

## **Lincoln Center In July**

**Frederick Ross observed clouds of smoke and ash mixed with cinders swelling over the regiments of skyscrapers on Eighth Avenue, a mile away to the south .The debris had settled into lean pillows over their naked floors, their rusted girders reflecting the occasional dull flicker coming from the flames.**

**The humidity was oppressive beyond the limit of nature's rights over mankind. The board of flashing lights on the façade of the Prudential Building across the street monitored the temperature: At 2:30 it registered 98 degrees, Fahrenheit; in the next half hour it rose to 100°; by 4 PM it would register 104°.**

Indifferent to this dreadful parameter, Frederick Ross stood in the shadow cast by the Manufacturer's Hanover Trust Bank at 72<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway and, numbed by stoic conditioning, played the violin. Ross was in his late 20's, tall, thin and nervous, dressed in jeans and a blue-green striped tee shirt. A shock of dark hair fell over his brow at awkward moments and had to be pushed back. A fair violinist, at best: leaving the New England Conservatory after two years only added to his difficulties. Musical ambition remained undiminished; the decisive factor.

The collapsible music stand to his right held compositions by Bach, Vivaldi and Fritz Kreisler. In his violin case, open on the sidewalk before him, lay all the spare change cast by the public since noon.

The lid of the case, fashioned from some leather-like copper substance, had been decorated in acrylics around its central bulge with a delicate fringe of flowers and leaves – the gift of a friend, a co-worker at Patelson's, the music store at 56th St and 7th Avenue that is now defunct. Ross worked there two days per week. The graceful suggestion of lingering embellishment evoked nostalgia and elegance, encouraging the fantasy that both violin and case had been rescued from some baroque villa, surrounded by vistas of azure sky and labyrinthine vineyards, in full view of the waters of the Mediterranean.

Ross may have been benighted, possibly deluded, certainly obstinate, to imagine that his devotion to the world's finest music was being transmitted to the handfuls of heat-stunned pedestrians who, briefly, entered his performance space. Few were inclined to be

generous, even in fair weather. The squadrons of office workers staggering wretchedly through tidal waves of heat to return to their (at least!) “respectable” jobs in air-conditioned offices, were astonished to encounter this scowling street musician in rolled-up shirt sleeves, his burnished face covered with a lather of sweat, operating, so it would seem, on blind energy alone! Encouragement or appreciation were hardly to be expected: public reactions veered rather in the direction of fear. What could possibly motivate this cheerless young man to labor with such ferocity out on this sidewalk Inferno?

His dynamism did not inspire others, it only depressed them. He could not have been making more than \$3.00 an hour. Quarters dropped into his case with the stinginess of beads of moisture. Nervy types bent over the violin case, counted the coins, then gyrated down the street,

laughing. Unlike the vendors of lemonade or hot-dogs, nothing that Frederick Ross offered had to be paid for.

One can testify, however, that his efforts did not go entirely unrecognized. Briefly lifting his transient gaze from the score of the E-major violin concerto of the music-master of Leipzig, the eminent Bach, Ross took in a picturesque group of faces all turned in his direction. Across the traffic heaving along Broadway in both directions they beamed unfeigned admiration.

Four sweating jackhammer operators naked from the waist up, their bodies slicked with black streaks of tar and mud, had silenced their machines in a unanimous acknowledgement of kinship with the shy, bespectacled fellow proletarian on the opposite sidewalk . Like them, he too despised the limitations of the flesh. No words were needed to

**communicate their consensual acknowledgement: Frederick Ross**

**belonged to the fraternity of real men!**

**Fire engines, their message alarmed and shrill, hurtled by in spiked intervals. Soon afterwards others, bleating like scared goats, followed them down Columbus Avenue. Then several trucks raced uptown, speeding past him before turning a large traffic island to continue back down on the other side of Broadway. Ross surrendered. Even he could no longer withstand the combined pressure of sweltering heat, public indifference, economic disaster and mayhem. When he stopped at 4 o'clock his earnings for the afternoon amounted to \$10. A bit of pocket change to take back to the Lower East Side, with enough for a sandwich and soda at the counter of the restaurant of the Ansonia Hotel located close by.**

**Frederick Ross laid the violin carefully in its case; over it he draped a green, flower-print shawl and snapped the locks. Pedestrians glanced down at him, sideways, with contempt. They despised him for giving up. They had despised him for continuing. He was an easy victim, a foil for the ambient hostility and broiling tempers of the equatorial day.**

