

Condensed from New York Times

## PIED PIPER OF SEVENTH AVENUE

It is rush hour in a New York City subway station. I careen through the closing doors of a graffiti-laden car to join the fluorescent pallor of 40 fellow robots. Their faces hidden behind newspapers, they seem to plead only for anonymity. "Please don't bother us," they proclaim. "We're not really here."

I spot a space miraculously vacant, plop down and open my newspaper. My eye momentarily strays to the gentleman on my right. Now I know why the seat was empty: I am installed beside a certifiable weirdo. Physically he is unassuming—a portly, middle-aged man sporting an open shirt that shouldn't be and

JAMES CONNER

*He was an artist, a virtuoso! For a brief moment, his magic transformed us all*



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THE READER'S DIGEST

baggy pants long overdue for laundering. His garb is not the threat, though; it's what he's *doing*. He is grasping what appears to be an ordinary gray typewriter case. Painstakingly, he places it between his knees, balancing this apparent treasure with great deliberation. Finally satisfied as to the perfection of its placement, he pulls out an aging pair of drumsticks and gets to work.

Eyes focused on an unseen maestro, he plays that typewriter case with an enthusiasm rarely reserved for portable luggage. My initial reaction is to flee. (I long ago learned that it is easier to read about eccentricity than to sit next to it.) Besides, how dare he interrupt my gloom? Yet he holds me by his commitment and wins me by his style.

Not a student of percussion, but a confirmed pencil-thumper since birth, I quickly realize that he is good. Not just interestingly incongruous, but *good*. Rhythms fly. Tempos alter abruptly. Those thin sticks mercilessly flail that unassuming Samsonite. A stick is dropped. He picks it up, scrupulously searches for a structural defect. Finding none, he resumes the concert unperturbed.

What showmanship! A poor man's Liberace, with taste. Pound-

ing away furiously, eyes closed, he sends first one stick and then the other high above his head. Surely this time he has overreached himself. No, he retrieves them both with indolent ease, never missing a beat.

He is an artist, never questioning his gift, never acknowledging the presence of his captive audience. He solicits no money and receives none. This is understandable. Would you tip Leonard Bernstein?

Finally, I notice my fellow passengers. Robots redeemed! I see about me a carful of radiant, beaming human beings. Smiles on New Yorkers such as I've never known. Teeth for miles. *Grim!* Feet tapping, heads keeping time, we have become a community if only for a few stops.

Our nameless drummer has accomplished this transformation in less than five minutes. At 72nd Street he quietly gathers his possessions and departs, accepting my meager accolade with a dignified nod.

Eccentric? Crazy? A frustrated genius too poor to buy a drum? I don't know. I prefer to remember him as the Pied Piper of Seventh Avenue.

And my smile lasted all the way to 86th Street.

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### Valuable Lesson

AN 11-YEAR-OLD boy holidaying in Switzerland wrote the following to his mother in London: "Yesterday the instructor took eight of us to the slopes to teach us skiing. I was not very good at it, and so I broke a leg. Thank goodness it wasn't one of mine."

—*The Daily Telegraph*, London