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The Fanciest Busking Gig in America: Outside a Gas Station in the Hamptons

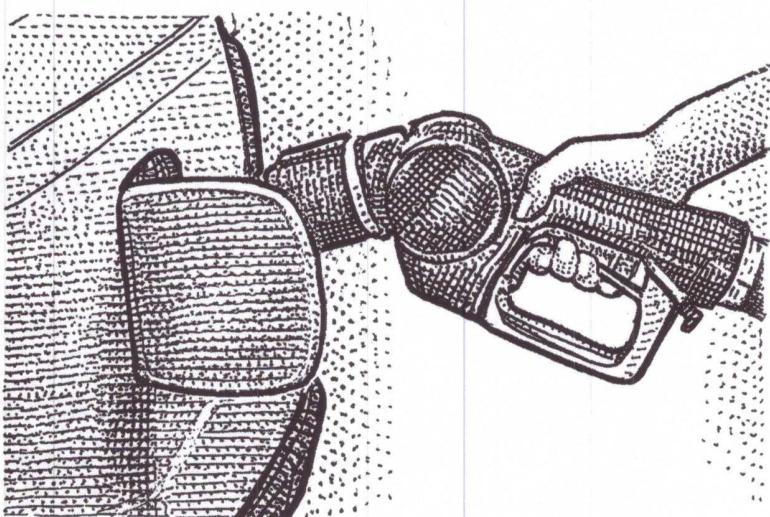
Swanky pit stop offers live music, magic to appeal to wealthy summer crowd; 'as quirky a gig as they come'

By Emily Glazer

Aug. 3, 2018 10:31 a.m. ET

SOUTHAMPTON, N.Y.—When advertising executive Mark Preiser stopped for gas recently near his vacation home in this swanky summer resort town, he heard a guitarist playing soft rock near the pumps.

"I was a bit shocked to see a performer at a gas station," he says.



Fill-up comes with free live music.

Stuart Markus is a full-time musician with one of the wackiest gigs around. Most summer weekends, he plays for the Maserati and Ferrari crowd at Gas Hampton. The gas station, with its celebrity customers, fancied-up bathroom, live entertainment and colorful mural, is an unofficial gateway to the Hamptons. And it may be the best spot to play for tips in all of Long Island.

Mr. Markus's audience, mostly people coming or going to the Hamptons on Route 27, has an attention span not much longer than it takes to fill a tank. "It's definitely as quirky a gig as they come," says Mr. Markus, adding that he doesn't bother to promote it because "people get gas when they need gas."

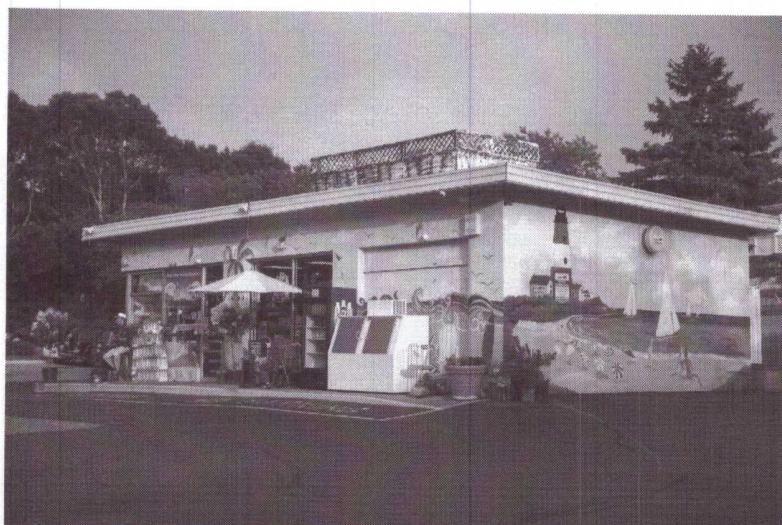
Mr. Markus, a working musician for about 25 years and a member of the folk-rock band Gathering Time, used to set up near an ice chest with a "propane sold here" sign and some cat

litter used to clean up oil spills. Recently, he moved with his tip jar back to a cleaner spot near some potted palm trees.

“My philosophy has always been to make a living, you go where the gigs are,” he says. “They might be kind of odd. They might be places you never expected to play.”

