

15 MINUTES

An American pitch-man

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It's easy to get lost, to disappear, at Fleamasters Fleamarket on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Congested avenues of used clothing, watches and sunglasses, flowers and puppies and plastic dolls endlessly lead to more. It's sensory overload, American-style. And everything mingles: the smell of sausage and hot pretzels and bottles of perfume.

The dress code is casual; the crowds relaxed; the soft Florida air and hazy light seeping in through cracks in the inner maze of the market, through an open door here or there, through some far-off exit.

Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant stare out from movie posters.

Frank Sinatra's voice floats from a boombox around a corner, and an elderly woman with a cane selling socks mouths the words to the song:

"I did it my way."

Neon signs flash: Italian Ice; Jesus is My Boss.

And in space 55D, vendor James Edward Lira, 54, is a television infomercial come to life, so perfect at what he does that people stop and stare and laugh.

"Tennis shoes cleaned free," Lira said, twirling a long-handled soapy scrub-brush. Suds fly close to passers-by, without hitting them. "Rings cleaned free. Watches cleaned free."

"Look at that!" he shouted, wild-eyed, pointing to a clean spot on a dirty rug in front of him. "What do you want, America? Any surface, any fabric, there is nothing you

can't clean!"

He is lean and shifty and bills himself as an old-time pitch-man. Today he's selling an all-purpose cleaner.

"Michael Jackson buys a bottle from me every month, just to keep his complexion up," Lira said, as the crowd surged by, hungrily eyeing the goods. "Look at that! What do you want, America?"

He picks up a bottle of the cleaner and holds it up.

"There's a lady on TV that uses Shock," he said. "I can't mention her name, but her initials are Martha Stewart!"

Lira sees someone wearing a Miami Dolphins sweatshirt, and said, scrubbing the carpet, "Look at that! So easy even a Miami Dolphins fan can do it!"

The woman selling socks looked over at Lira and shook her head. For a brief moment, no one's walking by.

"I'm just getting the pipes warmed up, Margaret," he told her.

Lira has traveled most of his life, he says, selling one thing or another.

"Jersey to Cali," he said. "And every little town along the way. Anywhere I can get a crowd."

He knows pitches for 39 different products he said, from Shock to Ginsu knives.

"I beat Herb 'the Mouth' Mamet," Lira



James Edward Lira



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Lira entertains onlookers as he pitches his wares

said. "One of the most famous pitch-men on the East Coast."

A young couple walks by.

"Look at that!" Lira said, getting in character quickly, wiping dirt off glass - another prop. "Now you see it! Now you don't!"

They wander over to a lemonade stand.

"See, you just gotta wake 'em up," Lira said.

He has been in Fort Myers for five years, the longest he's been anywhere.

"It's been exciting," he said. "It's been a life of charm. Of restaurants, hotels, people. It's been awesome, actually. It's gypsy. It's a carnie story without the rides."

A man holding a baby is his next target.

"I see stains in your future, buddy," Lira called out. "Let me save you 100 bucks."

Lira said he's part Choctaw Indian and part Italian and grew up - more or less - in Texas. He said his grandfather, a full-blooded Choctaw Indian, Henry Nash, was one of the first settlers to arrive in Nacogdoches, Texas. He arrived there, Lira said, by travel-

ing with white settlers from Louisiana.

It was in Texas, where "the pitch-bug" bit Lira. He was 25 years old then and was too scared to demonstrate until he saw a stranger in a blue pickup truck. The man pulled up on the side of the road, opened the back of the truck, and began to sell knives.

"I just was looking up at that man, awe-struck," Lira said. "And the pitch-bug bit me. It bit me bad."

Lira is full of stories, full of myth so authentically American, that you wonder how you never knew he existed. Where was Lira in the pages of your modern American history textbook? Maybe he was pitching cleaners at a K-Mart in Ohio. Maybe you've seen him a hundred times before.

Lira lives in North Fort Myers. He said at night when he lies in bed, he still sees people walking by, watching him make the pitch. The words come back to him, too: "Look at that! What do you want, America?"

"You try to just shut 'em out, so you can get some sleep," he said. ■

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