

Sound from Street Musicians

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Abstract

This research aimed to make a survey on street musicians in town communities in terms of their place of work, general conditions, income, method of work, problems and suggestions which reflect the voice of street musicians themselves towards Thai society. The researchers collected information from 20 street musicians (each person representing one band, duo or soloist) who work in the large communities in Bangkok and its suburbs such as Samut Prakarn, Nonthaburi, and Pratum Thani. The result of this research has shown that working as a street musician in Thailand was not a welcomed occupation. There is no government support, except only small, short-term grants available for some entertainment in public. The working conditions of street musicians were not good. The performers' skill needs to be developed. There were differences in income which depended on the types of performance. The suggestion of this research was that people in the urban community including government and private organizations could help by providing street musicians not only with funding but places to perform as well as training in order to encourage them to improve their appearance and musical skill. This could help develop the occupation of street musician in Thailand and lead to positive changes in pedestrian attitudes towards streets musicians.

Introduction

Sound is one of the external factors that human can receive from the hearing process. It is what every person has to take in unavoidably. Sound enters human's ears from the first second he/she wakes up and it sends a person to sleep at night. A day begins with the sound of the alarm clock, then comes the sound of television or people's conversations. When one walks in the street, the closer one is to the town, the more sound turns to be pollution to the ears. This starts from the sound of car engines, to people's shouts while walking on the pavement, to the sound of music intended to encourage customers to buy products in the stores.

Amidst people's rush and the confusion of the sounds that humans produce in places where a lot of people meet such as markets, super stores, and crowded bus stops, one sometimes hears some kind of beautifully made sound from street musicians. These musicians hope that passers by will be able to hear the beautiful sound and that they will be kind enough to donate some money so they can support themselves for another day. These people are called minstrels. In Thailand, they are similar to buskers in the West.

In the old days, there were street musicians in every province throughout Thailand. In some provinces, street musicians might gather together to form groups. Many of them inherited the work from their ancestors. It is noted that being a street musician has been the way of life lead by some groups of people in certain localities for a long time. Talented street musicians were popular and honored by local people as good musicians despite their working in the streets and they would receive money from different households. In the past, street musicians would sing folk songs while playing Thai classical music like a famous group of street musicians in Sawan Kalok District, Sukhothai Province called “Khun Kang Duey Kai”. This group was lead by Khun Kang who was known, 70 years ago, throughout Sawan Kalok as the local music master. Even though he passed away, there are still people who admire him and continue his method of playing music which is to play a pair of “Grub” in each hand and use the feet to play “Ching” while singing folk songs. They have also made this method known in many countries.

Today, lives of street musicians have changed tremendously because of the influence of Western culture. There are few street musicians who play Thai musical instruments or sing Thai classical songs like in the old days. Most street musicians play Western instruments and sing modern songs. They also tend to perform in crowded places in large cities that have high levels of noise pollution which make it impossible for passers by to fully admire the music. It is also difficult for people to stop and listen in these places, as they are often crowded pavements where people walk in a rush to escape from the traffic jams. An example of this kind of street musician can be found in crowded business areas in Bangkok and the suburbs.

Nowadays, street musicians are not as accepted as street musicians in the past. This is because of the changed social and economic condition. Street musicians tend to be looked down upon as beggars rather than being praised like street musicians in the past. Apart from not being welcomed by the society, it is also obvious that the government has neither promoted nor given any chances to them. This is different from governments in other countries which give street musicians opportunity to work honorably not only drawing up regulations for them to work legally but also supporting street musicians with tools such as amplifiers, arranged legal performance places, and courses so that they can work efficiently. Some schools encourage students to experience the way of life of street musicians. Some Universities arrange activities so that students can try working as street musicians. Later on many students choose this job as a part-time hobby to earn extra money for school fees.

Example of Regulations for street performer or so called 'busker' in other countries:

S i n g a p o r e B u s k i n g r e g u l a t i o n

The Singapore Theatre Guide © 1997 - 2000 Khoo Ee Hoon

1. Buskers are now allowed to perform at pedestrian malls, public parks and other authorised public places, such as underground passes.