**Ross rested up in the Ansonia's ground floor restaurant until 4:30.**

**When he stepped back onto the street a welcoming breeze, tantalizing rather than refreshing, heralded the evening. He'd decided to take a leisurely stroll down Broadway, towards its confluence with Columbus Avenue at Lincoln Center.**

**New York City mythology would have us believe that persons of superior cultivation circulate through this area, loosely designated Lincoln Square by contractors and realtors. Direct experience had made**

**Ross skeptical. Still, it might be worth his while to play there for a few hours, after the streets cooled off and provided the fire on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue had been brought under control. At 66<sup>th</sup> and Broadway he paused to sit down on one of neighboring stone benches placed near the entrance to Alice Tully Hall.**

**Filling up this corner of the street one finds metal poles rooted in the sidewalks, supporting a thicket of billboards holding numerous concert announcements. Standing up Ross walked about and read them with the obsessiveness unique to the true music fanatic. Although he affected to despise Lincoln Center, and the adjacent Julliard School of Music, as embodiments of the malevolent forces in the musical establishment blocking his pursuit of a normal musical career, the publicity for famous concert artists was an inexhaustible source of**



**excitement for him. Over the year, in season and out, Ross attended as many concerts as possible: street-wise musicians in the City have little trouble obtaining cheap, even free tickets to a wide range of musical events.**

**Continuing onto the next block, Frederick Ross arrived at the esplanades and surrounding buildings of Lincoln Center Plaza. Stopping by the great fountain before the Metropolitan Opera House, he received further confirmation of his fear that the fire was not going to die down for some time. A suspension of cinders defiled the spectrum of the waning day. Billows of smoke climbed up behind the Lincoln Center Bandshell, roughly in the vicinity of the Roosevelt Hospital, one block downtown to the west.**

**“They’re the ones with the real problems”, Ross told himself, taking a traditional comfort in the relativity of all catastrophe.**

**Sudden dizziness hit him with the immediacy of a shock-wave. It was imperative that he seek relief, immediately, from the intense humidity. The closest establishment with air-conditioning was the coffee shop of the Empire Hotel, half a block away at 64<sup>th</sup> and Broadway.**

**Ross's demoralization was complete. He had to be a fool, he told himself, to continue to do battle with the City for a handful of pennies. He’d traveled uptown in the early afternoon hoping to raise enough money for a rare lesson with a gifted violin teacher, a genial 72- year old woman, and a refugee from Vienna. By 4 that afternoon he'd earned barely enough to take a subway back to the Lower East Side and pick up a few groceries.**

**Frederick Ross passed through the pulchritude of the hotel lobby, then into a room decorated with the props of a typical small town bar and grill. Against the mirror behind the saddle-soaped counter stood liquors bottled in moon-rock canisters. Formica paneling and screens reflected silver glitter. Wrought- iron chandeliers supported electric candles that dispersed a dull, not quite sinister illumination; beneath them lay a floor tessellated by hexagonal ceramic tiles resembling cracking mud flats.**

**From there he descended via a small staircase into the hotel's restaurant-cafe and took up a seat at the coffee counter. The room was dark, cool , even chilly: exactly what he needed, although it was only a matter of time before he would be getting up to leave; the atmosphere of the Empire Hotel restaurant quickly became oppressive.**

**Slaughterhouse red leather upholstery covered the bench seats in rows of narrow, confining booths. A raised peristyle in the foreground of the cafe terrace lay prone, gripped in the embrace of a great picture window. The window ruined the terrace: it gave one the odd sensation of being trapped on a wide-angled movie screen. Clients who moved onto the terrace, lured by the enchantment of savoring a hand-me-down European charm, ended up paying royally for an ambiance lacking even the familiar satisfactions of old New York.**

**The waiters knew Ross and liked him. One of them slid him a free ginger ale. Later he came back and counseled him not to lose heart: a dance concert at the New York State Theater was scheduled to let out at**

**6. Only tourists went to dance concerts in New York in the heat of summer. Lovers of the Fine Arts, for sure, and with money to burn!**

**Ross thanked him. He already felt better; despite his aversion to the setting, he ended up staying there for almost an hour. The coffee counter supported a clientele mixing Empire Hotel residents, musicians on tour, high-culture aficionados and snobs. Ross had learned that hanging around the restaurants in this area was useful for picking up tips about potluck music-related jobs.**

