

## **Disabled Unions and the Performance of Martial Begging**

Michael Accinno

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Track 21.1 and Track 21.2, Companion Website to *Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press, <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199331444/ch21/>.

Track 21.1 [Score] *The Crutch and the Empty Sleeve; or, The Old Soldier's Reward*. Lyrics and Music by Whittaker Brothers. Published by Spear and Dehnhoff, New York, 1882. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Music Division.

Track 21.2 [Recording] *The Crutch and the Empty Sleeve; or, The Old Soldier's Reward*. Recorded by Michael Accinno (Tenor) and Jonathan Spatola-Knoll (piano), April 15, 2014.

### Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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### Abstract and Keywords

This essay discusses the phenomenon of disabled Union veterans who turned to the profession of organ grinding during and after the American Civil War: they became mendicant musicians who played music in the streets to beg for money. Within a cultural logic that emphasized the sorting of worthy from unworthy poor—and “true” veterans from “imposters”—the related practices of street music and mendicancy were harshly stigmatized. Although artistic and literary representations of disabled organ grinders often used the performers as rhetorical devices to elicit fear, loathing, or pity, closer scrutiny of surviving documentary evidence reveals that the men indeed possessed agency, along with a capacity and desire for self-representation.

Keywords: begging, organ grinders, American Civil War, disability, street music, mendicant

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GRINDING is not generally understood as a pleasant activity. The goal of grinding an object is to crush; to pulverize; to grate against. Grinding destroys rather than creates. Perhaps seen in this light, it is unsurprising that performers labeled as organ grinders were not particularly well respected in the nineteenth century. The pejorative designation “organ grinder” entered the English language in 1792, and quickly became a term closely associated with the practice of begging and mendicancy (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “organ grinder”). The disabled and nondisabled performers who took up barrel organs in Europe and the United States did so in the face of heavy stigma that surrounded the sounds and practices of street music. Negative reactions to street musicians, often couched in terms of ethnic, class-based, or bodily difference, continued unabated throughout the nineteenth century.

Organ grinders have not always seemed like “our” type of musicians—that is to say, they do not conform to normative aspects or behaviors of music making. Indeed, most historical observers did not regard the performers as *real* musicians at all. Unlike legitimate musicians, who were generally understood to possess well-developed musicality, organ grinders possessed untrained ears and uncultivated sensibilities; musicians developed finely honed manual abilities, but organ grinders needed only enough dexterity to crank a

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## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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pedal; musicians generally performed within the conventions of a proscenium space, while organ grinders readily performed on any street or thoroughfare.

Rather than consign organ grinders and other street musicians to a silent place in the history of nineteenth-century American music, this essay sounds out traces of these performers within post-Civil War urban spaces. Disabled Union veterans, many of them identified as men with amputated limbs, turned to barrel organs in the postwar period when northerners were intensely preoccupied with efforts to assist and employ maimed soldiers. Mostly drawn from the lower classes, these street performers staged a (p. 404) rhetoric of martial begging that invited audiences to pause and consider the intersection of manliness and disability. That the civilian public often responded equivocally to these encounters is well known.<sup>1</sup> But veterans, as well as those considered “imposter” veterans, did more than act as symbolic foils for Gilded Age notions of masculinity; loudly and without apology, they manipulated space, body, and sound to comment on the limitations of socially sanctioned legal, medical, and institutional paths to rehabilitation.

## Street Music in Contemporary and Historical Practice

Building on the premise that space is a social construction, scholars in performance studies, geography, and ethnomusicology have modeled how twentieth- and twenty-first-century street performers employ alternative practices to contravene the established social and spatial patterns of streets and public places (Harrison-Pepper 1990; Kuppers 2003; Simpson 2011; Mason 1992). In her landmark study of New York City’s subway performers, Susie Tanenbaum describes such music-making in public spaces as, “an urban ritual ... promoting spontaneous, democratic, intimate encounters in one of the city’s most routinized and alienating environments” (Tanenbaum 1995, 2). She further asserts that performers’ co-option of subway space encourages the formation of “transitory communities” (105) that promote greater understanding across class-based, ethnic, and linguistic barriers. Similar studies of itinerant musicians frame street performances as interruptions of daily life that promote a sense of “temporary collectivity” (Simpson 2011, 423), which can ultimately foster greater group solidarity between strangers (Boetzkes 2010).

The pervasive assumption that street musicians constitute a destabilizing threat, a notion that has long colored Western thought, has thus been called increasingly into question. Sally Harrison-Pepper has critiqued the lack of nuanced treatment of street performers in historiography, suggesting, “In theater histories, anthropology texts, or urban analyses, street performance is viewed as an event that is marginal, inconsequential, unworthy of documentation, even a threat to the image of the city, established structures of commercial theater, or other businesses” (Harrison-Pepper 1990, xiv). Although this claim possesses considerable merit, we must also consider to what extent the results of participant observation of late twentieth-century street musicians can be easily transposed into historical social practices. Approached through the lenses of Disability Studies and veterans’ history, another set of questions arises: How might the conspicuous presence of street

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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musicians with disabilities alter the use of alternative social and spatial practices? Can the street stage promote greater understanding between disabled performers and nondisabled audiences? What special demands do disabled military veterans make on civilian passersby?

