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Julia's Coffee Commercial

\$1.6 million for a smile.

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Presepio In Honor of Peace

American local Yvonne DiPalma has spent the last 35 years on her presepio installation, drawing on history to show the present and hope for the future.

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LORENZO PICCHI | EDITOR IN CHIEF

Buone Feste!

Christmas and New Year's in Florence

The downtown Christmas tree has found a new home this year: at the intersection of Via Martelli and Piazza San Giovanni.

A Plethora of Cheer and Holiday Spirit Around Town

JASLEEN KANDHARI
 CONTRIBUTOR

Christmas in Florence presents a unique experience, with its historic centre dazzling with festive lights and a plethora of Christmas markets enlivening the city's squares. In contrast, silent candle-lit churches like Santa

Maria de' Ricci display representations of the classical Italian tradition known as the presepio, or Nativity scene. Dating back to Christmas of 1233, when Saint Francis of Assisi set up a Nativity scene in the town of Greccio, this tradition has continued to feature as an expression of the Christmas season throughout Italy.

The Renaissance art and architecture of Florence provide a magnificent setting for the Christmas lights highlighting the grandeur of palaces, whilst an illuminated Christmas tree stands majestically in Piazza del Duomo. CONT'D ON PAGE 3



AUGURI, Firenze

ELIZABETH LAYTON | CONTRIBUTOR

With bright lights, close friends, champagne, and happy hearts, New Year's Eve surpasses all other events and is arguably the biggest party night of the year. Ringing in the New Year correctly is important, and having as much fun as possible is number one on the list.

For those who have decided to stay in beautiful

Florence for New Year's and are wondering what to do, you should be happy to know that your possibilities are endless. You can't have a true celebration without music, and each year Florence's main piazze host various free concerts. Piazza della Repubblica will offer a jazz concert; Piazza Stazione will have a pop/rock concert; Piazza Santissima Annunziata will have a folk music concert; and so on. Bring your bottle of *spumante* and celebrate the

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2010/2011

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Ken Mercer

A Musician's Superhero

MASSIMILIANO DI MARIO | COURTESY OF KEN MERCER

ANI MINASIAN | CONTRIBUTOR

It's about 10:00 p.m. on a brisk December night in Florence, and people are making a beeline across Piazza della Signoria towards the Uffizi and what seems to be the source of live music and singing. There, in front of the Uffizi, stands a lone figure with a guitar singing a hauntingly familiar tune. Across from him are the steps of the Loggia dei Lanzi, where dozens of people, young and old, are seated for the outdoor performance. Some are singing along, others are clapping or swaying, and all are seemingly mesmerized and engaged. Here under a patch of night sky, it seems eerily appropriate that he's singing these words from a Lennon classic: "No hell below us/Above us only sky."

The music, though contemporary, is surprisingly very much at home here in the midst of these historical buildings and towering statues. For passers-by accidentally coming across the performance, it seems like a spontaneous street show; but this is no coincidental occasion. This is the Ken Mercer show, which takes place in that very spot virtually every night from 9:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., as it has for over a decade. Barring torrential rainstorms, near-freezing temps, and physical illness, Ken reports to "work" each day with his amplifier and other gear in tow, always with the same enthusiasm and attention to detail. His tailored clothing well-pressed, his CDs placed just so in front of the mic stand, he sets up his equipment and runs his sound check alone. He has it down to a science—car batteries set up to juice the lighting and sound equipment, a wireless monitor that broadcasts to the earphone in his ear so he can hear himself, even a set-up that he can plug his smartphone into to play pre-show music and test the sound—and all of it fits tidily onto one hand-cart when the show is over.

Mercer's dedication and self-discipline are astounding. It is no wonder he is able to support himself doing music and nothing else, a great feat for any independent musician. For a couple of hours each night, he is the star of the piazza, earning the love and appreciation of the crowds. How does he do it? Well, it helps that he has a beautiful singing voice and that his guitar-playing is as accomplished as his singing. It also doesn't hurt that he can perfectly imitate James Taylor and Paul Simon when he performs their songs. And the fact that, during his rendition of "Winds of Change" by The Scorpions, his re-creations of the whistling intros and outros sound as good if not better than the soundtrack—well, you get the idea.