2. Amplification using battery-operated amplifiers is allowed.

3. Audience participation is allowed for mime, magic shows and circus acts, such as acrobatics.

4. Busking hours are extended by an hour - from 10am to 11pm - at authorised locations.

5. Buskers with experience in the performing acts are generally not required to audition.

6. They can donate any amount of their earning to arts groups or to charity after offsetting their expenses.
7. The busking scheme is extended to foreigners with a work permit or an employment pass, and who are members of local arts groups. They, too, have to make donations from their takings to arts groups or to charity.
8. The standard busking fee is \$10 per month instead of the previous \$5 a day per location.
9. Group licenses are issued to allow members of arts groups to perform, so they do not have to apply individually.

Vancouver (Canada) Busking Regulation

General Information

Although busking can be a positive addition to city streetscapes, loud and/or repetitive performances can be disruptive to people living and working in the area. In order to ensure your performance remains a pleasant experience for everyone, the following guidelines must be followed. Your cooperation in this matter is greatly appreciated. Please note: These guidelines do not pertain to Granville Island (604-683-0846) and Skytrain Stations (Bill Knight 604-453-4609). For information on busking in city parks, please call 604-257-8400.

1. *You may not begin your performance in a block face where 2 others are already performing. (The exception to this is Robson street, west of Burrard, where a maximum of 4 performers per block face is acceptable.) You must also be a minimum of 10 m (40') away from any street vendor or another Busker.*
2. *You may obtain a permit to use a battery-operated amplifier by attending an information session where concerns and conditions will be explained to you and by agreeing in writing to comply with the relevant guidelines.*
3. *Your performance must be limited to less than 60 minutes at any one location. After 60 minutes you must move to a new location at least one block away.*
4. *You are responsible for ensuring that doorways, display windows and pedestrians are not blocked by your performance or your audience.*
5. *You must comply with the City of Vancouver by-laws and cooperate immediately with the request of any member of the Police or Engineering Departments.*
6. *You must not in any way jeopardize the comfort or safety of others. Please respect the wishes of nearby residents and businesses.*
7. *The use of sharp or dangerous objects is prohibited (for example juggling knives, chain saws or flaming objects is not permitted).*
8. *Musicians are permitted to sell recordings of their original work during their performance without a Street Vending Permit. No other sales are permitted.*
9. *Portrait artists may use one easel and two small folding chairs. They may display up to three pieces of their art as well as a working drawing.*

The above two examples show that being a street musician in both countries is acceptable and legal. Some regulations support them by allowing them to generate more income by selling their records on the streets. People along the pavements recognize street musicians as people who have musical talent.

Moreover, street musicians in many countries have set up street musician networks to develop their work and to give suggestions and advice to those who want to be part of the domain. They exchange opinions on the Internet and set up street musician 'rules' and guidelines to help people of this profession so that they behave properly when working abroad. They go in turn to different countries where opportunity is given to street musicians as mentioned.

Examples of street musician guidelines found from internet are as follows:

8 Rules of the Road:

*1. **Everyone should carry his/her own stuff.** If you can't carry it for a five mile trek, then you should not bring it. (See - What to Pack - I've given you a complete and comprehensive list of what to bring with you. Unless you have special circumstances, those items listed are all that you need to have a successful tour.)*

*2. **Everyone should pay for himself/herself at all times.** Its too confusing to figure out whose turn it is to buy, so don't. Split the costs of all food, housing, travel, beer, etc. right down to the cost of tolls and the shared newspaper. Elect someone as treasurer who will keep a running tally on expenses, and who hopefully has a good grasp of long-division. Having an "up-front" conversation about finances always improves your chances of having a successful tour. Don't leave anything out. Everyone should be able to speak openly about their concerns regarding finances or any other matter.*