(p. 405) To further account for the cultural work that disability performed in nineteenth-century US streets, Susan Schweik (2009) has proposed an inclusive framework that in-dicts the underlying social categories at stake rather than the individual performers themselves. This new critical approach deconstructs cultural efforts to sort beggars from performers, the worthy from the unworthy, and real from fraudulent. Writing in more general terms about the imposter beggar, Schweik draws a provocative analogy to blackface minstrelsy: “Unsightly begging requires a kind of ‘disability-face’ in which participants, whether they were imposters or not, marked their bodies in stark, ritual opposition to normality, ability, and employability” (Schweik 2009, 133).

Building on Schweik’s “model of social imposture” (127), this essay similarly questions the ethically suspect distinction between “imposter” and “actual” martial beggars advanced uncritically by well-meaning veterans’ advocates and historians.<sup>2</sup> Although adopting such a stance undoubtedly risks conveying an impression of ingratitude toward the sacrifices of veterans, the inclusion of “veterans” here is both practical and obligatory if we are to acknowledge the tangible, lived realities at stake when a diverse group of performers adopts the social script of begging.

## Organ Grinders in the Nineteenth-Century United States

Barrel organs, also known as hand organs or “grind organs,” were first imported to the United States during the 1840s and 1850s by European immigrants. German instrument builder Franz Rudolph Wurlitzer, who set up shop in Cincinnati in 1856, helped to found a burgeoning domestic barrel organ trade based in the Northern states that reached its peak in the 1880s and 1890s (Bowers 1972, 661).<sup>3</sup> Drawn to the instrument’s portability and the ease of operating its simple hand crank mechanism, Italian, Irish, and German immigrants continued the old-world practice of playing the barrel organ in urban street performances.

After the onset of the Civil War in 1861, disabled Union veterans began to adopt the instruments to solicit donations from Northern crowds. These ex-soldiers responded to a long tradition of similar martial performances in western Europe, particularly in German-speaking regions. As early as the Seven Years’ War, Empress Maria Theresa helped license veterans to play barrel organs in Hapsburg territories (Buchner 1959, 76). The practice continued in Germany until after World War I, when Weimar officials discovered that many disabled and nondisabled beggars tried to pass as soldiers to realize increased financial and social benefits (Poore 2007, 16).

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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In the United States, martial organ grinders peaked in number and influence during the 1870s. It is difficult to establish an exact number of veteran performers, but in an article in the *New York Times* (March 20, 1895), one writer estimated that “thousands of invalid and wounded veterans purchased organs” after the war. Newspapers (p. 406) and periodicals in California, the Midwest, and the Eastern seaboard expressed alarm in documenting the presence of injured soldiers performing in public spaces. Writing in the *New York Herald*, one reporter captured much of the shock that crowds felt at witnessing the sight and sound of veteran street performers:

As we pass at the various corners of the streets the organ grinders, who are disabled soldiers, we cannot but think that some other provision should be made for these armless or legless men, who have suffered for the perpetuity of the nation. That those who fought and lost their limbs for their defense of our homes should be compelled to stand and beg for pennies at our street corners is a disgrace (July 21, 1871).

That many of the men are described as amputees is a testament to the outsized role played by maimed soldiers in forming postwar civilian perceptions of veterans.<sup>4</sup> This account renders the absence of limbs more visible by bringing specific bodily practices—standing and playing an instrument—to the foreground, enacting what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has described as the capacity of amputees to “shock viewers into attentiveness” (Garland-Thomson 2009, 128). However rhetorically jarring this representational strategy may be, its pervasive emphasis on veterans’ lost limbs has likely obscured the presence of less visible cognitive or mental disabilities in postwar begging spaces.

Part of the cultural shock that surrounded veteran beggars arose out of their uneasy coexistence with street musicians from the Italian immigrant classes. As Accinno (2010) has documented, Italian organ grinders predominated in the antebellum period, and reactions to the performers were often characterized by stridently nativist overtones. But by the 1870s, the presence of martial organ grinders meant that it was no longer possible for audiences to rely on nativist tropes alone. One observer in *Appleton’s Journal* noted, “The maimed soldiers of the last war ... excite more sympathy than the able-bodied Italians, and often earn twice as much money” (January 24, 1874). The influx of veterans into the once immigrant-dominated profession was so pronounced that when a reporter for the *New York Sun* asked a proprietor of barrel organs in 1874 about his clientele, he could readily reply that they were “nearly all Italians and old American soldiers” (reprinted in *Scientific American*, July 15, 1874).

