

Reclaim the Streets in Santa Cruz

by Christopher Robin

Welcome to Santa Cruz, a cozy little beach town where a person can get a ticket for pinching another friend playfully (a cop jumped out of his car and called it “disruptive”); and a young homeless teen who is eight months pregnant can be called a liar in public by a City Council member for trying to expose drug dealing at a local homeless center.

In the last two years, oppressive ordinances such as the “Move Along Law,” have been enacted to punish homeless and poor people for basic acts of survival. These include: No panhandling after dark (when soup kitchens have closed and dumpsters are locked), or within 50 feet of an ATM machine (this ban includes asking for a cigarette). No political tabling for more than an hour and within 10 feet of a building. No sitting within 14 feet of a building. No lying down in public or covering up with a blanket. No hackeysack, bubble blowing, juggling, fortune telling, writing in chalk on the sidewalk.

Joe Williams, who is running for Congress on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket in our district, brought his guitar downtown for the weekly SAFE gathering. Robert Norse, one of the organizers, scoured the streets for cops while I passed out literature. People danced in a circle, snapping their fingers and jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

As the weather grew colder, spirits



Susan Hamilton, Coral Rock and Valerie make music in Santa Cruz. Alene Smith

didn't diminish. A local man named Hot Rod started jumping around chanting “holy, holy, holy!” like a latter-day Allen Ginsberg and: “Bless this sidewalk! Freedom! Our streets!” The coins began to flow, shoppers stopped to watch, some joining in, and chips were provided to anyone that was hungry.

Merchants, police and the City Council have tried to drive local street performers out of town, using anti-free speech ordinances that make more than 75 percent of the public sidewalks off limits to street performers. A violation could result in a fine of more than \$100.

SAFE would like to see a return to the Street Performers' Voluntary Guidelines

which were successful for over 20 years until July 2002, when the new ordinances were passed by the City Council, most likely caving in to pressure from merchants to make sidewalks more aesthetically pleasing to shoppers and tourists.

By the seventh week, a flute, violin, drums, card table and petitions had been added, as well as delicious vegan soup donated by a local chef; no police harassment has yet been reported. This event is surely gaining momentum. The streets belong to all of us. Take them back!

Christopher Robin participated in the original soup uprisings of the late 1980s in Santa Cruz. He is no longer homeless and has lived in low-income housing for the last 10 years.