So why is he singing on the street instead of touring top venues? A young woman in the audience voices this same question to me as the crowd continues to multiply and grow more vocal. The answer is simple: the crowds are more generous than stingy club and bar owners these days who expect musicians to virtually "pay to play."

Mercer himself wishes for a more stable environment for his performances, especially in the winter; he dreams of opening his own venue in town where he and other musicians can perform year-round. But he does not dwell on the issue and instead, shows up in front of the Uffizi each night to claim his outdoor stage.

Even before settling at this spot in Florence, he was already well-versed in the art of street performance. He started busking in the subways and streets of London at age 16. Then one fateful day, at an Art Garfunkel concert, he threw a fan letter onto the stage that won him a backstage meeting with Garfunkel. Soon after, Mercer became the maestro's personal assistant, touring with Garfunkel and even opening some shows for him.

The road to success seemed to be opening up in front of him. But then life did what it does, and threw him a curveball. He was only 20 when his daughter was born and life as a family man meant leaving the tour and settling in Italy with his then-girlfriend. Fast-forward twelve years, he has created a successful niche for himself in the streets of Florence with no record label, publisher or management team.

It has not been easy carving out his place in this city. First, there were permits and paperwork to be filed, then expensive fees for sound level inspections. When he started to garner some attention, he became a target for jealous competitors and even suffered harassment from the police. (A suit against the police department is still pending). Recently, frequent city-planned events on the piazza have interfered with his sole source of income. And of course, winter means smaller crowds and extreme environmental conditions. In the end, however, he has managed to maintain his position and, fortunately, the summer months generate enough to get him through the leaner times.

Now at 32, Mercer is a seasoned pro, knowing how to engage the audience, handle technical difficulties with grace, and remain completely unfazed by the constant distractions in the street. Bicycles whizz by just inches from his mic stand; on the steps behind him, a homeless man settles himself to sleep; and oblivious people walk by talking loudly on their cell phones. Still he continues, without missing a note or showing any sign of frustration or annoyance. "I did that on purpose," he jokes with the audience when a technical mishap briefly interrupts his performance, "so you would know that it's live."

It has been only in recent years that Mercer has tried his hand at writing his own songs. Some of his originals are on the album "Let the Night Be Mine" which he sells at his shows. A new album is in the works and is expected to be out by the end of the year. For both albums, he has produced, engineered, and played all the instruments for the recordings which he made in his home studio. He keeps the package simple, and burns the CDs himself.

In tonight's audience,

there are locals as well as visitors from Barcelona and Azerbaijan; one group of tourists converses in German. Some are college-aged students; some look like retirees. But all are equally entranced by Mercer's renditions of songs by James Taylor, Simon & Garfunkel, Cat Stevens, The Beatles, even U2. Despite his young age, he is a passionate fan of the great troubadours and the folk genre. While he is not a lover of hip hop or straight-up pop, he does appreciate the songs of some of his contemporaries, such as Robbie Williams, Coldplay and Green Day.

Luckily, there are no troublemakers tonight. When he is not singing, he studies several martial art forms including Wing Chun Kung Fu, which has come in handy when (in addition to being his own roadie, sound technician and light crew) he occasionally has to play the role of bouncer as well. Some nights, he has had to defend himself against drunks physically accosting him while he is performing. Other nights, he has had to break up fights between people in the street to avoid police involvement and the untimely end of his show. Once, and only once, a thief tried to run off with his bag, dragging the mic stand with him down the street. Mercer tackled him, and recovered his bag and equipment. That has not happened since.

The crowd is so hyped up by the end of the show that they begin shouting out requests and he graciously does his best to accommodate them. But then one of the two batteries charging the equipment dies and he tries to make do with just the one for a couple more songs. Eventually, however, he has to call it a night and despite the increasing cold, his audience could not be more disappointed. Fortunately for all of us who happen to be in Florence, he will be back tomorrow night, same time, same place...

More information about Ken Mercer can be found on www.kenmercermusic.com. He performs nightly in front of the Uffizi Gallery from 9:30pm to 11:00pm.



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