

“Music of the Streets”—as depicted in Sheet Music

Angelo Rulli and Ron Bopp

The examination of words has long been used to study the life styles and customs of the times. One of the more entertaining, and revealing ways of conducting such a study is to look at sheet music from previous times. While today’s rap music and similar may be considered to be out of the mainstream, it’s interesting, if not amazing, to note the titles and lyrics of earlier eras, where we see that music in the mainstream was rife with words and phrases that would or could hardly be considered in today’s mainstream.

There is no official count of how many songs related to mechanical music were actually composed. It’s generally understood that over 1,000 such pieces were actually produced. Over the years, this author has seen something over 400 such titles; a fellow collector claims to have over 700 titles. In this article I’ve highlighted a small number of tunes related to the organ grinder. For reasons yet unclear to me, I have yet to see an organ-grinder related tune featuring an ethnic group other than Italian; however, we do find in the song *Organ Grinder Blues* the term “Au Revoir,” for a little French influence.

Of far greater interest are some of the idioms of days gone by: the Italian slang and slurs, the reference to monkeys (which all of us know continues to this day), references to other songs still known in the popular lexicon of today, and, of course, the lingo of the street.

It’s important to note the misnomer “hurdy-gurdy” as applied to organ grinding. Historically, in America, the colloquial term for crank organ has been hurdy-gurdy, even though they are in fact two completely separate instruments. The first being a renaissance-era hand-cranked instrument which has the appearance of a viola/autoharp; the latter of course having no resemblance to the stringed instrument, except for the crank.

And now, a journey back to another time as we recall the images, sounds and mores of the street music of America, as played and portrayed by the organ grinder.



Figure 1. *The Italian Vendor's Song*.

In the first piece, *The Italian Vendor's Song* (1895) the most notable aspect is that of the bird (Figure 1). While in America grinders have always been associated with monkeys, in Europe and South America, the bird accompanies the grinder. Most often, the bird was trained to retrieve a paper printed fortune (ala fortune cookies) from atop the organ. The organ was actually used to bring attention to the fortune telling, for which the grinder made substantial tips. This led to another problem, fortune telling was usually associated with gypsies, typically held to a code of ethics.

This grinder eventually realized that a monkey might be better for the image, and perhaps for greater income. Unfortunately, the music composer, and the grinder, seemed to be lacking, taste and common sense. It would be unlikely such lyrics would pass the politically correct standards of today.

We raise-a de grape vine and make-a
de wine then have a good time...
I bring-a your fortune to tell, dis littler
bird tella your fate...
Some people they beg she lay hard
boiled egg. This whole bis-ness make-a
me sick...
A monkey I buy one day, and an organ
too, so I can play...
I pay so much as ten dollar, for her I

buy a gun,
When the monk swallow de money, I
get-a my stiletto so fine, cut open de
monk, but don't understand,
The monkey she die every time.

Our second song is the best-known organ grinder song of all time: *The Sidewalks of New York* (1894, Figure 2). It’s interesting that reference is made to two songs that have been popular among children for nearly a century: *London Bridge*, and *Ring around the Rosie*. Equally interesting is that both songs are from jolly old England!

Down in front of Casey's, old brown
wooden stoop,
On a summer's evening, we formed a
merry group.
Boys and girls together, we would sing
and waltz,
While Tony played the organ on the
sidewalks of New York.

East side, west side, all around the
town.
The tots sang “Ring-a-round-a-rosie;”
“London bridge is falling down.”

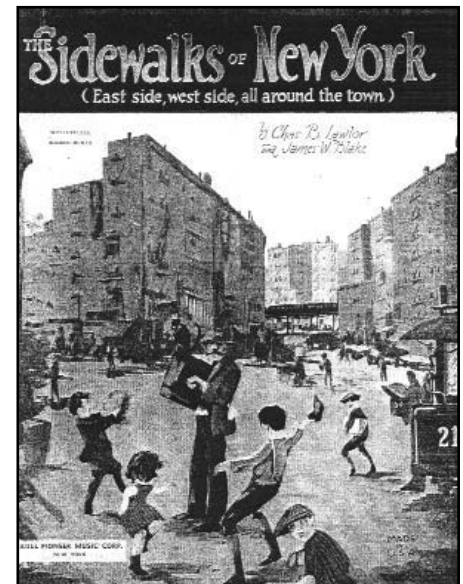


Figure 2. *The Sidewalks of New York*

The third ditty (*The Organ Grinder's Serenade*, 1897) affords the first reference to the amount of money tipped the



Figure 3. *The Organ Grinder's Serenade*. Note the four different photos of the hand organ on this sheet music cover.

organ grinder... a penny (Figure 3). It's both fascinating, and perhaps sad, that many passersby today still consider that to be adequate compensation. Here we see referenced another long-famous tune: *After The Ball is Over*.

