

ColdType
Issue 6
2002

Pages 21 to 24

Section Three



UNITED STATES

Still life

The strange
world of
Wells Oviatt III

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“I watch everybody; I’ve seen so many weird things ...”

If you’ve spent any time downtown since Wells Oviatt III came to Portland, Oregon, in April 1999, you’ve seen him. And if you have, you can be certain he’s seen you. “I watch everybody,” says the soft-spoken 27-year-old, exuding a remarkable calm, as if sound takes a long time to reach him. And in four years of performing on the streets, he says, “I’ve seen so many weird things.”

For example, Oviatt recalls watching a street person who was imitating him while talking to himself. “He seemed to be working himself up to robbing a store or something. He finally said, ‘Why not? Why not?’ and took off.”

Oviatt can be found around the square from noon until 4 p.m. in all but the worst weather. He’ll be sitting on his folding chair,



Above: Oviatt pulls on his sneakers while Mowcee watches.

Left: He applies the green makeup that transforms him into a computer nerd.



“I pay my bills, but then, I don’t drive a car ...”

Oviatt’s closet is packed with silver, gold, blue, green and orange costumes.



“The buses are heated. Sometimes I get so hot I have a headache”

perfectly still and brightly colored – orange, blue, green, gold, silver or copper. His copper-colored persona is a policeman, while his green man is a Bill Gates-ish computer nerd, complete with keyboard.

Raised in Estacada, Oviatt migrated to San Francisco, where he lived in a tiny studio apartment on Treasure Island with his pet rat and attended culinary school. “But all he learned to do was juggle,” his girlfriend, Elisha Silvey (known as Mowcee), says with a laugh as she bounces their 5-month-old baby, Faith, on her hip.

Oviatt’s juggling led him to a group of painted people in Union Square, and he was hooked.

“I moved in with them,” he says. When Union Square closed for six months, Oviatt came home to be near his parents and his brother, David, who had performed with him in San Francisco (“He’d be yellow and I’d be orange”).

Summer is his most lucrative time of year, “though rainy days with sun breaks are pretty good.” Christmas

shoppers can be generous, though much depends on the economy. “If spending’s down, I don’t do so well,” he says. How much does he make? “Well,” he says thoughtfully, “I pay my bills, but then, I don’t drive a car.” His girlfriend also works as a waitress.

Oviatt says he’s the only painted man in Portland, although he has groupies, including a 10-year-old named Henry “who’s modeling himself after me,” he says with a chuckle.

Sitting still for hours at a time can be cold work, so Oviatt dresses in layers, starting with long johns. That doesn’t work well for riding the bus from Gateway, where he lives. “The buses are heated,” he says, “and sometimes I get so hot I have a headache.”

Oviatt’s main complaints are rude children and the Brinks security truck that idles behind him for 10 minutes at a time, choking him with diesel fumes.

Is there a future in being the painted man? “Maybe if I go to Vegas,” Oviatt says. “I’d like to do that in five years, or get on with something else.”

Wells Oviatt III contemplates life from the bus as he heads into Portland for another day as a piece of living art in Pioneer Courthouse Square.

This article was first published in The Portland Tribune.