

Ray Jason, pioneering street juggler

Ray Jason had been juggling in San Francisco for seven years when Oral History staffer Lenny Limjoco interviewed and photographed him in April 1978. Born in 1946 in Chester, Pa., just outside Philadelphia, Jason went to college in North Carolina, served in the Navy in Vietnam, and moved to San Francisco in 1967, just as the city was exploding with political and social changes, including the Summer of Love and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. When he moved here, he practiced juggling for weeks, then hit the streets with both feet, making this his performing home base for decades and traveling the world in between. An avid sailor, he published "Tales of a Sea Gypsy" in 2001. Online postings two years ago put Jason in Key West, Fla., living on a sloop, juggling at Mallory Square and driving a cab, but the same year he also reportedly docked his sloop at the Errol Flynn Marina in Jamaica.

How would you describe your job and how you got started?

I'm a professional juggler — our city's first street juggler — and I started a whole new sort of trade for people. Since then, there've been quite a few others, some of 'em pretty good, some of 'em not so good. I was a relatively liberal-minded person in college, and word was traveling around that San Francisco was THE place to be. I heard people were more creative out here, that there was more freedom in terms of personal expression and that it was an absolutely beautiful city. So I hitchhiked out here and observed for myself that it was definitely better than where I was.

When I got here, there were no jugglers performing on the streets, and now I know of at least seven other acts working on the streets here. Proving that I could make a living as a juggler demonstrated to others that they could do it, too.

I learned to juggle when I was 13 or 14 but it was nothing more than a hobby then. It took a while to develop my skills. I wasn't too extraordinary when I started here, but I gradually got better and kept my standard of living low. Today, I make a tolerable amount of money and can live in modest comfort. If you want to make good money as a performer, you need something like Hollywood, New York or Las Vegas, but you're sure not going to make it in the streets. I perform in New York but I'd never move there. This city is starting to have some problems, too, but it's still really magical. I mean, just the fact that I can survive as a juggler for seven years certainly indicates what an extraordinary place this is.

Can you relate some of your experiences as a street artist?

Getting started, I lived in a lot of places in the city, in my truck for quite a while and in poorer sections of North Beach and the Tenderloin. When you're a juggler, you take what you can get. I play a lot of street fairs with no problems, but I've been arrested on Union Street three times — for blocking the sidewalk, which I never did but the audiences did, and begging and being a public nuisance, all ridiculous charges. The D.A. threw 'em out and got angry at the police because it just meant that I got lots of press and would have bigger crowds next time.

Another problem is that you always have injuries if you're juggling hatchets, machetes and torches (Jason later added bowling balls). I lopped off the tip of a finger on occasion and burned myself a lot.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Ray Jason, delighting his audience, juggles fire while riding a unicycle in front of a crowd on Union Street in 1978.

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I've had some interesting experiences juggling here. One night somebody ripped off my hat, which was full of money from three shows — it had a good pot in it. I picked up one of the hatchets I'd been juggling and chased the guy down the street. When he saw the hatchet, he dropped the hat and ran for it. Then, when I got back, the audience thought it had been part of the show. They thought it was terrific.

You seem to be a fixture on Union Street. Do you like it here?

I think there was a big change right before I got here, turning from a neighborhood with a lot of mom-and-pop stores to one that specializes in bars, restaurants, boutiques and antique shops. What I don't like on Union Street now is the heavy macho naked element. Not my style. It doesn't appeal to me. And I don't mingle with the crowd — when I finish working, I usually go to Coffee Cantata (now Betelnut restaurant) and just relax and have a glass of milk.

But there are things about it I like — the most beautiful women in the world are around here all the time, and it's a beautiful shopping street with great pizza places, places to have dessert late at night, little places like the Peanuts to get an inexpensive meal. The last two years have been rough, though. Two of the best places went down the tube: the Drinking Gourd, the old sort of folk music place (where the idea for the Jefferson Airplane was hatched by Paul Kantner and Marty Balin) and Hardcastles, this fantastic imported coffee place on Fillmore off Union. It didn't have any pretensions at all. You'd find UPS drivers talking to poets and housewives talking to painters and grocers, a real cross-section of humanity. Its landlord doubled the rent so it closed. And there's Minerva's Owl, the great bookstore that I hear is moving out, too.

I think Union Street would be much better if you lessen the influence of the automobile and increase the influence

of humans and even plants. The city should close off the street and make it a boulevard, plant trees and flower boxes in the middle, put little shuttle trams going up and down the street, nothing but foot traffic and maybe bicycles and unicycles allowed. Right now there are 4,000 people coming to Union Street on Friday nights in 2,000 cars. Hey, aha, I just thought of this: You could run a shuttle bus to Union Street from Marina Jr. High's school yard, which has got to be good for at least 1,000 cars. That's an original idea for the city's pipes — put

that in and smoke it.

What are your immediate plans for your career?

Not much change. I'm pretty much into just performing right now. I handle it all myself, no agent. People see me one place or another, they come up and I give them a card and then they get in touch with me. Good old-fashioned personal communication. Juggling brings me a lot of happiness. It seems to bring others a lot of happiness, so I'll stay with it. ■



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