Turning that shiny old handle, not a soul stops, or will listen, quickly they pass the door.

He heaves a sigh as they go by, they've heard those tunes before.

Yet close by stands a little miss,

"Here's a penny, please sir, play a tune for this..."

If you stay, I'll play my serenade..."

After the ball is over, softly the organ did play.

After the dancers leaving, Please mister come every day.

Another piece of sheet music of the time (1895) is *The Organs in the Street*. The cover is plain with no organ illustration and only once are the organs mentioned: "Then heel and toe, we dancing go, To the organs in the street."

In *Simple Simon Simple* (1905) there's no reference to a grinder, except on the cover of the sheet music (Figure 4); perhaps attesting to a character so popular just putting his image on the cover would help sell the music! The cover depicts a character not only cranking a hand organ with his right hand but a xylophone with his left hand, a triangle with his left foot, bells swinging from his

right hip all the time his monkey is beating the bass drum on his back and clanging a cymbal on top of his head.

The gang calls it a fizzle if a kid don't get renown. But I'm classed by my lonely by the jay hawks of this place.

To them I'm simple only. All they read's my simple face.



Figure 4. *Simple Simon Simple*. Here the organ grinder is performing multiple tasks with the help of his monkey.



Figure 5. *When Verdi Plays the Hurdy Gurdy*.

When Verdi Plays the Hurdy Gurdy (1916) gives us reference to the Twist almost 50 years before it became popular as a dance craze; here referenced as the *Macaroni Twist*, of course they were making a disparaging remark about the

ethnicity of the grinder and his cranking (Figure 5). Note also the negative description of the organ as a "raggy hurdy gurdy." Little did they know then how valuable such ragatag organs would become decades later.

Tony Verdi has a raggy hurdy gurdy, when he plays a sweet Italian melody. When you're near him you'll be hearing harmony from across the sea.

The neighbors can't resist, that macaroni twist.

When Verdi plays the hurdy gurdy down in little Italy.



Figure 6. *Sunshine Alley*.

Sunshine Alley (1922) combines optimism with reality. While everyone loves their place of birth, there are lots of places that aren't so swell to be born (Figure 6). Regardless where that place might be, or humble or poor, the people make it special, even if they speak as "dese, does and dem."

Everybody loves their place of birth, Seems it's just the grandest spot on earth,

Some folks live in mansions, some live mighty well,

But the stork just dropped me, where it's not so swell:

Sunshine Alley, where the hand organs play.

Sunshine Alley there I first saw light of day.

Tho' it's humble and poor, every heart's a gem,

There the boys and the girls all say "Dese, Does and dem."

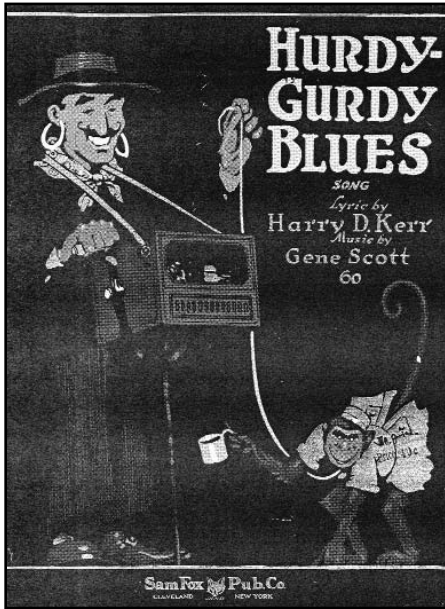


Figure 7. *Hurdy-Gurdy Blues*. This cover depicts a mean-appearing monkey.

Hurdy-Gurdy Blues (1923) depicts an organ on the cover but the lyrics are about a street piano (Figure 7). Here we see a reference to the French language (*Au Revoir*).

When we were young, don't you recall,
that old-time hurdy gurdy man
down on our street, it was a treat, those
days that old pianner seemed mighty
sweet.

Old hurdy gurdy man, won't you play
for me, say "Au Revoir" once more.
That tender "Don't you remember
sweet Alice Ben Bolt?"

Remember how ze monk played mon-
key shines, each time he got a shiny
dime?

