

Crank Organ Digest - An Interactive Series - Part II

Grinding for Success—Your Routine (Tips and Tricks)

Gordie Davidson

You spent thousands on a street organ and now desire to do more than just entertain in your living room or at rallies. Why not crank for real money? The truth is you can be an income producing grounds attraction with a little bit of planning, effort and expense. Yes, the old adage that you must spend money to make money applies. I will attempt to share some of my lessons learned from the past 13 years of grinding street organs in and around the Greater Kansas City Area. Keep in mind that there are many successful folks in this hobby utilizing different formulas for success. My thoughts are suggestive only and certainly not definitive.



Figure 1. A pro look and super smile from Jane Hellar, complete with the \$70.00 FurReal Friends animated parrot.

There is one common thread for success that sets professionals (pros) apart from amateurs. Simply put, the pros look, sound, and conduct themselves in a professional manner. We discussed how to look like a professional in Part I (issue #34 of the *Carousel Organ*). This issue will provide some insights on what to do with your routine. As an interactive series for COAA, I will continue to post supplemental images, videos and files on my web site at www.gordiedavidson.com.

For this issue, the assumptions are (1) you now look and sound like a professional, and (2) you landed your first paying gig. What are you going to do with your performance routine? Have no fear—there is more to do than you think. This edition provides a few tips for success along with an occasional trick for added inspiration.

Tip—get a good performance location. This is so important for the success of the venue and for your own sanity. When called, always assume the organizer knows nothing about what an organ grinder does. Of particular importance is

that you not be placed in competition with some other entity such as a disk jockey, stage or another grounds attraction. Be skeptical about performing at the entrance of a venue. People will be focused on getting in the venue and have little interest in your act. Determine the exact nature of the event—many are simply inappropriate for organ grinders. You probably will not have fun placed next to an outdoor wrestling ring at your local “City Daze.” Be really skeptical about performing exclusively in the kid’s area—sounds like fun—could be fun, but could likely be pure misery. Tricks—I always determine who controls the refreshments and bathrooms. I greet these folks and sometimes offer one of my compact disks. This usually gets me all the drinks I can consume along with constant access to the necessary room. I say no to more events than yes simply because they will not be fun regardless of compensation.

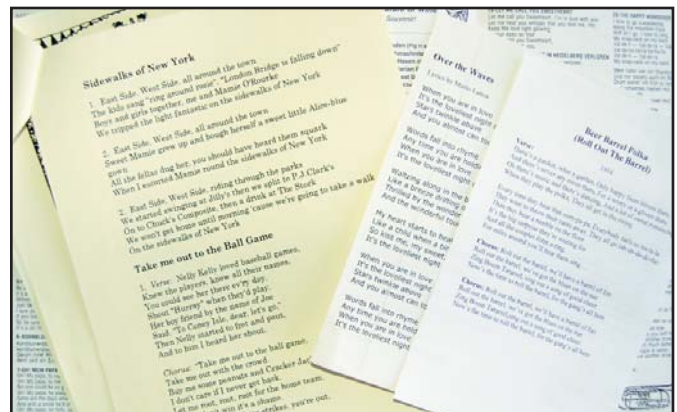


Figure 2. Sing-a-long sheets—any size, any format.

Tip—play the right music. Most people have never seen or heard a street organ. They will initially be amused by the organ’s sound, then its construction and appearance. Your appearance and conduct come last. There are some great arrangements available for the 20-note scale. Conversely, there are some less than stellar rolls available from all arrangers. At \$100 plus each, never buy a roll by title or arranger alone—hear the roll before you buy. I will have more on this in a future edition. Make sure you have a variety of tunes that are somewhat recognizable and lively. It’s OK to be a classics buff, but as a rule, do not subject the public to any one genre. As much as I love the Lord, I do not play the *Hallelujah Chorus* during my Country Club Plaza gigs. Tricks—I have one classic hymns roll that I always play at church events; simply appropriate. If you’re so inclined and have the personality, sing-a-long rolls can be fun. Prepare some sing-a-long handouts (Figure 2) for that appropriate opportunity. Beware—I wasted \$100 on a special occasions

roll I never use - tunes like *Happy Birthday*, *The Wedding March*, *Jolly Good Fellow*, etc.



Figure 3. This kid worked hard, had fun and earned a Certificate of Achievement.

Tip—get people involved. This tip that can bring you the most goodwill and make your gig go by faster. I take every opportunity I can to provide for audience participation (**Figures 3 & 4**). This is an intuitive skill you will develop with experience. Allow your guests to crank your instrument. These are tough instruments—people are not going to break anything. I usually suggest a child be as tall as my chin to crank alone. With younger kids, I'll have them hold my hand as I turn the handle. This is really fun and will get you in many



Figure 4. Anyone can crank, even a bride at Union Station in Kansas City.



