sally. Monkeys: George and Sasha. Only George performs. Owner of Monkey Joe's Big Nut Company, 205 N. White Horse Pike, Laurel Springs, NJ 08021. Organ: Baccigalupo barrel organ with 6 tunes. Phones: home-(856) 424-7576, office (856) 627-4600, fax (856) 424-8225, cell: (609) 335-0775. Joe and George performed at the White House twice. Write-ups: *Inquirer* (Philadelphia area news magazine) March 24, 2002; *Cuisine*, Feb.-March 2002; *NY Times Magazine*, Feb. 23, 2002; *Palm Beach Post*, Jan 23, 1994. Various TV appearances.

Bob Cothran, P. O. Box 465, Williston, SC 29853. Phone: (803) 266-5625. E-mail: magicman@sc.tds.net, Monkey: Spanky (Spanky's father played Dodger in the movie *Monkey Trouble*), organ: Hofbauer.

Walter (Wally) Durbin, 4228 So. Rangeland Rd., W. Milton, OH 45383 (Toledo area)

Judie Harrison, 26 Oakridge Ct., Elkton, MD 21921. Business name: Monkey Business. Chimps and monkey. Ph. (410) 996-9720 Cell: (443) 350-7346

Art Howell, 1501 Wayfand Ave., Sacramento, CA 95825. Phone: (916) 925-5844. Performs at the El Dorado Casino.

Robert Ketchum, 968 White Oak Drive, Elljay, GA 30540. Business name: "Hurdy Gurdy

Monkey and Me," 988 White Oak Drive, Elljay, GA 30540.

Tony Lupo, P. O. Box 273, Newton, MA 02160. Phone: (617) 964-3074. Web address: www.hurdygurdy-monkey-and-me.com. E-mail: HurdyGurdy4fun@rcn.com. Monkey: Coco, the only Elvis monkey. TV appearances: David Letterman, Saturday Night Live, Today Show, TV movie "Kennedys of Massachusetts." Lifetime member and medal winner from the Harvard *Lampoon*.

Phil Monroe, Monterey, Calif. Business name: Monkey Models. www.monkeymodels.com. E-mail: philmon-@redshift.com. Phone: (831) 375-6941 Six monkeys. Says he has a special Molinari and the last Baccigalupi made.

Tony Monda, 1927 Topsail Ct., Las Vegas, NV 89156. Phone (702) 437-9273 e-mail: mismaeltd@aol.com. Monkeys: Miss Mae and Don Juan. No organ. Uses fake organs with CDs inside. He has two fake organs of different sizes. One is a large circus wagon with fake calliope pipes. The smaller one is on wheels and looks like most small street organs. Tony works as a street performer, but also has agents and works some conventions in Las Vegas. He has been in this business more than 30 years.

Rosemary Monisteri, PO Box 5291, Deltona, FL 32728. Company name: "Sunshine Monkey Shines." No phone number and no further information. Still listed by USDA in 2006.

Sony Rickson, e-mail: ImSony@aol.com. Moves back and forth between Texas and Las Vegas. Known usually as "The Monkey Woman." Uses a boom box with a calliope CD. She hopes to get an organ in the future. Photos of her and some mon

keys at: <http://monkeymoms.com/Sonysmonks/organmain.htm>. Monkeys: Jasmine, white faced capuchin her working monkey, Sebastian, white throated capuchin whom she rescued when he was five, and two cinnamon caps JP Booger and Jessica Jasmine was in the movie "Tarzan" by Phil Collins. She has been written up countless times, mostly in Las Vegas publications and has turned down a number of movie offers.

Pat Reiger, 2068 NE 135 Lane, No. Miami Beach, FL 33181. Molinari organ. Now performs with just monkeys.

Lenny Schendowich, 1065N.E. 134th St., North Miami, FL 33161. 16 monkeys. (305) 891-7805 Cell: (305) 891-7805, Fax: (305) 891-1954

Robin Sloan, owner of Monkey Maddness in Florida. E-mail: monkeymom@monkeymaddness.com. Web address www.monkeymaddness.com. Robin's website has a plethora of information about local laws around the country, monkeys for sale, people who want to buy monkeys, monkey memorabilia and more. There are many photos of monkeys as well.

Norris Welch, Funtime & Monkey Business, P. O. Box 2400, Fulton, TX 78358. No phone number. Still listed by USDA in 2006.

Dennis Windsor, 3532 E. Brook Rd., Lynchburg, VA 24501-7711. home: (434) 929-0698, shop: (434) 846-6254. Monkey, Jojo, five years in the business. Over 150 pictures of organ grinders. Nine organs. Main one is a 40-key Baccigalupo. E-mail: kimsnanny@aol.com. Interested in buying monkeys. He has participated in numerous radio appearances, magazines, promotions, advertising, movies, commercials, and talk shows (with costume changes to fit any theme).

Vincent Morgan and his wife, Maryam, live in Queens NY. Vincent's interest in organ grinders began as a youth, seeing them in parks and other places. But after moving to New York City from S. California he noticed that there were no organ grinders in the city where they were famous for so long. Upon researching for this article he discovered that all street music, especially organ grinders, were outlawed in 1936. In 1976 the law was repealed. Street musicians returned, but no organ grinders, with or without monkeys, were among them.