

STREET-CORNER ASTRONOMY

One night, sidewalk astronomer Jeffrey Jacobs offered a free look at the Moon. But would skeptical New Yorkers accept the gift? // BY PHIL SCOTT

"Come see the Moon!"

Thursday evening. In New York City they call it "the new Friday," meaning the night when everyone gets an early start on the weekend. Jeffrey Jacobs sets up his 8-inch Newtonian telescope on the northwest corner of Bleecker Street and 6th Avenue in Greenwich Village. Here,

the high-rises sit low, and Jacobs focuses his telescope on the Moon, now making its debut in the east. Then, he violates an unwritten New York City law and starts talking to strangers.

"Come see the Moon," he says in a raspy voice. "Come see the Moon."

People try to ignore him. A man walks past, holding his daughter's hand.

"Come take a look at the Moon," Jacobs beckons. The man pauses, suspicious, and tries to keep going. But his daughter springs on her tippy-toes like excited kids do.

"Without touching the scope, just move up and slowly look with one eye," Jacobs says. "What do you see?"

"It looks like it could fall," she says. "I have a book about the sky."

"That's great," Jacobs says. He's age 61, genteel and dignified with his wire-rimmed glasses and dark jacket.

"She got a book about the stars and the sky for her birthday," Dad explains.

"I just turned five," she says.

"Tell him thank you," Dad says.

"Thank you," she says.

"You're very welcome," Jacobs replies, and hands her a leaflet about the sky he brought with him.

"Come see the Moon," he says, adjusting the scope. A few people look at him but keep walking. "Come see the Moon." A man in a gray coat stops.

"What's your purpose?" Gray Coat asks.

"It's a public service," Jacobs explains.

"Sidewalk astronomy. We're looking at the

Moon tonight," he says. Gray Coat steps up to the eyepiece and looks intently. "This is the best I've ever seen it. Why do we see only one side?"

"The gravitational pull of the Earth over billions of years has stopped the Moon from spinning," Jacobs explains. "It's dancing with us, and we're telling it we want to look at its face all the time."

He re-centers the telescope. "Look at the crater near the top." Gray Coat concentrates on the eyepiece. "It's named Tycho, after the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe," Jacobs says. "The wall measures thousands of feet high." Gray Coat stares. "See the rays emanating from the crater? They're formed from glass beads. Some of the rays measure 1,000 miles long. That's the distance from New York to Chicago."

A red-haired man wearing a red jacket jabbars obliviously into his cell phone. He stops in front of the telescope, waiting for the light to turn green. "Come look at the Moon," Jacobs tells him. Red Jacket turns around, a little stunned. "Okay," he says, dialing another number.

He closes the phone and steps up to the eyepiece. "Wow," he says. "Wow ... wow. Why are you doing this?"

"Just as a public service," Jacobs says.

"Thank you very much. It's funny, during the blackout we slept on the roof and I said, 'When was the last time you saw a sky full of stars in Manhattan?'" He opens up the phone to make another call. "I saw the Moon. Through a telescope. What? Seriously."

"Hey, didn't I see you two years ago in the East Village, on Houston?" A thin, dark-haired man asks. "You were showing



HOW TO ENJOY THE MOON

Urban astronomy is not an oxymoron. Even in major metropolitan centers like New York City, where light pollution casts a pall over the sky every night, you can still explore the sky with a small telescope (in the 2- to 3-inch-wide range) or binoculars.

The favorite target of urban astronomers, the Moon, is big, bright, and easy to find. You can see fine details on the lunar surface with a small telescope or binoculars. With a Moon map, you can spend hours exploring our luminous satellite.

This article is based on material presented in *Astronomy* columnist Phil Harrington's "Urban skies" series on the web. To read the articles, go to: www.astronomy.com/urbanskies. —Daniel Pendick



THE MOON'S Tycho Crater, with its 1,000-mile-long (1,600 km) rays, is visible through a small telescope ADAM STUART

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