Old tunes that some folks thought a lot
of noise, they gave to us a million joys.
That's why I cry now, those Hurdy
Gurdy Blues.

Although the song *The Hand Organ* (1923) doesn't illustrate the instrument on the sheet music cover, the lyrics are most interesting (Figure 8).

People practice years to learn the
fiddle or flute;
Clarinets and saxophones are hard to
learn to toot;
To learn to be a drummer would take
all summer.

Why not try organ grinding, you'll be
quickly finding
All the great musicians sell their music
canned!

You simply buy it, and when you try it,
It sounds much better than played by
hand!



Figure 8. *The Hand Organ*.



Figure 9. *The Organ Grinder*.

The Organ Grinder (1932) provides a glimpse into something few Americans know about organ grinders of days gone by: they were as likely to have a parrot as a monkey (Figure 9)! In this case, the parrot was taught to talk and that would be reason enough for passers-by to drop a coin in the cup. The lyrics note that the coin would be a penny or a nickel. The reference to the organ sounding like "an old tin pan" is not flattering, to say the least.

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Listen to the story of the organ man.
He found a parrot that whistles and
talks, that's how it first began.
Beneath your window he grinds and he
grinds, sounds like an old tin pan.
He bought a funny old melody box,
and so we have the organ man.

It's really awful, but nobody minds.
The music of the organ man.
The kids are happy whenever he's near,
let's help him if we can.
Out the window you must throw your
pennies and your nickels to the organ
man.

The following brief lyric (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 1932) connects the organ grinder with other happy sounds of spring (Figure 10).

Hark! I hear a hurdy gurdy down the
street.

Sending gaily on the air its song of
cheer, now I know spring is here.
Pussy willows, hurdy gurdys, robins
gay, seem to come the first spring day.



Figure 10. *The Hurdy Gurdy*.

The Sidewalk Waltz depicts a nostalgic look back (from 1933!) in a visit to a former neighborhood (Figure 11) and the sweet memories of an organ grinder that brings back "the sweet long ago." It's amazing that 70 years ago songs were already expressing the sadness of organ grinders of the past. Sung to the strains of *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*.

Here we are back in the old neighbor-
hood, the sidewalks that we used to
know. The old organ grinder is grind-

ing a tune, that brings back the sweet long ago. It's just a reminder of childhood and June, the childhood we used to know.



Figure 11. *The Sidewalk Waltz*.

Faithful little monkey, working every day.
Don't you often long to be far away?

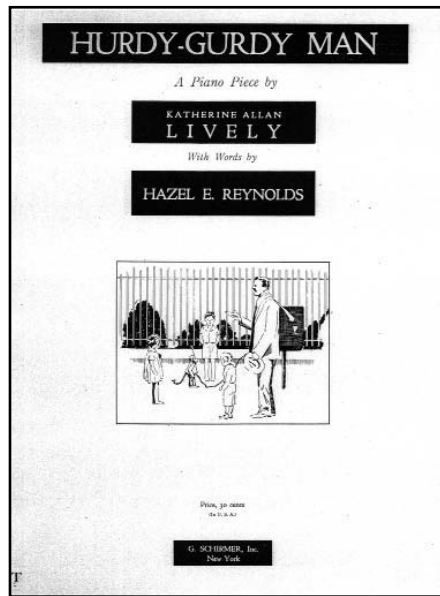


Figure 13. *Hurdy-Gurdy Man*.

Some people say you don't belong, I know they must be wrong.
Let them be unkind, you pay them no mind.
Cause the monkey on the string makes the kiddies laugh and sing
"Ring a-round the rosie."
Your just a Hurdy-Gurdy Man doing the best you can.

Organ Grinder's Swing (1936) was one of the most endearing of all the songs composed about the grinder (Figure 14). In part because it incorporates a dance beat, the song was wildly popular well beyond those interested in organ grinding. While it's not significant, the ante has been raised from a penny to a nickel.

Who's that coming down the street?
Good old organ grinder Pete.
He's the latest rhythm king
With his Organ Grinder's Swing

When he turns that handle down,
Music goes around and 'round,
Everybody starts to sing
To that Organ Grinder's Swing.

All the children tag along,
Just to listen to his song.
Monkey dancing on a string
To the Organ Grinder's Swing.

Drop a nickel in his hat
Like a rich aristocrat,
Ev'ry nickle that you fling
Makes that organ grinder swing.