**Time passed quickly as he chatted with the waiters and the middle-aged gentleman on his right, a cellist who saw nothing odd or unusual about Ross's profession. The cellist did not have to tell him what he already knew: that he had the talent and the musicality, but not enough of the training, and none of the discipline for a full musical career.**

**Shortly before 6 PM Frederick Ross walked back out onto the street. From the moment he opened the door of the restaurant he found**

himself being carried as if through instinct across the traffic rushing along Broadway to the front of the ASCAP building. The ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) building façade stretches the full length of the east side of 65<sup>th</sup> Street. Like a 20-story battleship smokestack, its central core squats atop a prognathous marquee displaying the enchiselled initials A.S.C.A.P. A procession of coarse-grained unsurfaced pillars concentrated around the front entrance splits into chains marching away in both directions. Stationed behind and between the columns on both sides were the metal tables and chairs of expensive restaurants. In keeping with the predilection to commercial overkill that has made America renowned among nations, their names and decor proclaimed them as inflated caricatures of European prototypes.

To the right of the marquee stood *Fiorello's*. *Cleo's*, more cosmopolitan, more pricey, was located a short distance down the street to the left. Between *Cleo's* and the ASCAP building's entrance there used to be an unpretentious sandwich shop which did a brisk business from office workers on their lunch breaks.

The location in front of the sandwich shop was, basically, the only one in Lincoln Square that could be effectively utilized by a street performer. To stand in front of the Lincoln Center Plaza (or on the Plaza itself!) were out of the question. Although he could not hope to be welcome in front of *Fiorello's* or *Cleo's*, Ross the proprietor of the sandwich shop was actually encouraged him to play there! He found Ross's image, combined with his solid musical taste, good for business.

Coffee was always on the house; at least once a week, Ross found himself treated to sandwiches

Out of the doors of the New York State Theater came the audience from the dance concert. It fanned out in a doughy mass into Lincoln Center Plaza, descended its broad steps onto the sidewalk, then dispersed in the manifold directions prevailing at this complex intersection. A sizable percentage would cross Eighth Avenue, then traverse the traffic island to cross to the other side of Broadway. And Frederick Ross would be standing right there to serenade them as they wandered uptown.

His rejuvenated spirits translated themselves spontaneously into his playing, now more lyrical, electric, accurate. The wailings of fire engines had become more sporadic, the din of traffic in abeyance. Now



he could actually hear himself play! This resulted in the creation of a far more professional product than the tinny Bach he'd been reduced to grinding out at the height of the afternoon heat wave.

Ross opened up with the first movement of Mozart's 4th Violin Concerto, followed by the first movement of the 5th. The choice was enough to indicate that his own opinion of his playing did not exactly correspond to his real abilities: only virtuosos dare perform Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup> violin concerto in public. Still, with the swelling of the crowds Ross anticipated the prospect of making some real money.

Alas; Frederick Ross had yet to learn that his fate was not the sort that engenders millionaires. Anyone engaged in the pursuit of a craft on the streets of a big city can tell you about the deadly tightness of provincial tourists. Their numbers, combined with their remarkable

aptitude for getting rid of huge amounts of cash, conceal other less ingratiating traits. They descend on the commercial districts of the great metropolis harboring hosts of preconceptions about con men, hustlers and beggars. They also imagine themselves very clever in being able to detect them. For these minions the ambulant musician, the hawker of hand-made jewelry, the sidewalk chalk artist, even the hot-dog and pretzel vendors, are objects of suspicion. As with the contours of their stomachs, there is a mushrooming in their distribution around middle-age. Children and students will be attracted to street artists out of curiosity, while the elderly have their relative wisdom.

Frederick Ross was able to get in about twenty minutes of uninterrupted playing before being obliged to face the fact that he was being almost totally ignored. Sometimes, through the chaos of chatter

there arose the occasional insult, infrequent, yet no less hurtful for all

that:

*Get a job! Go back to school! You're hurting my ears! ;Squeak!*

*Squeak! ; Ouch! ; Stop! ....*

Insults had almost no effect on him. Even a hostile response was better than nothing; in them he acknowledged a genuine clash of values, even a vicarious recognition. It was the united wave fronts rolling past him manifesting the solidarity of a stolid indifference that provoked an impotent rage, insupportable fury and manacled despair.