Many observers took pains to draw clear distinctions between the two groups of street performers, and often resorted to discussions of veterans’ manliness in designating soldiers as a special social category apart from immigrants. In James McCabe’s *Secrets of the Great City*, a middle-class observer’s account of the “virtues and vices” of New York City’s working classes, McCabe reserved special scorn for immigrant organ grinders. Describing the performers as capable of “only the most horrible discord,” he elaborated further on the impoverished living conditions in the infamous Five Points neighborhood,

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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where the musicians “sustain their families entirely upon macaroni” (McCabe 1868, 125). Their tenements are described as “vile and filthy,” and their children as “dirty, ragged, and more like monkeys” (125, 128).

While McCabe’s dismissive, nativist screed is typical of the broader corpus of nineteenth-century writers’ heated reactions toward immigrant organ grinders, his (p. 407) subsequent chapter on “soldier minstrels” represents an abrupt about-face concerning the issue of street musicians. Although he observes that the “maimed and battered veterans” of the Civil War played the same instruments as their Italian counterparts, McCabe strictly separates the veterans from other street musicians, reasoning that their service and bodily sacrifices merit consideration as a special category of performers (470–474). Narrating the story of John Williams, a gallant private in the Army of the Potomac who lost both an arm and a leg during the course of the war, the author notes that Williams “consoled himself with the hope that the people for whom he had fought and suffered, would not let him lack for some means of employment” (473). The hoped for work fails to materialize in the aftermath of the war, and instead Williams is reduced to playing the barrel organ on city streets, a profession that, owing to its associations with immigrants, is described as “repugnant to one’s manhood” (474).

McCabe’s rhetorical strategy relied on a binary logic that sought to shock readers into extending social and financial benefits to deserving veterans while simultaneously dismissing immigrant performers as unworthy. Such reasoning, however, must be questioned, for the categories of veteran and immigrant were never entirely mutually exclusive during this time period—as many as 200,000 German-Americans and 150,000 Irish-Americans served in the Union Army and Navy (Bladek 2000, 1029). Some of these immigrant veterans who lacked access to secure social or familial support networks would later turn to street performances in the postwar years.<sup>5</sup> An article in the *Washington Post* reported the story of an Irish immigrant who lost his arm during the Richmond-Petersburg campaign. Lacking family ties in the United States, the man later received a barrel organ that he claimed was financed personally by newspaper editor Marcus Pomeroy (January 2, 1884).

A particularly disturbing story of a one-armed German veteran in Milwaukee was recounted in a series of outraged letters written by readers of the *Chicago Tribune*. According to eyewitness accounts, the veteran arrived outside of the offices of the *Wisconsin State Register* and started playing a hand organ, only to have a pail of dirty water dumped on him from the window of the office by the newspaper’s editor, Jack Turner (*Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1872). A corroborating account by a different witness indicates that Turner continued to berate the man, and may have even kicked him down a flight of stairs (*Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1872). These accounts—which also implicate the newspapers themselves as biased observers of organ grinders—suggest that immigrant veterans may have had particular difficulties in navigating postwar benefit and employment networks.

### Veterans and Postwar Labor

A variety of employment programs that were deemed suitable for disabled Union veterans began to emerge both during and after the war. Motivated by gratitude for the veterans' sacrifices, but also by fears about an emerging class of martial vagrants, the new labor schemes ranged from positions in government to messenger and delivery (p. 408) services. In 1864, William Oland Bourne, the New York-based editor of the veterans' newspaper *The Soldier's Friend*, began to employ disabled soldiers to hawk his publication in the streets. Bourne would later sponsor the "Left-Arm Corps," a writing competition for one-armed veterans in which the men were encouraged to write about patriotic themes.<sup>6</sup> Pharmacist H. T. Helmbold, creator of the infamous concoction Helmbold's Buchu, sponsored a series of almanacs in 1868 to be sold in the streets by disabled veterans (Wecter 1944, 209); *The Half-Dime Tales* included a catalog of facts about the Civil War and selected writings that included the poem "The Empty Sleeve."<sup>7</sup>

Other disabled veterans took advantage of civil service opportunities. Some of the men were hired under federal legislation that granted them privileged hiring status for federal appointments and promotions (Nielsen 2012, 81); many soldiers also extended their military service in the Invalids Corps, a unit of wounded soldiers that were deployed in a variety of noncombat roles (Holberton 2001, 125). But for men of lower social and financial standing, these employment programs were largely ineffective. Frances Clarke has observed that postwar rehabilitation and vocational programs never approached the comprehensive level adopted in later US military conflicts (Clarke 2011, 147). As rapid military demobilization quickly blurred distinctions between soldiers and civilians and public support for disabled veterans evaporated, employment opportunities became increasingly scarce. But despite the limited availability of "honest livelihoods," heated criticism of the "dishonest" practices of mendicancy and organ grinding never ceased. The proposed eradication of begging by disabled veterans thus took on a moral flavor that provided convenient cover for those hoping to justify their own flawed efforts on behalf of the "worthy" poor.

### Institutional Attitudes Toward Mendicancy

For my eye is fixed with a steadfast strain  
On the tattered soldier's halting stride,  
Till his tall form sinks down the dark hill-side;  
Then I cry, "Thank God! He hath now no need  
To beg at the stranger's gate!