Southampton, unlike New York City, isn’t especially tolerant of buskers. Musicians aren’t allowed to perform on the street or public sidewalks without permission or a permit.

Gas Hampton owner Sergio Celikoyar hired the musician as part of an effort to pry people out of their cars and over to his convenience store to spend a little more money. His aim is to create an aesthetic that screams Hamptons, not roadside pit stop.



The owner hired a local muralist to decorate the gas station, including the entrance, below, to its fancy bathroom. PHOTO: GORDON M. GRANT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)



He hired a local muralist to decorate the store as a beach, with surfboards, palm trees, sailboats and a lighthouse. Painted circus tents lead to the bathroom, which is so clean it drew praise from reality-television star Bethenny Frankel. She tweeted it was the “nicest gas station bathroom I’ve ever seen.”

Gas Hampton has seen more than its share of stars. Jimmy Fallon and Brooke Shields have posed for photos. Golfer Jack Nicklaus stopped in to ask for directions. Television host Dr. Mehmet Oz came by.

Mr. Markus, the guitarist, gets paid by the owner about \$150 for a three-hour performance, plus tips. Those can be as much as \$20 a car. His filling-station set list includes Jackson Browne's "Running on Empty," America's "Ventura Highway," Simon & Garfunkel's "America," and—not surprisingly, given the crowd—Jimmy Buffett.

One woman walked up to him recently on her way to the convenience store and asked if he played any "Jesus music." He played the first song that came to mind, "Amazing Grace." She tipped him \$20.



Mr. Markus gets paid about \$150 for a three-hour performance, plus tips of as much as \$20 a car. PHOTO: GORDON M. GRANT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Local teenagers can be a tougher crowd. Mr. Markus has gotten used to some sarcastic requests for songs by rappers Jay-Z or Drake.

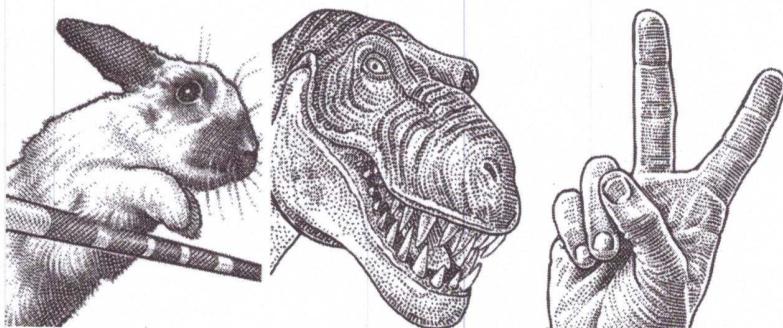
Sometimes customers pause to take photos or video, he says, because a live musical performance at a gas station "is sort of an only-in-the-Hamptons kind of thing."

On some summer weekends, when Mr. Markus isn't singing, the owner pays a local magician to do card, coin and rope tricks. Tom Hashim, who works by day as a salesman for a home-improvement company, sets up a table with a sign "Razzle Dazzle Co." and dons a vest featuring bunnies coming out of hats.

Mr. Hashim, who prefers performing indoors, says he waits until customers get out of their cars to make his tricks "more personal." He will often open with a quick card trick and then start turning single dollar bills into \$100s. Sometimes he will float a silk handkerchief or a napkin in front of a customer.

However fancy the clientele, though, there is no escaping that the stage is a gas station. Noisy vehicles are an annoyance. "[I] grit my cheeks and play through it," says Mr. Markus. "When you're a musician, you get used to a certain number of 'grin-and-bear-it' moments." He says he

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wouldn't want to create a "volume war," since "nobody needs that."

On the plus side, there is the exposure. Kirsten Lonnie, executive director of the Southampton Cultural Center, says people driving out to the Hamptons could be "heavy hitters," or folks living in private estates who may be looking for musicians for a private party or



When the guitarist isn't performing, local magician Tom Hashim sometimes entertains motorists with card, coin and rope tricks.
PHOTO: EMILY GLAZER/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

event.

Mr. Markus says he hands out a couple of business cards each time he plays at Gas Hampton. It has led to one party booking in Southampton, so far.

"That is one of the things I had in mind when I took the gig," he says. "The parties do pay well."

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