



RICK EGLINTON PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

While traffic goes north, frontman Michael Louis Johnson and the Music Kings aim their music southbound, on a torn-up section of Bathurst St. that was turned into performance space. It was all part of the light-hearted Streets Are For People picnic that provided locals with a Sunday surprise.

## Urban rebels take back part of the city's asphalt jungle

It must be summer, as frolics take over Mirvish Village and Bathurst road repair site

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The older woman looked suspiciously at Shamez Amlani's packed-to-the-brim rickshaw. Then, more suspicious, she looked at Amlani. "What are you *doing*?" she asked. "I'm going to a picnic," Amlani said.

"You're kidding."

"We're having a picnic on Bathurst Street."

"You're kidding."

He wasn't. And he had to be going. He was late, and his all-purpose rickshaw held most of the picnic's essentials: a Hibachi grill, hula hoops, lanterns, a wooden table, ping-pong paddles and badminton racquets.

He took off towards Bathurst, just south of Follics Ave., where he stopped, sweating, in a southbound lane closed for construction. And he stepped off the rickshaw.

He had arrived at the picnic site. Amlani's small group of anti-car activists is called Streets Are For People. Yesterday, in at least two places, Toronto streets were for people.

Markham St., where Amlani briefly stopped in his rickshaw and was quizzed by the senior citizen, was closed from Bloor St. to Lennox St. for Mirvish Village's second car-free Pedestrian Sunday of the summer.



It's happening! Performance artist Eva Moon puts up a picnic notice on Bathurst St. road sign. At right, David Mirvish as the renaissance prince of Markham St. addresses Pedestrian Sunday gathering there.

Amlani, 38, who owns La Palette restaurant on Augusta Ave. with his wife, helped conceive the inaugural Pedestrian Sunday, at Kensington Market back in 2004.

Mirvish Village joined the fun and began holding them in 2007.

Yesterday, children drew on Markham St. with chalk. David Mirvish recounted the history of the village. Singer Jadea Kelly performed. Store owners sold handicrafts and clothes outdoors.

And less than a kilometre away on Bathurst, Amlani and a small band of co-conspirators did what they do.

Their goal — "reclaiming" public space for people not in cars — is serious. Their tactics, in the finest tradition of street activist-theatre, are deliberately outlandish.

They have held Streets Are For People events since 2004. For the first unsanctioned happening, they pushed an upright piano onto College St. streetcar tracks, then played music by candlelight.

"The revolution," Amlani said, "should be hilarious."

At the intersection of Bathurst and Follics (a few blocks north of Bloor), 16-year-old Eva Moon — "That's my artist name" — twirled a hula hoop. As drivers heading north gawked, organizer Michael Louis Johnson, 39, played a trumpet and sang. Beside him, Marcel Aucoin, 38, played an ancient wooden pedal organ that Johnson bought for \$45 at a garage sale.

A few metres away, Pierre de Margerie, 60, played Scrabble on a

giant mat-board with Nicole Wile, 30, and Todd O'Reilly, 37.

"Far too much of our public space is devoted to cars," said O'Reilly, who then used three tiles to make CRAVEN and CUB from RAVEN. "It's nice to take back a little bit, especially without impacting anybody else."

Eating lunch at the intersection's Grapefruit Moon restaurant patio, Alejandro Zuluaga, 23, said the guerrilla picnic had cheered him up after a rough night. "We should have this everywhere."

Neighbourhood resident Carlos Strangis, meanwhile, stood in the intersection and stared, bewildered, at Johnson.

"This," the 54-year-old murmured, "is something."