(*Harper's Weekly*, October 4, 1862)

Criticism of mendicancy was loudly voiced by public and private institutions dedicated to the care of indigent veterans. Henry Bellows, president of the US Sanitary Commission, declared one of the goals of his institution "To make mendicancy and public support disreputable for all with any ability, however partial, to help themselves" (*Sanitary Commis-*

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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sion Report No. 95 1865, 3). Bellows's misgivings stemmed from the Commission's studies of European military asylums founded in the style of the *Hôtel (p. 409) des Invalides* and the Royal Hospital Chelsea (Marten 2011, 96). The asylum model was deemed out of touch with American values, which emphasized economic self-support and, only when necessary, reliance on "domestic and neighborly sympathies" (*Sanitary Commission Report No. 95 1865, 3*). Adopting a more strident tone in the pages of *The Soldier's Friend*, William Oland Bourne railed strongly against "shameless imposters, who play upon the sympathy of the soldier to secure a larger income than ordinary beggary would produce" (quoted in Marten 2011, 220).

The administrators of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, established by Congress in 1865, singled out organ grinders as a special cause for concern.<sup>8</sup> In its annual 1867 report to Congress, the asylum's Board of Managers wrote alarmingly about the increasing prevalence of barrel organs:

True it is that many cases will be found of apparently disabled men, who claim to be soldiers, in large cities or on railway trains, asking relief of the charitable, or attempting to earn a subsistence by grinding a hand-organ, or other like means of appealing to the generous sympathies of the community (quoted in Gobrecht 1875, 43-44).

The Board regarded the actions of these "apparently disabled" men as the "prostitution of the honorable wounds and the uniform of the soldier," and further suggested that the men in question were primarily a group of ragtag imposters, deserters, and swindlers who were hired by "associations" of morally questionable employers to play borrowed instruments on the streets (quoted in Gobrecht 1875, 43-44). But the report's blanket condemnation obscured the fact that the regulations of the National Home ultimately may have been the source of street musicians' duress. In 1871, George McWatters, the so-called literary policeman of New York City, argued that the "true and honest soldiers" who pursued organ grinding did so because the asylum system failed to provide housing for their wives and children (McWatters 1871, 71-73). The Board itself noted the lack of housing for dependents in its first annual report, but Congress failed to advance legislation to address the issue (Kelly 1997, 235-237).

The national leaders of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the powerful Union veterans' fraternal organization, lodged similar complaints against mendicancy; state and local chapters of the group, however, demonstrated greater flexibility in addressing the issue. The founder of the GAR, former army surgeon Benjamin F. Stephenson, emphasized a rhetoric of manliness and independence for the organization's disabled members; in a speech to the group's 1868 national encampment, he noted the GAR's success in helping, "thousand of our poor, helpless, crippled comrades ... who, but for our own instrumentality, would be left to seek their support from the cold hand of charity, and the Union soldier disdains to beg" (quoted in McConnell 1992, 136). But in 1870, the New York State branch of the GAR lobbied both houses of Congress to rescind a federal licensing fee im-

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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posed on street musicians. According to Marcus Pomeroy, editor of the *New York Democrat*, the government license cost each performer \$10 per year (Pomeroy 1890, 220).

(p. 410) Similar to the exceptions created for Civil War amputees in several “ugly law” statutes, the group proposed that the Senate adopt a motion “in favor of amendment of the revenue laws, so as to exempt such honorably discharged soldiers, sailors, and marines as derive their livelihood by playing hand-organs and other musical instruments from license taxation” (*Journal of the Senate of the United States of America*, vol. 64, January 17, 1870, 103).<sup>9</sup> In addition to state branches, local chapters also may have accepted and even supported the presence of veteran organ grinders. An Ohio newspaper relates one such instance: a local GAR chapter agreed to purchase a new barrel organ for a veteran “soldier without legs” after his instrument was destroyed in an altercation with a blind, civilian organ grinder (*Daily Ohio Statesman*, April 1, 1867).

Although quick to condemn disabled veteran beggars or to use them as rhetorical devices to dramatize and justify their own efforts, many institutions and their supporters proved to be less interested in taking seriously the concerns of the beggars themselves. Disabled mendicants who passed as veterans could simply be written off as imposters. For those who *were* considered veterans, the fault lay not in the institutions but with the individual beggars themselves—as one newspaper coolly reasoned, “If any of them are in want of any of the comforts of life, it is because they do not avail themselves of the ample provision that has been made for them” (*Washington Post*, June 4, 1878). But beggars were more than symbols—they were *real* people who possessed agency and the capacity for self-representation. They were men like Joshua Parker, a handless veteran who played the hand organ in Washington, DC, with the help of his wife. In 1898, Congress finally granted him a pension of \$40 a month, nearly three decades after the end of the Civil War (*Washington Post*, February 22, 1898). For Parker and others, the “begging problem” lay not so much in the failing of the individual, but in social institutions that did not thoughtfully listen and thus became complicit in perpetuating the very category of beggar that that they sought to erase.

