

**“Only Those Who Attempt the Absurd Achieve the Impossible”: A Profile on  
“Ramblin’ Dan” and His One-Man Band  
By: Marlo Jappen**

A harmonious blend of different sounds fills the Boston Public Gardens. From a distance, one would probably attribute this music to that of a band, but as you move closer you will discover that this music is actually coming from a single source – a man playing an absurd-looking device that looks like it came straight out of a Dr. Seuss book.

This man is Daniel Friedman, but he refers to himself as “Ramblin’ Dan.” The bizarre contraption that he is playing is one that he made himself. He calls it “The Amazing World Band” and says it is a “Peace Wave Generator” that takes the energy of music, converts it to Peace Waves and broadcasts them to the trouble spots of the world. He assembled it from the “junk” that he found in the basement of his co-op. It is made out of a colorful assortment of instruments such as horns, cymbals, drums, bells, and a guitar. An old pair of cross country skis serves as the base of this machine, and added knickknacks such as a rainbow pinwheel, a candy-colored bucket, a stuffed monkey, and a rubber chicken named Henrietta are attached to this device. He wears a helmet that has a tambourine attached to it, which is decorated with a peace sign in the center and the words “Don’t Worry. Be Happy.” Around his neck is a zebra-print harmonica, which matches his sneakers, which are also zebra print. When he stomps with his left foot, a mallet strikes the drum that is strapped to his back. When stomps with his other foot, the cymbals, which are also strapped to his back, clap together. Despite his ability to play multiple instruments, he does not consider himself a musician. “I’m not really a musician,” Dan says modestly. “I just play by feeling. It’s just expression really.”

“I don’t read music,” he adds. “I’m an entertainer. But, my brother is a classical musician.” Friedman is sixty years old, and has been doing this nonstop for thirty years. “I started doing this during the time of the Vietnam War when big protest movements were going on,” Dan says. “Then I decided that we need peace waves all

the time.” According to Dan, “Achieving peace is the only way we’ll keep from blowing ourselves up. We need to wake up and find a better way. We now have advanced technology and so much capability. It’s really up to the younger generation. Maybe they’ll figure something out.” Ramblin’ Dan’s endeavor to share his music started after he completed his studies in Botanical Sciences at the University of Wisconsin and worked as a microscopist at Yale University. He wanted to explore the world, and playing street music helped him support his travels. Performing is Friedman’s only occupation. It is the one thing that supports him financially. “Sometimes you do well, sometimes you don’t,” he says. “I don’t make much money, but I don’t need a lot. Just enough to live and travel.”

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Dan grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. He currently resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with ten other people, in a housing cooperative called The Cambridge Cooperative Club, which is located between Harvard and Porter Square. According to the website, “They live in a community guided by a consensus, in a house that is neither owned nor rented, with roots of ecological sustainability and social justice going back to 1963.” Together they are dedicated to learning from one another and contributing to the local community.

Friedman has performed all over the world. So far he has played in more than 35 countries, and is planning to go to Sikkim, India, for a few months. But as part of his typical routine, he puts on a show at the Public Gardens on weekends between 12 and 4. “I really love playing in the Public Gardens,” he says, his eyes widening. “The squirrels there have been getting in on the act as well. Once during break, one of them came up and started playing my tambourine with his little paw. I wish I had my camera with me! And twice now a squirrel has come up after the show and put a walnut in my tip bucket! I swear that this is really true, and I have witnesses as well.” In Boston he does not need a permit to perform. He rides his bike to the Gardens from Cambridge, transporting his instrument along with him.

“Ramblin’ Dan” tries to play all year, if he can. But if it is too cold, no one will be outside to enjoy his music and his fingers will get numb when he plays. In these cases, he performs underground at subway stations like Porter Square and Downtown Crossing. In February he traveled to Cancun, Mexico, to escape the cold weather of Boston for two weeks. Dan stayed in a hostel for ten dollars a night and played music on the streets and at a school. Although he did not make much money from this excursion, he had a fun time doing what he loves-which is making people smile. Toward the end of January, he modified his instrument so that he would not have to pay extra fees for his baggage on his travels. The new model that he now uses is more portable, weighing 14 pounds, much lighter than the previous one, which was more than 40 pounds. This new machine allows him to play longer without his joints aching or his back getting sore. Although performing can sometimes be physically exhausting for Dan, he does not see himself retiring anytime soon. “I imagine I will be able to perform in one way or another for quite some time,” he says thoughtfully. “Recently someone sent me a picture of a street musician who is 104! I don’t think I’ll live that long, but he is an inspiration to me. I’m sure everything will work out for me as long as I keep on doing what I love best.”

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On a warm spring afternoon, a crowd gathers around Dan Friedman. He begins by saying, “Only those who attempt the absurd achieve the impossible.” This same phrase, originally said by Albert Einstein, is also inscribed on his drum set. He starts off by singing “Let it Be” by the Beatles as he simultaneously plays his contraption. The audience claps along to his upbeat rendition. “Anyone is welcome to join in at anytime,” he says to the crowd as he points to a pink hula hoop that is next to him with horns, bells, and tambourines inside. A young girl with pigtails and her mother pick up a set of bells and follow along to the music. Curious onlookers stop to join in on the fun, both tourists and locals alike, and people of all ages and backgrounds. They circle around Dan, who is wearing a vibrant striped shirt and a smile across his

face. More children pick up instruments from inside the hula hoop and play along. Friedman moves on to more numbers like Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" and "Peace Train" by Cat Stevens. He wanders around the crowd, interacting with the audience. People drop money into his tip jar. There is another jar to the left of this one, but it is meant for donations of chocolate. "I could really use some chocolate, folks," he says with a laugh, drawing attention to this jar.

Every once in a while Dan tires and takes a break to rest his voice as well as his muscles. "This is going to be my last number before I pack up and call it a day," he says, but he does not always stay true to this commitment. Once a passerby marvels at his strange but wonderful machine, he cannot resist but delight the crowd in yet another song.