

Noah Koon
UGA Libraries Undergraduate Research Award Essay

Five days a week, I sit in my glorified janitor's closet (carrel) pouring through books on Victorian street musicians, noise pollution, degeneration, and Victorian medicine. The walls are plastered with old maps of London (to identify streets in my sources), pictures of ragged old men grinding at any number of strange instruments, and comics maligning the savage Victorian street-musician. For 30 hours a week, I sit in here reading from books, pamphlets, and cartoons in any number of subject areas...and I love it.

I began working on my Honors history thesis in May of 2008 by simply sifting through the DA section of the main library for any books that sounded interesting. When this proved too tedious, I turned to the library website. In the past, I have used Galileo for nearly every research paper I have written, regardless of the subject. JSTOR has been an indispensable tool in my college career. It proved equally valuable when searching for a thesis topic. After ten minutes of playing around on JSTOR, I found an article titled "The Soundproof Study", by John M. Picker. This essay used the story of a Victorian writer, Thomas Carlyle, and his efforts to block out distracting street music by building a cork-lined study in his house, to introduce and analyze the problem of street music in 19th century London. Immediately intrigued by the topic, I turned my focus to street music and life in Victorian London. I began by searching every related term on GIL and tracking down any promising results.

After poring through the library I had amassed, I began going down to the fourth floor and searching shelf by shelf through the DA section to see if any useful looking books might have slipped by my GIL searches. I figured this would only take a day, but everything I read opened up new questions answered only by books on other floors and in other libraries (Science, Law, Map). At this point, my research evolved beyond a history paper and into something much broader.

Having chosen a professor who does not specialize in British history, I did not have a person to turn to for ready recommendations. The nebulous quality of social history also made research difficult. As I mentioned earlier, many of my sources did not come from the British history section. By using the bibliography and footnotes from each of my most rewarding sources, I was able to find books and papers relating to my topic that approached it from other disciplines or had titles that would not have turned up in any of my GIL searches. This multidisciplinary approach to research made finding sources more difficult, but in the end I feel I gained a more comprehensive knowledge of my topic and it will ultimately make my thesis more interesting and accessible.

Once the fall semester started up, I decided to meet with a research librarian to learn how to research my topic as fully as possible. Being a perfectionist, I felt I would never rest until I had every book, paper, or news article that contained the words street music, noise, or nuisance. I met with Ms. Trapp and we went over Galileo, Inter-library loan, and Worldcat. I was fairly familiar with Galileo, but Ms. Trapp showed me search engines in other studies such as entertainment, sociology, and anthropology. One unexpectedly valuable tool Ms. Trapp showed me was the online Oxford English Dictionary. Of course I had used dictionaries before, but Ms. Trapp showed me how to find the history of words like “busker”. By finding out when certain terms were first used, I could limit my search terms to words used during the nineteenth century.

I spent days on Worldcat searching for maps, books, and dissertations that might prove useful in my research. I became well acquainted with ILL, and made frequent use of their services. To date I have requested 23 articles from Interlibrary Loan as well as 3 books, almost all of which have proved useful in my research.

The two most important tools in my research have undoubtedly been Palmers Index to the Times and Pooles Plus. Palmers provided me with a list of every article in the Times from the 1800’s that contained the contained period appropriate terms for relating to noise, nuisances, and

street music. I searched for other terms as well, but with limited success. Any that were not available online, I found in the written indices kept on the first floor of the main library and then on microfilm in the basement. In all, I found more than 80 articles in the Times. I read each of them, took notes in the margin, and later typed up their main points in separate word documents organized around my outline.

Next I turned to Pooles Plus where I tried similar searches to those performed in Palmer's. My searches returned 95 results, around 40 of which proved useful. Next, I used Worldcat to locate where each article could be found and noted that in the margins of the search print-off. I printed or copied any articles available in the UGA libraries. For the remaining results, I made requests via ILL.

I never knew my topic would become so broad. At first I approached my topic purely as a chronological history, but the combination of finding my ideas already executed and discovering so many fascinating related articles in non-historical sources forced me to reconsider my approach and look for ways to turn a multidisciplinary fascination with one topic into a cohesive study. Once I had realized how to use each source, my analysis became a room with many windows, each one looking out in different directions, but all shining light on the same idea. My research has taken me through nearly all of the UGA libraries (Science, Main, Law, and Map) and opened me up to many different research tools made available on the UGA library website or simply within the buildings.

Noah Koon
Undergraduate Research Award Abstract

Detuning London: Street-musicians and the Noise Suppression Campaign in Victorian
London

A combination of street-musicians, balladeers, hawkers and industrial workshops sometimes made life in Victorian London unbearable. Many notable artists and writers expressed their distaste for the noises of the streets in their diaries, books, and art; claiming that it impeded their work and endangered the health of those whose illnesses were treated at home. Others defended street musicians and the like as a cheap and delightful source of entertainment and work for the poor. Many historians have chosen to reflect on this subject with its climax being the 1864 passing of the Metropolitan Police Act. However, the post-1864 debate reveals a larger class conflict and a convergence of authority directed at shaping lower class behavior and order. An analysis of the post-1864 life of the street musician offers a great deal of insight into changing social relations and power structures in the late Victorian era as well as insight into Victorian perceptions of ownership, privacy, immigration and taste.

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