## Representing Martial Begging: Tactics and Contexts

Having placed attitudes toward mendicancy and organ grinding within the broader historical context of veterans’ institutions, this essay will now shift to consider the visual and aural representational tactics employed by street musicians within performance spaces. A description of one such performance that occurred in San Francisco in 1869 is characteristic of much of the reportage about the men who represented themselves as disabled veterans to their audiences:

Two Empty Sleeves—On Saturday afternoon a soldier who had lost both arms above the elbows made his appearance on Kearny Street, accompanied by a boy with a hand organ. An accompanying placard informed the public that the name of

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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the (p. 411) unfortunate man was R. D. Danphy, and that he lost his arms at Mobile Bay, on board the United States ship Hartford, in an engagement with the rebel ram Tennessee. A contribution box was provided for the reception of donations, and the appeal was liberally responded to (*Daily Evening Bulletin*, August 25, 1869).

The sailor's "empty sleeves" are identified by the author as the singularly most important detail about the performer, in keeping with Garland-Thomson's assertion that "visible disability ... almost always dominates and skews the normate's process of sorting out perceptions and forming a reaction" (Garland-Thomson 1997, 12). Naming frequently emerges as an important aspect of a soldier's or sailor's self-identification. Whether provided orally or through the use of a certificate of discharge or placard, the name of a battle, unit, or ship offers important context for audiences to further reflect on the circumstances of a veteran's injury or impairment. The contribution box—usually described as a cigar box or a similarly sized container—is identified as a receptacle for donations. We cannot presume that the performers themselves necessarily viewed these donations as a form of charity, but may have thought of them instead as akin to an optional fee for services rendered. Moreover, if there was any discomfort associated with the collection of the fee, it likely lay more with the audience member than with the performer himself (Bogdan 2012, 23).

There is one more crucial aspect about the performance conventions of organ grinding that the account divulges: namely, it reveals how some amputees operated an instrument colloquially referred to as a "hand organ" without the use of a hand. In order to operate the barrel organ, an instrument with preprogrammed tunes that were "pinned" onto a roll mechanism, the boy who accompanies the veteran supplies his own arms and hands to turn the crank of the instrument. These able-bodied assistants helped transport the barrel organs as well as the disabled men themselves, and sometimes wore blue uniforms that matched those worn by many veterans. Although occasionally described as the wives of the veterans, these companions were typically male, and thus heightened an already masculine-dominated performance space.

Establishing what musical repertoire was performed by veteran organ grinders remains an open question. Lacking well-preserved manufacturers' records and few extant nineteenth-century barrel organs in working condition, we must turn elsewhere for anecdotal clues about tune selection. The first stanza of the 1882 work *The Crutch and the Empty Sleeve*, a jaunty song in D major about a crippled organ grinder, provides some indications about the repertoire choices made by veterans: "Down at the corner a hand organ stands, Where the crowds are passing every day / And an old crippled soldier he turns at the crank, While a man with one arm takes the pay / It is only the war tunes of old that they play" (*Whittaker Brothers* 1882). For a score and recording of this song, see Tracks

21.1 and 21.2 on the Companion Website.



## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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What might these “war tunes” have included? Upbeat, propulsive melodies such as *A Life on the Ocean Wave*, *Sherman’s March to the Sea*, *La Marseillaise*, *Hail Columbia*, and the *Star-Spangled Banner* may all have been used, owing to their general popularity during this period and their patriotic and nationalistic associations. Along with worn (p. 412) uniforms and other military accoutrements, these tunes may have assisted performers’ efforts to create liminal patriotic spaces that appealed to passersby.

The barrel organ’s raspy timbre functioned as another aural signifier that contributed to martial performance spaces. Many observers derided the instruments in metaphorical terms that likened them to diseased or choking bodies. Prone to overuse and habitually exposed to humidity and bad weather, many of the degraded organs became known as “wheezers.” An article that appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* described these broken, out-of-tune instruments as a kind of asthmatic body:

When an organ is past mending, when it has lost its teeth, and its lungs give partly out, and its joints squeak, it is not to be thrown away. It then becomes a “wheez-er,” and easily finds a new owner in the person of some blind or some decrepit beggar, who sleeps by day and comes out by night to sit on a curb-stone in some gay and busy centre like Madison Square, and to grind on incoherently upon the broken barrel and the sympathy of passers-by (*Harper’s Weekly*, July 20 1889).

In this instance, both instrument and performer were bound up in the rhetoric of disability. Like mendicant literature, “wheezy” mendicant music created mutually reinforcing connections through its proximity to, and presentation with, the disabled bodies of performers.<sup>10</sup> Such a double stigmatization of bodies, both human and instrumental, further heightened audience reactions to street performances.