*3. **Share responsibilities** such as map reading, making reservations, changing money, getting train tickets, getting your local "busking" pass, etc. Some of us are naturally more eager to take charge while others may be inclined to follow the desires of the group. It is true that while you'll see many different and cool cities, these places can be a bit intimidating if you don't know the language and/or have no experienced guide with you who can show you around. And every city is, indeed, different - complete with its own systems and customs. However, we have found that much of the real experience and fun of traveling abroad comes by fully participating in those routines of daily life i.e. changing money, getting a room for the night, ordering tickets, figuring out what bus or train to take, and general city orientation, etc. The more you do it, the better you'll get at it. So don't shy away from taking your part in tour responsibilities. You'll be surprised just how "less foreign" and intimidated you'll feel once you've played a few gigs in two or three towns.*

*4. **I strongly suggest that each person attempt to speak the local tongue, even if sparsely.** While most Europeans have a decent grasp of English, as a performer, you don't want to come across as an arrogant American (a popular misconception among many Europeans) who expects everyone else to bow to his perceived ignorance of languages. Any polite attempt at speaking a few local phrases will go a long, long way towards warming up the crowd to you and your music as well as adding a few Euros to your hat. (See - 100 Words & Phrases To Get You*

Going for a brief listing of useful phrases and information.) By the way, speaking English loudly does NOT constitute the speaking of a foreign language.

5. If anyone is separated from the group for less than a day, then return to the hotel/hostel to re-group. If one is separated for more than one day, then be sure to have a mutual contact phone number/person in the U.S. who can serve to shuttle messages between you.

6. Each of you will have different interests, energy, appetites, etc., so it's usually a good thing to **allow for the splitting up of the group** for an afternoon every few days. You don't want to be at each other's throats as to what to do or where to play or eat. Most importantly, don't take anything too "personally" that may be uttered when scaling the steps of your nineteenth museum or castle.

7. **Make a real effort to practice your music or craft** for at least two hours each morning (but don't wake up the neighbors!). You will be tempted to go, go, go all day to see as many museums, galleries, churches, parks, and villages that you can. This tendency will unfortunately have a bearing on your energy level when it comes time to perform. So, if you're going to Europe to sightsee, then do that. But if you're going to Europe to perform, then it is imperative that you save time each day to practice and to be energized to perform. Your body and your audience will appreciate your dedication.

8. **Eat as healthfully as you can** (i.e. try not to over-indulge on French Roast coffee, Swiss Chocolates, German Beer, or Italian Pasta). Your stomach and friends will thank you for it. Try to eat a decent amount of veggies and fruits. These help to maintain your digestive equilibrium. When abroad, most travelers commonly complain of digestive problems, even when eating fairly decent foods. You can eat healthfully without going broke by shopping at the markets where the locals shop and by buying fruits and veggies, meats and other items that can be beneficial to maintaining your stamina and overall happiness. <http://www.gigeurope.com/tour_info_8_rules.htm>

R e s e a r c h C o n t e n t

This research aims to conduct a survey of street musicians in town communities in terms of places of work, general conditions, income, methods of work, problems, and suggestions which reflects the voice of street musicians themselves towards Thai society. The researchers collected the information from 20 street musicians (each person representing one band, duo or soloist) who work in the large communities in Bangkok and its suburbs such as Samut Prakarn, Nonthaburi, and Pratum Thani.

Street Musicians: ways of living

Street musicians are spread across many areas in Bangkok. The places that they are most often found are those where many people gather, for example, large bus stops, pedestrian overpasses, in front of department stores, and restaurants at night. Street musicians that form bands normally gather at crowded places such as markets and bus stops where many bus lines meet. As for street musicians who work

individually, they often sit on or near pedestrian over passes where many people pass by. Moreover, there are also some street musicians who move around to different places such as restaurants, in front of cinemas, and department stores. They change from one place to another in one day, for example, In Dao Kanong, a group of street musicians have different times of work and they go to work by hiring a tuk-tuk, (a three-wheel vehicle) a small bus, or a motorcycle to pick them up and drop them off at various places. This means that this group of street musicians prepare themselves very well. Each day, street musicians in Bangkok are often found in Tha Prachan, Sunday Market, Siam Square, Water Gate, Seacon Square, The Victory Monument, Tha Nam Nonthaburi, Prakanong Market, Samrong bus stops, different markets in Bangkok and its suburbs.

