



Morgan Johnstone is a homeless musician who performs as Da Lil' Mo Sideshow.
PHOTO/MATT BIEKER

Street smarts

Da Lil' Mo Sideshow

If you've spent any time at the Hub Coffee

Roasters on Riverside Drive or strolled the narrow sidewalks of the Riverwalk over the last two years, chances are you're already familiar with Da Lil' Mo Sideshow. Born Morgan Johnstone, "Lil' Mo" plays classical guitar for the citizens of Reno on most fair-weather days.

"This particular place on the river is a pretty place, visually speaking, and I'm not really the barroom kind of guy," Johnstone said. "I'm a coffee drinker, so I feel very comfortable being across the street from a coffee house."

Johnstone just completed his second Christmas as the Riverwalk's resident busker. He's easily identifiable by his wagon, small amplifier and bucket from which he collects his steadiest source of income—tips.

"I'm a homeless man—I am poor as dirt," Johnstone said. "I am a beggar, a very good beggar. My dear old, rough, tough deceased dad said, 'Don't ever ask anybody for anything.' I'm not really asking, but I do have my bucket out, and I try to play the best that I can."

Johnstone said he's lived on the streets consistently since 2001. Originally from the Texas Gulf Coast, he lived in Alaska for 10 years before moving to Reno in 2011. Music is in his blood, he said, having known family members who played. He saved up to buy a guitar, amp and sheet music. Because of his love for classical arrangements and in order to learn new music, Johnstone sight reads the music on his stand every day.

"If you fancy yourself a musician, you might as well become a literate musician,"

Johnstone said. "I can play way more music than, say, mister wonderful Jimi Hendrix. It's like OK, he had all this unique stuff, but then again, he couldn't read music. I can play music all day long and not play the same thing twice because I can read."

In a break from his typical performances, which have included standards like "Au Claire De Lune" or Mauro Giuliani's "Study in A Minor," Johnstone spent the holiday season reciting Christmas carols as both a celebration of the season and a technical challenge.

"I've added new paper, new instructional paper to increase my technique further," Johnstone said. "I have three current lessons going on, one is to improve my ability to play scale passages, and, another one, I'm seeking to improve my rhythmic ability and my ability to count more difficult rhythms, and then the third part is my ability to sight read music."

On his wagon are cardboard signs advertising his musical identity, religious and political beliefs, and he often takes time to chat with passersby in between songs. Johnstone describes himself as a conservative Christian and alleges that part of his circumstances are the result of a targeted assault that happened years ago.

"I claim I was wrongfully emasculated as a teenager by Planned Parenthood people," Johnstone said. "And I want them to fork over \$100,000,000 for the injury."

Advertising this information, he said, is an effort to be transparent with his audience.

"I mean, it's like you see my dark side, you see my entertainment side, you see the plain old fella inside his scheme," Johnstone said.

He said that the reactions from the public have been polarized—some people greatly enjoy his presence on the Riverwalk, while others have threatened him with violence for his playing. Johnstone will play until dusk, then he'll pack up his instrument and wagon to find shelter for the night. As long as it's clear, though, Da Lil' Mo Sideshow will be back in the morning. □



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Judy Chicago, *Smoke Goddess V* (detail), from the *Women and Smoke* series, 1972, Flares, performance outside of Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives. Photo courtesy of Judy Chicago/Art Resource, NY.