

The Guide to Busking



by
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The Guide to Busking

a how-to guide for street performance.
(cover illustration: Amy Kuttat)

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This is dedicated to Sharmini Wijeyesekera.

Without her, this book wouldn't be possible.

There, I said it.

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Introduction

Busking is performing on the streets for money and exposure. It isn't any more complicated than that. There's no booking agent, no press releases, no need for premeditation. When most people are waiting around for a gig, there's an opportunity on the street corner. There's promise in the dirty, abandoned storefront. You want the dream? Chase it, the stage is empty and the curtain's been pulled—what're you waiting for?

Is it begging? Yes. "Busking" even sounds like a dirty word. The popular platitude is "no, it's about performing for people to spread beautiful music," that's just a see-through hippie line. It's about cash. The truth is that societies—Indian, American, European, you name it—treat musicians poorly. Always have been, always will be. Sure, you have your celebrities, but as an amateur, you're a nobody; a cipher; a second-class citizen. There's disparity. Worse, there's backlash. How dare you come here and liven up the place with something live when we can fill it with canned music? If you're playing to those who "wish they could be musical", you're sure to arouse feelings of envy, guilt, and missed opportunities—not exactly a position that anyone wants to experience.

The world is changing. Blame the internet, but artists are clamoring for attention via electronic means nowadays. Record companies are fading and the bloated business model is going the way of the dinosaur. However, the new boss looks an awful lot like the old one. Instead of album sales, it's Facebook likes. Twitter. Your social media cache. These things can be bought. Do you want direct-distribution, fans to bands? No middle-man, no manager. What better way to be direct than to be several feet away, plying your trade?

In few other professions can you not be compensated for performing a service. If I were a carpenter and I've finished assembling a cabi-

net, I expect compensation. If I'm a performer playing for a packed house, I have to beg to make enough for expense reimbursement—profit is a luxury and not mandatory. On the other side of the coin, what determines “quality” is arbitrary. One man's symphonic perfection is another's excuse to yawn. Herein lie the vagaries that perpetuate the status-quo. Don't look for it to change; it won't. Take matters into your own hands.

So, busking is a musician's revenge. You get to be a hustler. Invoke guilt in the passersby's heart for all those uncompensated hours of practicing! Best of all, you can get paid.

How?

Read on. Some people busk once—some make it a lifestyle. People are fickle. One town may compensate you with a cavalcade of free food and a wad of cash for your effort. Other towns will call the police on you or ignore you like a leper. Be prepared to get indignant. Dealing with these obstacles is a test of your endurance and how badly you want to be a musician. Gypsies don't ask for permission.

And, oh yeah, you can't put this on your résumé.

(Disclaimer: I'm not a physical artist. I don't juggle, do fire-poi, or do gymnastics. This guide is meant for busking musicians, but I'm sure there's something of interest for any prospective street urchin. And no, you can't have your money back.)