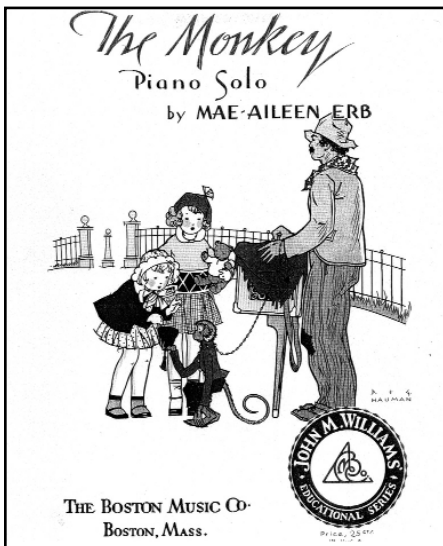


Figure 12. *The Monkey*.

The Monkey (1933) is one of the few songs devoted to the grinder's sidekick (Figure 12). Here we see the value of the monkey collecting those coins for his very old master. The words suggest the monkey had a long, tough life.

Clad in little flannel coat, made of brightest red,
See him take his jaunty cap from his head.
Reaching out for pennies, do not think him bold.
For his master needs them, see, he's very old.

In *Hurdy-Gurdy Man* (1936) the theme once again is nostalgia as the sound of a crank organ returns a child's memory to childhood scenes (Figure 13). We also see the tinge of discrimination
Your music can't compare with a symphony, it isn't grand by any means.
But to me each melody returns me to childhood scenes.



Figure 14. *Organ Grinder's Swing*. This was released by "Exclusive Publications" of New York in 1936 in two versions, both with identical lyrics and music. The cover on the left depicts an increase in animation of the cartoon characters than does the more somber grinder on the right.

Figure 15 (opposite—page 33). Shown are sheet music covers with little or no reference in the lyrics (or absent lyrics) to outdoor mechanical music.

Blue Bird of Happiness

FRANKS-TILMAN
TANDOK-THORNTON
By **TAN PERCEE**
Come to the Organ
Music by Tan Percee

CARRIE
OR
CARRIE HARRY HARRY

Music by **JUNIE McCREE**
Music by **ALBERT VON TILZER**

GIRIBIRIBIN
A. FORTACODA

Music by **MAXWELL ACRASTIN**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

COME DOWN TO KEW

SUNG BY THE GRAND ACCOMPANIST
By **CARL DEIS**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

Down Our Way

Successfully featured by
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

EVERY DAY'S MY Birthday

PIANO SOLO
By **EDGAR A. BRAZELTON**

From the Street

PIANO SOLO
By **EDGAR A. BRAZELTON**
Gambie Music Co. Chicago

HURDY GURDY RAGTIME MAN
HAND SOLO

By **MAXWELL KORNSTEIN**

HURDY GURDY

PIANO SOLO BY **ALFRED RICHTER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

HURDY GURDY MAN

PIANO SOLO BY **ALFRED RICHTER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

HURDY-GURDY MAN
Words and Music by **GOPPEY COHEN, SAUL CHAPLIN**

PIANO SOLO
By **ALFRED RICHTER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

Hurdy-Gurdy WALTZ

FOR PIANO
By **ALFRED RICHTER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

HURDY-GURDY

FOR THE PIANO
By **ALFRED MARSHOM**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

MY FLUFF-A-DE RUFF

By **JAMES BROCKMAN**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

organ-grinder in the rain

Piano Solo
By **Frank Adams**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

The Children's Hour

By **LAURENE GARDNER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

The HURDY GURDY GIRL
A MUSICAL COMEDY IN 3 ACTS

By **LAURENE GARDNER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

THE HURDY GURDY MAN

By **ALFRED RICHTER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

the old organ grinder

By **LOUIS SUGARMAN**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

THE ORGAN GRINDER

By **ELEANORA PATER**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

the ORGAN GRINDER'S MONKEY

PIANO SOLO BY **EVERETT STAVANS**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

The Organ, the Monkey and Me

By **EVERETT STAVANS**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

TIC-TOCK POLKA

By **G. LAMA**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

WAIT FOR MARGARITA AT ELLIS ISLE

By **MICHAEL SOUBANE**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK

WHEN THE ORGAN MAN COMES ROUND

By **J.W. GUINAN**
C. SCHURMER, INC., NEW YORK



Figure 16. *I Heard A Hurdy-Gurdy*.

I heard a Hurdy-Gurdy (1943) repeats the nostalgic theme with reference to the way the world used to be (Figure 16)! And the penny was the coin of the day again.