The close relationship promoted between disabled body and disabled instrument was illustrated in a scene that appeared in the women’s journal *Hearth and Home* in 1873 (see Figure 21.1). In the drawing, an organ grinder and his monkey perform for a woman and her young children at the doorstep of their home. Both the performer’s prosthetic limb and the martial costume of his simian companion suggest qualities associated with the trappings of 1870s war veterans. Although the presence of a monkey playing a fiddle provides a cue for the woman and her children to avoid staring at the organ grinder’s wooden limb, viewers of the illustration are nevertheless invited to gaze unabashedly at the man’s prosthesis (We can also detect an avoidance grounded in listening; the skilled fiddler is heard attentively by his audience, while the unskilled organ grinder is shunned). Indeed, the positioning of the man’s leg vis-à-vis the supporting wooden stand of the barrel organ is highly ambiguous: it is difficult to tell if the barrel organ acts as a prosthesis for the performer, or if the performer acts as a prosthesis for the barrel organ.

To be sure, these conflated bodies were often represented from an able-bodied perspective, and thus tended to exaggerate performers as grotesque, humorous, or pitiable. In the published tale *St. Ephrem: A Story of Christmas Eve*, a disabled veteran with two amputated legs identified as “Danny’s father” plays the barrel organ with the assistance of

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

his son. In one bedside scene, the narrator dramatizes the inability to distinguish between performer and instrument:



Figure 21.1 An organ grinder with an artificial limb plays for a woman and her children. The illustration appeared in the women's journal *Hearth and Home* in 1873. Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Danny's father in bed, with the hand-organ obscuring all of him except his bushy head, and his left arm, which clasped the organ in front. The handle of the organ (p. 413) seemed to be his right arm, so that either the organ was itself with Danny's father's head and arm; or Danny's father was himself with an organ body and ivory stops; or Danny's father was an organ with his own head and arm ... or the organ was a father, or the father was an organ. Who is it? Which are they? How was it?

(*Hours at Home* 1870, 243)

The twisted contortions that the narrative voice subjects on Danny's father—his own name is never revealed—gestures toward an ableist perspective that obscures the man's agency and assumes a lack of self-worth. We might thrust the questions back on the narrator and ask: Who is doing the speaking here, and to what end? Certainly not the disabled veteran himself, whose own motivations are concealed and obfuscated.

## Mendicant Texts: Literature, Imagery, and Music

In deconstructing rhetorical accounts of disabled martial performers, I may indeed be complicit in the very type of disability ventriloquism that has heretofore been critiqued. (p. 414) This final section therefore endeavors to provide space for organ grinders to speak for themselves through mendicant texts that allow for the possibility of self-representation. Broadly construed, mendicant texts are defined here to include any material means through which street performers represented themselves to their audiences. Thus,

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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in addition to mendicant literature and photography, explored by Schweik (2009) and Bogdan (2012), respectively, mendicant music also functioned as an interpretive device used by performers to describe and interpret their own bodies.

Although there is no archive of mendicant instruments to speak of—or at least there is not one *yet*—preserved collections of mendicant poetry, tracts, and cartes de visite provide revealing traces of martial performers who, although often pressured to resort to the rhetoric of pity and marginalization accepted by their paying audiences, nevertheless acted as proud, stubborn salesmen. These texts, which demonstrate a persistent refusal to accept the passivity typically associated with cultural constructions of begging, can provide important insights about how music may have worked in analogous ways to negotiate between performers' self-expression and audience expectations.

The broadside "The One-Arm Soldier" is one example of a larger corpus of begging poetry that concludes with the final stanza "Strangers, pardon, if I ask you / To buy a one-arm soldier's song" (see Figure 21.2). Owing to the poem's dislocation from its original purveyor, we do not know much about the document's provenance, nor can it presently be ascertained how its publication was financed. Similar to the shared history of the "Empty Sleeve" poetry discussed by Devin Burke in this volume, numerous variants of the poem circulated that substituted different names and identifying information.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the variant used by James R. Thomas, the personal details provided by the poem allow for us to more readily establish the man's identity (see Figure 21.3). The roster of the 1st Pennsylvania Reserves records that Private James R. Thomas was discharged on December 5, 1862, for wounds received in action, and Thomas's regiment was indeed present at the Battle of South Mountain.<sup>12</sup> The poem reveals further details about Thomas's war injury and his status as a married man, information that is especially useful for empirically oriented historians.

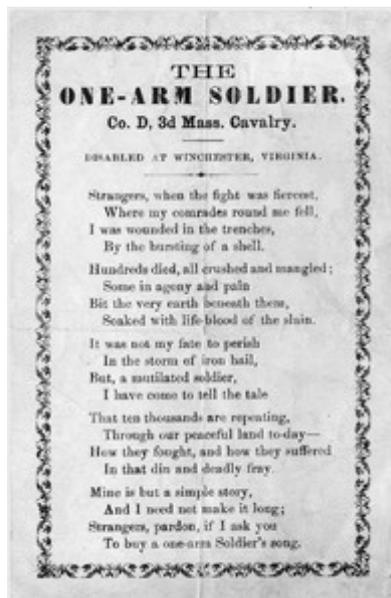


Figure 21.2 “The One-Arm Soldier.” Mendicant poem (date unknown). *Center for the History of Medicine: OnView*, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/items/show/6098>.