Types of Bands and the Way of Playing Music

There are two types of street musicians: ensemble and soloist. The bands are often found at the same places along the pavement nearby shopping areas such as markets and department stores as well as at bus terminals and crowded areas in Bangkok and the surrounding areas. There are bands that have all kinds of instruments and there are bands that have only 2 people: the organ player and the singer. There are also soloists who play organ or other instruments and sing by him/herself. The 2-people bands normally consist of a husband and a wife. Sometimes the wife is blind and the husband plays the instrument and leads the way while the wife sings. The type of street musicians which is found the most is soloist, both singing and playing an instrument by him/herself. Soloists are found where there is a crowd of people, for example, bus stops, pedestrian overpasses, shopping centers, food stalls on the streets in the afternoon and evening.

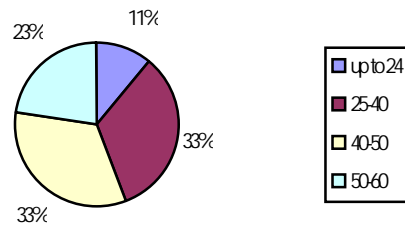


General Information of Urban Street Musicians

Domicile

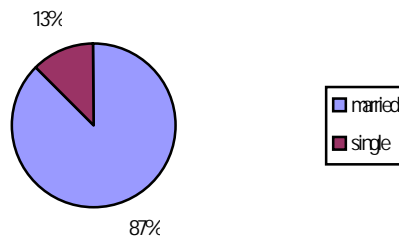
As discussed, urban street musicians spread all over the important areas of the town where there are many people. However, when the researchers made a survey on general information of 20 urban street musicians, it is found that the domicile of most street musicians are in other provinces such as Surin, Burirum, Srakaew, Konkaen, Chiangmai and in the suburbs such as Nonthaburi, Patum Thani, Saraburi, and Samut Prakarn, etc.

Age



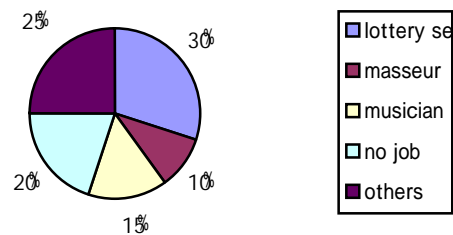
Within the 20 groups, it is found that most street musicians are aged from 25 to 60. Those that are 24 and under are smallest in number and those at the age of 50-60 are the second smallest in number.

Status



Over 80% of the street musicians are married and have a family to support. Those that are single are students or disabled people living together as a group.

Former occupation

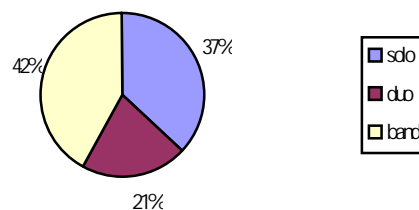


Within the 20 groups, it is found that the most common former occupation of the street musicians is lottery seller, followed by masseur and musician. 15% of the street musicians interviewed have never had a previous job. 10% have done different kinds of work such as banking and working in the office. The latter quit the former job because of the economic recession. Some of them quit their former jobs because of accidents which brought about disability, for example, blindness or lost arms and legs as the street musician used to be a soldier and stepped on a bomb.

It is notable that 80% of the street musicians in the sample group are visually challenged. 10% have lost their arms or legs or cannot stand normally. The other 10% are students or unemployed.

Working as a Street Musician

Ways of Performing

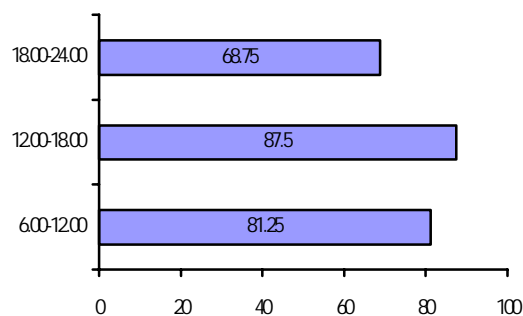


The research shows that 42% of the street musicians are working as bands. 21% work as duo and 37% work individually. From the interview, many individual street musicians have previously played in a band with their peers but the income per day is quite low and not stable because it has to be shared among the musicians in the band. So, they decided to work individually because they get better income and need not share the income with anyone.

