

Metro musician
Farris Smith
plies his trade



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Rhythms of the Underground

Musicians in the metro must audition for a coveted license to perform – and earn a living

by Meredith Mullins

To those who pause to listen, the metro offers some of the best concerts in Paris. Throughout its web of 380 stations, talented artists take the neon-lit stage. The musicians are diverse – from the aria-singing “diva du métro” to the puppet rocker who plays a mean mini-guitar, to the jazz bassman who improvises words and music to awaken passing smiles. Music is their life – and their livelihood. They may have gigs elsewhere, but the metro tunnels are a place to be seen, and to make money (from 20€ to 100€ an hour).

Quality and diversity

The music in the tunnels is consistently of high caliber because the Paris transit system (RATP) requires the musicians to pass an audition. Antoine Naso, RATP Artistic Director, started “le casting” 12 years ago to ensure the quality, originality and diversity of music. More than 1,000 musicians compete twice a year for one of the coveted 20€ badges (330 in 2009) that allow an artist to

play in the metro corridors for six months.

There are of course unlicensed musicians who move quickly in and out of metro cars, but these musicians are not legal, since the RATP believes its customers should not be a captive audience. Thus the regulations were born – pass an audition and play only in the corridors.

The audition process is simple. Musicians fill out an application and the RATP’s *Espace Métro Accords* schedules auditions during a six-week period in the spring and fall. RATP volunteers serve as jury members, rating the performer’s two pieces on technical quality and presentation.

The selected musicians come from all over the world and all musical genres. About half are from France; 52% are men and 48% are women; 40% are soloists, 40% duos or

trios, and 20% groups. All are dedicated musicians.

Music is about freedom

Naso believes part of his job is to support young musicians. “It is harder and harder to make it in the music world,” he says. “But you can see that these musicians are passionate about defending their music. They really want to make it. They stand up for themselves.”

Most metro musicians keep their badges for only a year, but 30 musicians have been licensed since the beginning of the audition process. Belgian Jean-Pierre Lignian (double bass) is one of these veterans. As a classically trained musician, he could easily play in a symphony orchestra. But for him, music is about freedom – to play what he wants, when he wants and where he wants. Even in the windy Franklin D. Roosevelt station tunnel, he stays

warm through the sheer passion of his playing.

American bassist Farris Smith (a three-year veteran) plays at Châtelet, an underground maze where eight metro and RER lines converge. “Maybe 5,000 to 10,000 people pass by me each day,” Farris explains. “You have just 10 seconds to grab their attention.” Farris uses those seconds wisely. He dresses well for that “first impression” and uses the power of his resonant voice to reach down the corridor and around several corners.

French singer Béatrice François-Diouf, who performs in the Nation station, also likes the connection with her audience. “It’s rewarding when someone shouts ‘bravo’ or feels an unexpected emotion. One man walks by every day. He never stops to talk, but he always gives me money.”

Béatrice admits it can be difficult to play alone in the metro. The young people in groups can be rude, but she takes it all in stride. “Music is my life ... a way of being.” ■

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