Although sifting through the poems in this way can yield new insights about particular individuals such as Thomas, it also comes dangerously close to replicating in historiography the discarded historical categories of “worthy” and “unworthy” poor. Rather than using the texts to establish whether the veterans in question were *real* or *fraudulent*, we might ask instead what cultural work the broadsides accomplished for the purveyors of the texts themselves. Or, to borrow the language of Thomas’s poem, how did the poem’s use within the begging encounter “assist the work of this one hand?” For one thing, such mendicant poems established value, both in a transactional sense and in terms of the inherent personal benefits realized in any attempt at self-representation. Selling these poems as commodities rather than as acts of charity protected the men against civic “ugly laws” that sharply restricted begging in public (Schweik 2009, 259). In this respect, it did not matter whether Thomas was a real veteran or whether the anonymous “one-arm soldier” was a fake one: both poems reveal a strikingly similar set of (p. 415) begging tactics that likely resulted in a shared social stigma, regardless of one’s veteran status.

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging



Figure 21.3 Thomas, James R. "When I left my good home." Mendicant poem (date unknown). *Center for the History of Medicine: OnView*, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://collections.countway.harvard.edu/on-view/items/show/6097>.

Cartes de visite, small pocket-sized photographs that were popular during and after the Civil War, were commonly attached to soldiers' pension records, but they were also used in a similar context as begging poetry (Newman 1993, 64). Connor and Rhode (2003) note the case of Private Alfred Stratton, a double arm amputee who sold photographs of himself taken at the Army Medical museum to supplement his pension income. In one of the photographs used by Stratton, he wears a Union uniform with empty sleeves pinned back to accentuate his disability.<sup>13</sup> Another man, Eppentus McIntosh, a survivor of the infamous Andersonville prison who was diagnosed with "disease of spine and resulting curvature and insanity" (Stevens and Tharp 2010, 152), (p. 416) (p. 417) sold postcards of himself as an itinerant musician. McIntosh, who shuttled in and out of veterans' institutions for several decades, traveled around the Midwest for much of the 1880s and '90s and further supplemented his income by selling songbooks of patriotic music (153).

At least one carte de visite featured an organ grinder, and judging by its preservation in multiple archival collections, it likely circulated as a mendicant text (reprinted in Appollo 1997, 15; Cooney 1984, 40—see Figure 21.4). Printed by Fetter's Gallery in Logansport, Indiana, the card shows a double arm amputee and his young assistant dressed in sailors' uniforms, standing on opposing ends of a large wagon-mounted barrel organ. The back of the card includes a reprint of the placard visible within the portrait, and relays information about the battle of Fort Fischer. The card demonstrates several forms of mendicant representation and self-representation. Within the medium of the postcard, text, imagery, and music interact with and against the disabled performer's body. We can also consider the original street performance as another potential layer of representational space, since the card was likely bought and sold in intimate proximity to the martial performer him-

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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self. Thus, there existed the potential for intertextual mendicant spaces in which the disabled performer's agency was realized and negotiated through different visual and sonic media.

### Conclusion

Identifying himself only as "Otsdama," an indignant organ grinder wrote to the editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1869 to protest against the onslaught of critiques that had been leveled against the performers by the newspaper's readers in recent weeks. His anonymous remarks, employing a mixture of humor, sarcasm, guilt, and wit to silence and shame his critics, demonstrate the power of disabled self-representation:



*Figure 21.4* Amputee sailor and boy with barrel organ. Picture taken at Fetter's New Photograph Gallery in Logansport, Indiana (date unknown). Heritage Auction Galleries.

As a member in good standing (on one leg) of that much abused class of musical purveyors, I beg the privilege of giving to the public a few of the reasons which govern us in the choice of this profession. While many persons with musical cultivation and education enjoy the opera and so-called classical music. ... the great mass of common people are better satisfied with simple airs, finding little pleasure to elaborate and intricate compositions... . But what have these censorious scribblers to say on the score of their own patriotism? Do they not consider that while they were enjoying their ease at home, we who are now maimed and crippled for life, were fighting the battles of our country? And when we are unfit for active labor, we must do something to support ourselves and those dependent upon us, for a living. Give us something else to do, we will gladly do it. We have sometimes thought that Uncle Sam might with great propriety give us a place in his service, to do such light work as is now performed by stay-at-home politicians. As for example, see the inner workings of the Brooklyn Post office. Perhaps you do not like our music. Possibly you do not like our organ grinding. What else shall we do? Perchance our music annoys you. (p. 418) Pay us our wages, and we will sit by our music boxes in proper silence, to please you. Is our music disagreeable? We have heard that which was more so, on the fields of Gettysburg and the Wilder-

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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ness. When you hear our wheezing instruments, consider it but the faint echo which we have brought from the battle-fields which saved our Republic, and look upon our employment as the necessary resort of the fragments of your country's defenders, and we hope these considerations will make you less easily annoyed and less irritable (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 11, 1869).