I miss the hurdy-gurdy man and his happy song. I heard a hurdy-gurdy playing yesterday. Life was gay, yesterday. I wonder when I'm gonna hear it play again. The world was very merry then. You didn't need a calendar to tell you it was Spring. The merry music brought it to your door. Little Tommy told the man to play a song that he could sing, or he wouldn't give a penny any more.

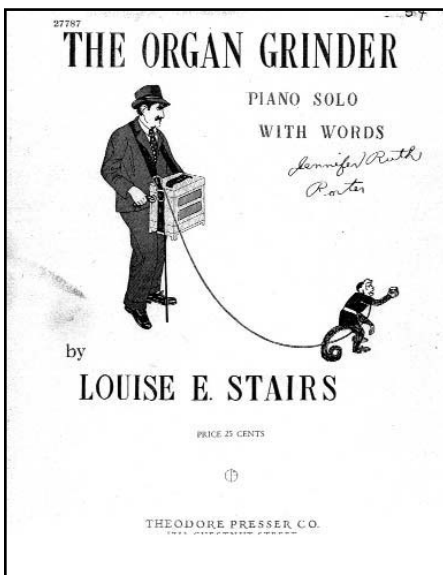


Figure 17. *The Organ Grinder*.

The Organ Grinder (1946) gives us a view of city life and the grinder and the importance to the grinder of his monkey climbing vines to the upper windows so that coins can be collected there (Figure 17).

The organ grinder is on the street; I hear him playing his music sweet. A monkey dressed in a suit of red Is racing on ahead. He climbs the vine to my window sill, and holds his cup for a dime.



Figure 18. *Organ Grinder Man*

Organ Grinder Man (1947) again reveals the happy times associated with such music (Figure 18).

Oh, the organ grinder man with a monkey on a chain. Will be coming down the street now that spring is here again. Oh, the monkey on the chain is as cute as he can be; For a penny in his cup he will tip his hat to me

Tippie and the Hurdy-Gurdy (1947) focuses on springtime and the music the grinder brought (Figure 19). Of note is the trained monkey and his ability to tip his hat for tips.

When I hear the hurdy-gurdy, then I know it's spring, And I want to dance and I want to sing. The hurdy gurdy has a monkey, cute as he can be, I put a penny in his hand, he tips his hat to me.

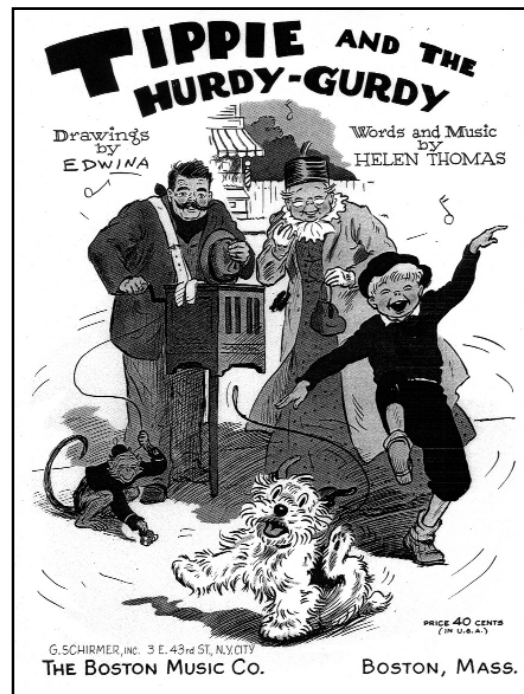


Figure 19. *Tippie and the Hurdy-Gurdy*. This is one of the more colorful sheet music covers.



Figure 20. *Jolly Fella Tarentella*.

Jolly Fella Tarentella—The Organ-Grinder's Song (1949) featured the most popular singing group in the history of recorded sound: The Andrews Sisters (Figure 20). The lyrics portray the happiness of singing from windows and in the streets. The first and only reference also to the grinder hiring himself out for private events.

There is singing from the windows, there is dancing in the street. Many, many is the penny that I make wherever I roam.

You can find me in the park, and on
the fancy boulevard,
And I even make appointments to
appear in your back yard.



Figure 21. *Play, Hurdy-Gurdy, Play.*

Play, Hurdy-Gurdy, Play (1949) depicts a love song featuring a request to the grinder (Figure 21) to “charm her.”

Please tell my lady fair, romance is in the air.

Ask her if she will go dancing with me as you play.

Lovers are dancing the night away.

You can disarm her, your music will charm her, so play hurdy-gurdy play.