Figure 5. the Certificate of Achievement is awarded to those who complete a tune or roll (file available on author's web site).

photos as well as provide relief from cranking. You may have to be assertive with your offers and sometimes even escort folks to the crank. Trick—I provide a Certificate of Achievement (**Figure 5**) to those visitors who complete a tune or roll.



Figure 6. Terry Bender amuses kids with his parrots, JA-FI Marrionetten monkey and storyline.

Photo: Jan Bender

Tip—always smile. Sounds simple enough, do it! Remember this—you never know who is standing in front of you. Could be the children or relatives of the promoter (**Figures 6 & 7**), could be a local VIP, or could be the media.



Figure 7. Wienerwald belly organ, small monkey, big sound and heart from Tom Griffith.

I once talked with a really nice guy for about 15 minutes before I introduced myself. He replied, “Glad to meet you, I’m Lee Iacocca.” Everyone can smile (**Figure 08**), do not be a grump—it does not sell or enhance your routine. Trick—I take every opportunity to wave at people driving by, in a bus, walking across the street, etc. Be friendly!



Figure 8. Pell busker organ, quality stuffed monkey and super smile from Tom McAuley.

Tip—use a smart book. You will occasionally encounter a visitor who really wants to know more about the instrument, music and hobby. I have a loose-leaf notebook for just such an

occasion. I have pages that include a map of Germany depicting where the organ was built in Überlingen, photos taken at the Raffin factory, the Raffin 20-note scale, and JA-FI Marionetten photos. Trick—I use my smart book not only to inform, but also as a means to take an on-duty break from grinding—you will get tired.

Tip—give out Certificates of Achievement. This is a tip that supplements getting people involved. Issue a Certificate of Achievement to those visitors who crank a complete tune or roll (Figure 5). The certificates are preprinted on commercial bond paper and suitable for framing. The cost of about 15 cents each is minimal for the goodwill and personal satisfaction attained. Trick—when known, I preprint certificates with the names of promoters, VIP’s and special guests. [see issue #23 of the *Carousel Organ*, “Organ Grinder Certificates”—Ed]



Figure 9. Get an animal—exemplified!

Tip—get a monkey, bird, anything (**Figure 9**). The perennial question, where’s the monkey? Either get one or develop a snappy answer. I have the wonderful and expensive JA-FI Marionetten (**Figure 10**) monkey from Germany



Figure 10. JA-FI Marionetten on the author’s organ.

(about \$3,000). His name is Franco and he has been worth every Deutsch Mark spent. I also purchased a mechanical parrot last fall from Wal-Mart (about \$70, www.hasbro.com/furreal/). There are all kinds of critters and animations out there that can enhance your routine (**Figures 11, 12 & 13**). Whatever critter you choose, make sure it is the utmost in quality. Many grinders are successful with hand puppets operated by an assistant. Look around, ask around, do some research, and get something. Trick—I frequently allow visitors to assist me with the monkey. He is equipped with nine separate functions to include winking and tipping of the hat.



Figure 11. A tag team routine with marionettes—Thun, Switzerland.

Tip—start early, finish late. This should be a blinding flash of the obvious, but still seems to challenge some folks primarily due to poor planning. There are no degrees of lateness—late is late—once again, the first impression is the only impression. Tricks—I always arrive at least one hour early. This allows me to find a place to park, locate the person in charge, set-up in a leisurely manner and simply relax. Never stop early without guidance from management—use common



Figure 12. A clever accompaniment with registered trash can, again in Thun, Switzerland (video on author's web site).



Figure 13. An animated turntable with a Bruns trumpet organ in Thun, Switzerland (video on author's web site).

sense here—do not disappear. I generally start my last roll right at completion time, which means I entertain a few minutes extra. Finally, if the crowd is lively, you've got energy and no place really important to go, keep on cranking!

Hopefully these tips and tricks will enhance your routine. I recommend you observe as many professionals within the hobby as possible. There are some really entertaining folks out there who will gladly share their individual tips and tricks. I have posted some images, videos and useful files to supplement this edition on my web site at www.gordiedavidson.com. Thank you for reading this—I welcome feedback and ideas for future COAA Journals.

Next Issue: *Grinding for Success - Marketing, Booking and Other Issues*

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7th COAA Rally (Marietta, Ohio) planned for 2008

The seventh COAA rally for 2008 is actually the second rally which will occur on June 14th & 15th in Marietta, Ohio. This promises to be a great rally as the rally organizer, Sylvia Caporale, has had many successful rallies in Marietta. Information will be forthcoming by separate mail but you may contact Sylvia now at 740-373-4262