Instruments Used

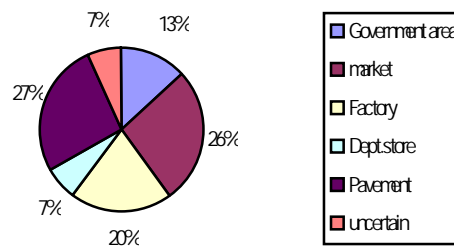
The instruments that most street musicians use are organs, lead guitars, bass guitars and drums. Some groups form small bands, having 2-3 people, a keyboard, drums, and a singer. Sometimes there is only a keyboard and a singer in a band. Individual street musicians normally have one instrument such as a flute, mouth organ, guitar, or a cassette with a recording of karaoke music to go with the singing. As for the visually challenged, it is found that the 2 musicians are often husband and wife, one is the blind singer and the other one leads the way and plays the instrument or carries a cassette player in front of the one who is blind. Students usually play guitars while singing and working at different places.

Performance Time



The research shows that street musicians have different performance time. Some groups of street musicians go out to work from 6.00-12.00. Some work from 12.00-18.00. Some like to work at night from 18.00-24.00. Most of them work at 12.00-18.00 because they can eat lunch at home and go back to eat their supper at home in the evening to economize their budget. Another reason for working at these hours is that people finish their work in the evening and go out to eat dinner or go shopping at the department stores. At this time, they are in less of a hurry and they may be more likely to consider donating some money than during the morning rush hour. Street musicians who work in the evening normally work where there are many people or change their places from one food stall to another.

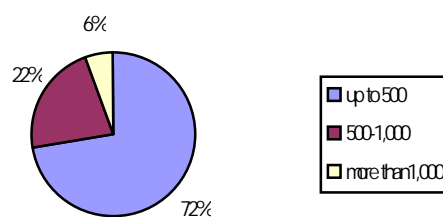
Places of Performance



Places where there are crowds of people attract the street musicians the most. The research found that most street musicians work at the markets and on the pavement. They are also found in public places such as factories, government offices and department stores in Bangkok and its suburbs. Individual musicians change places of work and do not stick to just one place like those in the bands.

From the interview, those in the bands prefer to stick to one place because it reduces the risk of being 'caught' and fined by the police. So, they like to stick to one place when they find the right spot. However, they have to pay some money to people "in uniform" who have influence so that they are not 'caught', a situation in which they would face greater loss as they would have to pay a fine and have their instruments taken away.

Income



The income of street musicians varies, depending on the place of performance, how hard they work as well as their ability to attract people's attention. Street musicians' income per day is at the highest average of 1,000 baht which is still considered little. Street musicians who earn higher income are those that work individually or those that are visually challenged and work with their brothers or sisters, or husbands and wives as a duo.

Street musicians who work as a team normally have low income. This is because of the higher number of musicians within the group so that they have to share the income with each other. They also have to pay instrument rental fee. Moreover,

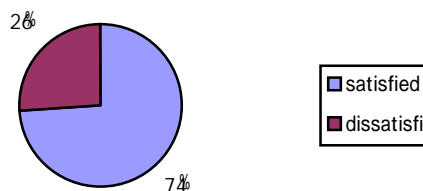
they have to hire a vehicle to carry their instruments. Bands that have their own instruments have more income than those that do not have their own instruments. Street band musicians have an average income of 250-300 baht or less per day. This is why there are so few street musicians nowadays.

From the interview with the Blind Association of Thailand, it is found that there have been more than 60 registered music bands run by blind people over the last seven years but now there are not more than 20 bands left. The interviewee said that the low income is the reason why there are fewer bands but more duo and individual musicians nowadays since they gain more income and need not invest so much in their instruments when they work in pairs or individually.