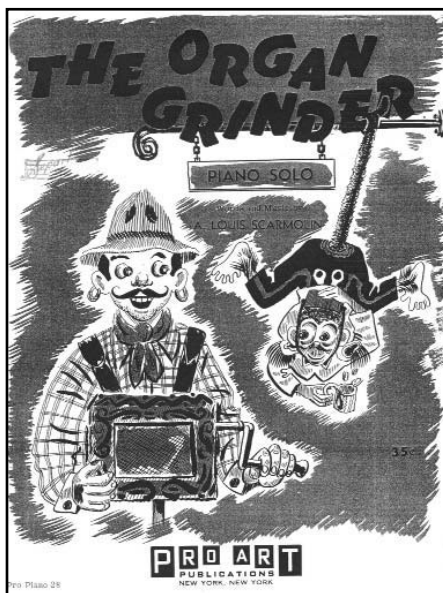


Figure 22. *The Organ Grinder*

The Organ Grinder (1949) features children dancing and throwing pennies (Figure 22).

On the sidewalk the children are dancing, to the tune of the old organ grinder...

So their pennies the children are throwing, as they twirl and they twirl with their partners.

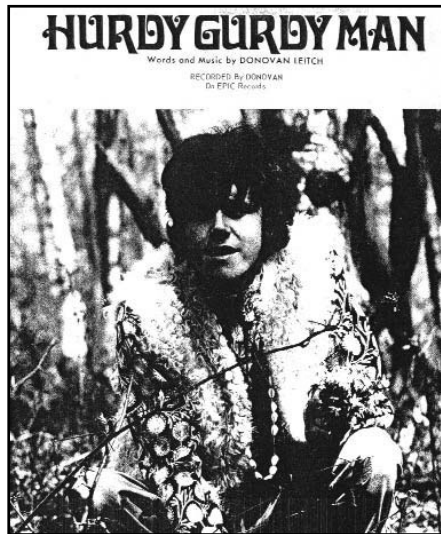


Figure 23. *Hurdy Gurdy Man*

Hurdy Gurdy Man, 1968. Donovan was a popular singer in the 1970s and 80s and his rendition of *Hurdy Gurdy Man* (Figure 23) is a classic among two generations of fans.

Thrown like a star in my first sleep, I open my eyes to take a peep.
To find I was by the seas, gazing with tranquility.
Twas then the hurdy gurdy man came.
Down through all eternity, the crying of humanity,
Twas then the hurdy gurdy man came singing songs of love.

Last in this group of mechanical street music is *Love Me, Love Me Love* (1971) by Frank Mills (Figure 24). This was also known as “The Organ Grinder Song.”

Standing on the corner passin’ time away,
I thought I heard the organ grinder singing as he played;
He had a little monkey with a little cup of tin
And he danced for joy when someone new put a penny in.



Figure 24. *Love Me, Love Me Love.*

Mechanical Music in Sheet Music Titles

- Grind-Organ Man*
- Hurdy Gurdy Ragtime Man*
- Hurdy Gurdy*
- Hurdy-Gurdy Blues*
- Hurdy-Gurdy Man* (1936)
- Hurdy-Gurdy Man* (1936)
- Hurdy-Gurdy Man* (1968)
- Hurdy-Gurdy Waltz*
- Hurdy-Gurdy*
- I Heard a Hurdy Gurdy*
- Organ Grinder in the Rain*
- Organ Grinder Man*
- Organ Grinder's Swing*
- Play, Hurdy-Gurdy, Play*
- The Hand Organ*
- The Hurdy Gurdy Girl*
- The Hurdy Gurdy Man*
- The Hurdy Gurdy*
- The Monkey*
- The Old Organ Grinder*
- The Organ Grinder* (1932)
- The Organ Grinder* (1946)
- The Organ Grinder* (1949)
- The Organ Grinder* (1960)
- The Organ Grinder's Monkey*
- The Organ Grinder's Serenade*
- The Organ, The Monkey and Me*
- The Organs in the Street*
- Tippie and the Hurdy Gurdy*
- When the Organ Man Comes Around*
- When Verdi plays the Hurdy Gurdy*

We hope you enjoyed this historical journey via song lyrics and covers. There is much here to ponder and enjoy. There are also countless other related titles and lyrics; they must wait. Happy cranking.

Angelo Rulli, White Bear Lake, MN, is in his fifth and final career. He has cranked organs in eleven different countries, and 25 states, and has a dream of doubling those numbers. Ron Bopp is editor/publisher of the *Carousel Organ*.