

Jason Kahn
untitled composition, track 3 (1:21) from the
CD “Songs for Nicolas Ross” (*Rosbin Records, 2003*)

The northwest corner of Sixth and Broadway, downtown Los Angeles. A typically hot and smoggy August day, creaking buses spewing heavy exhaust and heat waves dancing from the sidewalk. A snarl of traffic completes the picture. I arrived here because of a sound. It coaxed me down Sixth Street, hovering just barely beyond conscious recognition, but there all the same, irritating in its perseverance and simplicity and refusal to go under in the dense maelstrom of chugging car engines, Norteño blaring from storefronts, hawkers barking their wares. It was a humble sound, yet bold because it dared in its own low-volume way to try and subvert the afternoon on Sixth and Broadway. And when I arrived at the intersection it took me some time to find the source of this sound, scraping, metallic, rattling like a death throe, but seemingly disinterested, practically nonchalant in its innocence and also organic – like the wind blowing through a steel grating and vibrating some loose and rusty pieces of metal slowly decaying there over the years.

So, I stood a while and just listened. And looked around. A man, a really big man, tall and quite heavy and his size accentuated by not one but two severely caked in street dirt heavy black overcoats, standing motionless in big boots without any laces and the tongues flopping out like two dogs panting in the heat. This man held a tin cup in his right hand and in this cup some coins rattled every now and then when he felt like jiggling his arm. This was about all he did. He wasn't asking passersby for money, wasn't bothering anyone. Didn't even seem to be interested in whether or not any money came his way. He stood right out in the sun, with heavy black beard and hair all matted up in one giant dreadlock slapped diagonally across his head like a roadkill flattened beyond all recognition.

The sound of those coins just drew the whole afternoon spiraling down into the cup, the vortex at the bottom of the whirlpool sucking everything away. Each car, bus, baby crying, crazy person screaming, arguing couple, police siren all just vanished there. Only the coins left, rattling a bit against the tin cup, in the man's dark brown like baseball mitt hand, holding the cup out for what? No one gave him any money. Most people walked away or around him, in some manner just tried to avoid him because this didn't look good, some big homeless guy just standing there on the sidewalk rattling coins in a cup in the middle of the afternoon in broad sweltering daylight. No hand-scrawled cardboard sign “I'm hungry” or song and dance or “God bless you,” “You have a nice day,” or some kind of strange speaking in tongues. Something ominous here, maybe threatening, portent of an uncomfortable situation looming on the horizon.

At some point I remembered the DAT recorder and switched it on, which, now that I'm writing this, reminds me of that Zen monk who always stands around the West entrance of Shibuya Station in Tokyo in his spotless robe and big straw hat begging for alms with his bowl out, which he sometimes also shook but never managed to draw the whole world down into its quiet din like this man on Sixth and Broadway did. I also tried to record this monk several times but as soon as I turned on the DAT he always shot me a deadly evil look and stopped shaking his bowl, stared me down with his dagger eyes till I walked away with my ears burning in shame. And this has been going on for years, because it's been that long since I've been seeing the same monk at Shibuya Station and not once have I been able to record him. Which I guess is fair enough – I never gave him any money, either.

I finished recording the man and his cup, then walked across Broadway to the other side of the street and kept going slowly from corner to corner around the intersection, maybe spending more time on the shady corners than the sunny ones, but moving on just the same. And I did this for around one hour with the coins always there in the cup, ringing clear as a bell no matter where I stood. I finally walked over to the man and dropped what little change I had into his cup. He didn't seem to notice, which was fine by me. I wonder where he is now. Twelve years since hearing those shaking coins. Their sound still haunts me.