53% of the interviewed groups said that they earn enough income to support themselves and their families. However, the other 47% said that they have less income than expenses because they have to pay the rental fee for the house, the transportation fare and have to support many members in the family, all of which makes it too difficult for them to live without debt.

Relevant Information

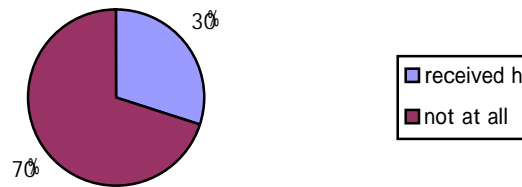
Satisfaction



74% of the surveyed groups are satisfied with working as street musicians. 26% said that they work as street musicians because there is no chance of any better job to do. Those who are not satisfied are all disabled and most of them are blind.

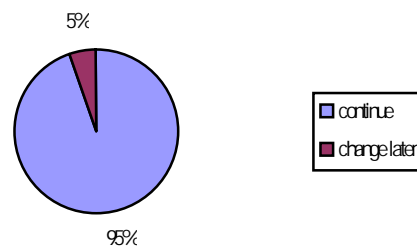
When asked about their feelings towards the passers by, they said that they think the passers by who stop to watch and listen to the performance feel sorry for them more than admiring their musical ability. Some passers by quickly give them the money so they cannot see the reaction of those passers by.

Help from Authorities



Relatively few street musicians have ever received any help from the authorities or concerned institutes, just 30% of those interviewed. 70% of the groups have never received any kind of help from the government or other authorities. For those who have received some sort of help, it is being hired to give a performance on a special occasion such as a meeting in a park or school. The Blind Association of Thailand helps them by giving registered bands work that they have received from the government or private sector. However, this does not happen very often.

Willingness to Continue Working as Street Musicians



From the interview, it is found that 95% of the street musicians are willing to carry on working as street musicians, giving different reasons. The groups that have enough income said that this is the best job for them as it is a legal job that does not need big investment and they prefer to continue working as musicians if they cannot find a better job. Those that do not have enough income still want to carry on working as street musicians because most of them are disabled and they do not think that they can find any other jobs that would bring them more money.

Expectations of Street Musicians

Although street musicians are looked down on by people of other professions in Thai society who think of them as minstrels or beggars, street musicians still hope that they can achieve a better position. This means that they are not satisfied that people look down on them. The 'better position' they hope for is to be professional musicians, working in nice restaurants so that they have stable income to ensure that they have enough money to cover their daily living costs. The important point is that they see working as musicians in restaurants as a more stable job than going around public places which brings them unstable income and puts them at risk of being caught and having to pay some money to the local influential people in uniform. This makes them feel hopeless.

This group of street musicians hope that the government can give them consistent support, not just help them occasionally, and so give them a better chance in society. This can be done by providing them with permanent places for performance such as in parks, in front of department stores or schools. Different government authorities and private organizations could help them at different times during the year so that they can be proud of their work and be encouraged to give good performances to society. If this was the case, they would not have to move around from one place to another, facing the pollution and the dangers they usually have to deal with when playing on the street. However, a few street musicians, around 25%, said that they just want to work for a while. Some of them only want some money to pay for their wives' and or parents' hospitalization costs. Some have to work because they have to pay their debt and some have to earn some money to get their land back. This group of street musicians intend to quit their work as street musicians in the future and they do not think that being street musicians can help them earn a lot of money. They do this job because the situation forces them to and will not carry on if they can solve their financial problems.

A group of street musicians unwillingly do this job because they do not have any better choice but if they could find a better job, they would stop being street musicians immediately because they think that it is not acceptable in Thai society.