Now he understood that all things conveying any real insight into the workings of the city's beating heart would be brutally rejected and scorned. Brought together by the dream of experiencing the great metropolis, this debris of provincial America swirled its ignorance down

**the street. They moved in unison, these congregations of slack bodies, sour dispositions self-righteous with mediocrity, impelled by some mindless shuffling momentum towards the limitless horizon.**

**Now the restaurant terraces were filling up. Distributed among their customers, like wriggling splotches of color in a dingy sea, Frederick Ross could identify the faces of music lovers, people who acknowledged the value of his work. Some of them smiled at him in such a way as to indicate that they knew he was playing Mozart; though it quickly became obvious that these far more sophisticated audiences were as little disposed to part with their dimes and quarters as the unwashed multitudes, for whom he might just as well have been serving up meaningless noise.**

*Frederick Ross gripped his violin by its neck and hurled it through the air!!*

**It was a petulant impulse, beyond his control, like that of the movie hero who slaps the cad that insults his girl-friend; or the pianist who bangs shut the piano lid and walks off stage in protest; or, perhaps, the slamming down of the telephone receiver at the conclusion of a fruitless discussion. As Frederick Ross had not made the decision to initiate it, there had been no time for Frederick Ross to inhibit or restrain its execution.**

**Hard stares filled with shock and pain turned in his direction. Empty faces gaped wide, as intellects unused to reflection tried to make sense of this astonishing deed. Had they all just witnessed the spectacle of some crude lout trying to wreck a priceless musical instrument?**

*... Was that a violin? A viola? What was that thing he'd been playing on anyway ?...*

*...He's got to be one of those local characters! That's how bad things have gotten in our own time. See how our glorious classical music is treated like trash!...*

*...If you ask me, it's worse even than that: I would classify him as a public menace ! There's a movement going the rounds these days, against the Sanctity of Art! : ...John Cage? ...Dada?... Deconstructionism ? ... I don't know what they call it, it's just uncivilized, that's what it is! What nerve! Someone ought to give him a good talking-too...*

*...He's completely ruined the, how shall I put it, the..uh.. 'bouquet' of our delicious afternoon at the ballet! ...*

*...Hey, we're paying out six dollars for our goblets of wine, twenty dollars for the entrees, four dollars for each bowl of garden salad; hardly chicken feed at 1976 prices!...*

*...You can buy a new car for the cost of some of those violins! But really, when you come down to it, it's the whole idea of the thing! If you ask me, he's out to destroy Western Civilization! Somebody should go for a policeman! I'd do it myself, were it not that my Florentine pasta would get cold.....*

**No one passed Frederick Ross a quarter. No one offered him a sip of wine, or a glass of water. No one told him of a friend connected with a musical group or small orchestra, or of a reception or wedding that might have work for him. In fact no one so much as spoke to him. Within the**

vapid faces that stocked the terraces on both sides, hostility and fear were focused on him and him alone.

The violin had flipped in mid-air, landing belly-downwards. Its' fall had been broken by the arch of the bridge. The A-string had snapped, otherwise it was undamaged. Those cheap factory instruments can be remarkably tough. Ross never brought his real instrument out onto the street.

He picked it up gently and, very carefully, wrapped it in its green flower-printed shawl. Then he placed it, lovingly, correctly, in its case. The tension of the horsehair on the bow was slackened, before inserting it between the clasps on the velvet upholstery inside the lid. The locks were snapped in place. The music stand was folded, then dropped into



his briefcase. His music was also placed there, alongside the pages of a copying assignment due in a few days.

To the couple sitting close by, at a table to his left, still staring at him with suspicion, yet into whose faces a predisposition for drowsiness had already begun to creep, he shook his fist and screamed:

*"You'd let a man starve but you're outraged when he damages a wooden box!!"*

They averted their eyes, from embarrassment. Who knows: perhaps from honest shame?

Frederick Ross collected his gear stiffened his body walked self-conscious exhausted yet proud five blocks in the direction of the subway entrance at Columbus Circle. He needed to return home quickly to wash

**up and prepare for a lesson he'd arranged to give later that night.**

**Provided the student kept the appointment.**

**Across the street, on an electric bulletin board fastened onto the wall of the Empire Hotel, the temperature display board announced its grim index: 94 degrees Fahrenheit.**

**Somewhere along Tenth Avenue, the clang of a fire truck .**