In representing himself and his profession, Otsdama makes use of many devices that encapsulate conventional scholarly ideas about reading texts to understand an individual's agency and creativity through authorship: double entendre ("member in good standing (on one leg)"), alliteration ("ensorious scribbling"), and the evocative metaphor linking "wheezing instruments" with the sounds of battle. But when interpreted as an authored text, Otsdama's anonymity may have presented some readers with an interpretive dilemma. Lacking a name, couldn't this writer have been *any* organ grinder? Was he even an organ grinder at all?

Parrying such questions from his skeptical interlocutors, Otsdama identifies the true nature of the problem: a widespread *cultural* failure to listen engagingly and thoughtfully to the music created by disabled street performers. As this essay has demonstrated, one possible response to Otsdama's rousing call to action lies in acknowledging postwar disabled begging as a shared culture in which men fashioned themselves as authors, poets, and musicians. Within this culture, authorship and musicianship were realized through the use of a performance script of martial begging that resisted the destruction (p. 419) wrought by cultural stigma and institutional inadequacy. As the loudest and most controversial group of street musicians, organ grinders figured prominently in the creation and maintenance of these begging performances. Their inconvenient social critiques beg us to listen and respond.

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### Notes:

(1.) In one of the earliest comprehensive studies of Civil War veterans, Dixon Wecter (1944, 189) described the unease surrounding veterans' street performances: "Some citizens grouched that their [veterans'] hand-organs were invariably the worst and squeakiest ever heard; couldn't the town fathers at least see that they had tuneful instruments?" Writing more recently about the influx of disabled veterans into post-Civil War San Francisco, Susan Schweik (2009) has noted, "Begging veterans entering or reentering the peacetime city told war stories with their injured bodies. San Franciscans responded ambivalently" (28).

(2.) In adopting a sympathetic stance toward the "imposter soldier," I acknowledge the considerable methodological distance that separates Disability Studies from disabled veterans history. Writing about this divide, Gerber notes, "The recent historical literature on disabled veterans ... continues to be produced by researchers who do not consider themselves historians of disability for readers who are more interested in war, the military, and the state than in disability" (Gerber 2012b, xii).

(3.) Bowers 1972 and Ord-Hume 1978 are the standard reference books for mechanical instruments.

(4.) This observation is strongly in keeping with James Marten's recent study of Civil War veterans, in which the author notes, "one-armed or one-legged veterans almost immediately became a stereotype of noble sacrifice and deserving pity" (Marten 2011, 76). Speaking in more general terms, disability historian David Gerber contends that this visible fixation is repeated in postwar cultures writ large: "Especially traumatic, visible injuries have tended to become the primary way in which the general population of disabled veterans often seems to have been conceived in the minds of experts, artists, and the general citizenry" (Gerber 2012a, 2).

## Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging

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(5.) Immigrant access to disabled veteran support programs was decidedly mixed. Blanck and Song (2007) note that German and Irish immigrants were significantly less likely to apply for pension benefits than native-born veterans. However, Kelly (2007) estimates that up to 60% of veterans who sought assistance at the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in the first two decades of its existence were immigrants (243).

(6.) A public exhibition of the Left-Arms Corps took place in 1866 in Washington, DC. According to Marten (2011), the event failed to significantly sway public opinion about amputee veterans (94). For further discussion, see Clarke 2002, Cooney 1984, and Padilla 2007.

(7.) For further discussion of this poem, see Devin Burke's essay in this collection.

(8.) The organization used the term "home" rather than "asylum," part of a broader attempt by administrators to associate disabled veterans with the "soothing discourse of Victorian domesticity" (Kelly 1997, 90). Amputees figured prominently in official representations of the National Home: the organization's seal featured a soldier with an amputated leg stretching his arm out to receive a cup from Lady Liberty.

(9.) It is unknown whether Congress successfully passed legislation to amend the licensing fee. Schweik has documented many instances of municipal peddling ordinances that created similar fee exemptions for Civil War veterans; the mayor of Chicago tried to carve out a exemption for Civil War amputees when the City Council passed its "ugly law" statute in 1881 that banned begging and organ grinding on city streets (Schweik 2009, 30-32).

(10.) Writing of mendicant literature, Schweik notes, "Disabled self-publishers promised a direct link between the story of the text and the story of the writer's own body. ... The text came with (even as it discreetly supplemented) or substituted for bodily display" (Schweik 2009, 344). Straus makes a similar conceptual point about composers and their corpus of music, arguing, "in some cases, the music appears to share the stigmatized quality of the body that produced it" (Straus 2011, 16).

(11.) Marten has identified several variants of the Broadside that alter the identifying information of the soldier or substitute "one-legged" or "crippled" for "one-armed": James Walsh, George M. Reed, and "The One-Armed Boy" (Marten 2011, 92 and 292). I have identified three additional versions that reference the names Thomas Ball, John Williams, and James R. Thomas.

(12.) The roster is available online: <http://www.pa-roots.com/pacw/reserves/1stres/1strescoh.html>.

(13.) Available online at [http://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/Issue\\_5/ConnorRhode/ConnorRhode\\_figures/CRfig18.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_5/ConnorRhode/ConnorRhode_figures/CRfig18.html).

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## **Disabled Union Veterans and the Performance of Martial Begging**

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