One of the street musicians said that he is ashamed to mention the name of his university because he is afraid that the university's reputation will suffer if it is known that one of its students is working as a street musician. However, he has to do this job because he is sure that it can help him support himself through university years. He said that his income per day is very high. He moves from place to place, normally to places with crowds of people. He only sings and plays his guitar. He puts his guitar case in front of him while singing folk songs, 'songs for life', or sometimes popular songs. This attracts a lot of people and this helps him earn 300-1000 baht after a few hours of work. He said that he does not want any help. He is happy doing this job and will continue until he graduates. However, he will stop being a street musician after his graduation because he knows that this job is not seen as very honorable in the context of Thai society.

The researchers had the chance to interview a group of street musicians working in Bangkok and suburbs. They live together in Patum Village, Patum Thani. One of the interviewed groups consists of blind people like many of the others living nearby in this village. This group is a famous band. There are about 5-6 people in the band. They rent two houses. One houses four people and the other has two people living together. They gather to practice at the house of the head of the band who is also blind. The head said that groups of blind street musicians come to live in this

village. Most of them are from other provinces. They rent houses and some houses have up to 8 people. This is to reduce expenses.

Each group works at different times. Some work in the morning, some in the afternoon and some in the evening. They also work in different places. This is so as not to fight for working places among themselves. They pay the house rental fee at the rate of around 2500-3000 per month. Living together helps them cut some of their expenses. Many husbands and wives stay and share the rent with other families. The head of the band said that they have never received any help from the government. He feels that the government abandons them. Moreover, they are often beaten by the police, the 'influential people' in uniform. Blind individual musicians are at risk from criminals. The head and his members hope that the government will give them some chances, not money. They just wish to be able to do the job they love and be given chances to perform properly, so they would be happy and proud that they are Thai citizens and that they can do some good deeds in and contribute to society. They do not commit crimes, they are not addicted to drugs or gambling and they want to pursue a legal job.

Moreover, he said that they are always ready to improve their skill if the government sector, for example, The Blind People's Association of Thailand, offers them a course to further their knowledge. With help they can become professional musicians or develop their style of performance so that they can gain a better image. The government can also arrange some places for them to perform so that they can perform legally, not having to run away from the police or pay protection money for their performance-place. This would allow them to work happily without any worries and be proud that they play their role of good legal citizens. As long as the government allows food stalls on the streets by restructuring them, it should pay more attention to offer small suitable places where street musicians can perform so that they would become like flowers amidst the pollution in Bangkok and its suburbs.



Conclusion

This research has shown some of the problematic issues in the lives of street musicians both in central Bangkok and the suburbs who have to make their own living without any support from the government. The majority of the sample groups are handicapped in one form or another with the majority being blind.

The main reason for them becoming street musicians was the lack of other opportunities in society to work as regular citizens. Since there is very limited acceptance of handicapped people in Thai society, both the type and quantity of employment options available to them are limited. Therefore, working in their own special occupation as a street musician provides a way for them to earn some money without directly confronting the rejection from other more formal means of employment. Although the blind street musicians have become used to this way of earning a living, some would immediately quit if they found more formal employment.

It was found from this research that working as a street musician in Thailand is not a welcomed occupation. Though there is no government department that is in charge of this issue, there is a small, short-term grant available for helping better the situation of the street musicians.

The working conditions and the lives of the street musicians would be improved if the government and private sector paid attention to their plight by offering legal locations for them to perform and some professional music instruction to enhance their existing abilities. There would thus be no anxiety about societal rejection or the pain of embarrassment in the community. They would become part of their community, belonging to it, legitimate performers working to earn money rather than begging on the street. If the government could offer them musical training instead of throwing them a sum of money to hire them for a short period, they would be better musicians and be held in higher regard as they play in legitimate locations on the street. With the help of different government authorities and private organizations in society providing them places to perform during the year, they could be occupied throughout the year with their musical jobs that allow them a meaningful life day to day while providing an attractive aural diversion for the people walking the pavement with its polluted sound in the crowded urban areas. Then their presentation to society will be enhanced and their natural abilities polished so that they can be proud of their contribution of harmonious melodies over the contaminated sounds of the city. They would then become flowers of the street bringing the smell of music to the ears like the scent of flowers to the noses of those pedestrian in the Thai urban areas in the near future.