

BUSKING

SQUEEZING OUT
STREET MUSIC

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BUSKING

Ask any musician what drives them, and to most of them, it's the thrill of performance - the thrill of playing for an audience. What makes one walk out on stage time and time again? What drives the musician to want this heart pounding adrenaline pumping experience? It's the feeling of achievement - the thrill of excitement like a roller coaster ride and the satisfaction of pleasing those in the audience.

What does one do when there are not enough gigs to be had? Get out on the street! Create your own venue to present your music to an audience. Go where the people are. This is called street performance, more commonly known as busking.

Do you lack sufficient funds to pay for your daily needs, or do you just want to make some money to buy another accordion? Would you like to be your own boss? Playing only when you choose, stopping when you choose, and taking breaks whenever you want? Then it's time to give busking a try.

There are no steadfast rules for busking, but there are certain guidelines that must be observed in order to keep from being hassled by the police, hassled by store owners, or hassled by other buskers.

GETTING STARTED

Before going out on the street as a busking accordionist, go over the following checklist:

Repertoire: How many songs can you play? To get started, you need to know at least 5. Make plans to work up some new tunes quickly so you won't get bored.

Sheet Music: Leave it at home. Nobody wants to see a street musician reading sheet music. You must learn to play your tunes without looking at sheet music before you start playing on the street.

Clothing/Appearance: Keep yourself clean and groomed - hair looking nice and clothes clean. You don't want anyone thinking of you as a beggar. You are not a beggar - you are providing a service: beautiful music! Clothing with a little flair might help to draw some attention to you, especially if you are in a crowded location. Make it easy for people to spot you. Are you playing French music? Then you might dress a bit French - wear a beret, etc....

Sign: Some sort of sign with your name on it works wonders! People will pass by and say your name out loud. Some buskers set out a sign that says "Tips Happily Accepted," and this is okay if the location you've chosen allows that.

Tip Catcher: You will need something into which everyone can put their money. This can be a large hat or basket, your instrument case, or a box that you have made for tips. Make sure passersby can simply throw the money into the tip catcher. You'll get more tips this way! Whatever you use, it needs to be easy to see and have a wide opening. It shouldn't be easily tipped over. It will need to be pushed out a ways from your body, as some people don't seem to want to come up too close.

Seed Money: You must bring some money with you. This is absolutely essential. Nobody wants to put money into an empty tip basket. It has to be seeded in order to grow. If you want to grow dollar bills, then you must seed with dollar bills. If you want to grow pennies and nickels, then that's what you should put in your tip basket or box. You don't need a lot - just \$2 or \$3 will do the job nicely.

Dress for the weather: It's important to look nice when you are playing, but it is also important to be comfortable. Is it going to be 100 degrees, and will you be in a sunny spot? Then dress in light cool clothes and make sure to bring a hat and plenty of water for drinking. Is it going to be 40 degrees and windy? Then layer your clothes. I sometimes wear a t-shirt, two turtlenecks, two pairs of pants, heavy wool socks, and a coat. (It's on nights like these that we stop for coffee breaks.)

Chairs: If you will be sitting, then you will need a very comfortable chair - one that is easy to carry.

Parking: Generally, we try to not pay for parking, as the purpose of our busking is to make money - not spend it. Try to find a spot close to where you will be busking, because if you don't, it can be a hard walk back to the car when you are done and you're tired out. Also, one of us puts an accordion on a rolling luggage carrier and can put the chair on there too, and the other one of us carries an accordion in a backpack, a chair that slings over the arm, an empty case with drinks in it, and our sign. We don't like an uphill walk when we are finished or to have to go very far at all. If you have to pay for parking - and sometimes we do - it will just mean less money at the end of the busking.

LOCATION OR BEST PLACES TO MAKE MONEY

When you have properly prepared to be a street musician and are ready to perform, you'll want to find a busy place to play. It's important to find an area that has heavy pedestrian traffic - people who are not in a hurry to be anywhere. City streets make good busking spots. Outdoor shopping malls make good busking spots. Old town centers and tourist attractions make good busking spots. Public parks, city squares, outdoor cafes and markets make good busking spots. It's important to play where people will have a reason to stop for a moment and reach into their pockets. We have found that it works well to be able to be seen or heard before the people actually walk past you. Many times they already have their money out of their pockets and purses and are ready to throw it into your box before even passing you.

TIMING

When is the best time to go out busking? Early morning? Probably not. Late morning is sometimes good, depending on where you are busking. The same goes for the early afternoon. Wanting to catch people on their way to dinner? Then that's the time you should be out there. Set up ahead of time; get ready for the crowd. Are you wanting to play for inebriated folks when the bars shut down? Then you'll need to be out there at 2 am! Figure out what is the best time for busking in the location you plan to busk!

FINDING A SPOT OF YOUR OWN:

Scout around for a spot. It needs to be a place where you can be seen and heard well, but don't look too long, or someone else may get the good spots. Make sure you are not intruding upon another busker's spot. If you are busking in a new place, and you don't know the area well, then you must ask around and make sure the spot you take is not one that someone else always uses. Nothing angers a busker more than to have someone else using their regular spot when they show up to play! You might choose to wander the fringes of outdoor cafes, or you might move around often - it's your choice. After all, you're a busker! Try to find a place that has great acoustics. We play in downtown Austin and notice that our sound carries well with the tall city buildings. Maybe an intersection would be a good spot for you to play - more people at the intersections. Underground subway passages also have good acoustics and sizeable crowds. Whatever you do, don't set up where you make a store's customers or people passing feel like you are panhandling - and do not block window displays.

POSSIBLE PITFALLS

The city you choose to play in might have rules and regulations for buskers. You may be only allowed to busk during certain hours of the day. You might have to make sure you are not blocking the right of way for pedestrian traffic (Austin). This means you cannot set up on the sidewalk where anyone could possibly walk. You have to be moved back into the entranceway of a store that is closed, or at an intersection between the flowerpots, or somewhere where there is no chance of anyone tripping over you. You might have to ask permission from a business to play in front of their building. Even they can make you follow rules. For instance, we are allowed to play in front of a posh restaurant only after they stop serving new customers - 11 p.m. Many cities only allow acoustic musicians. Some cities have set rules for buskers - including licenses and fees.

Many cities do require permits, so if you are going to play in a new city, it's best to find out ahead of time. Check with the local police or city office or chamber of commerce about any types of restrictions that might already be in place. Some cities that require permits also have rules about changing locations every hour.

Treat other buskers with kindness and graciousness. Be accommodating. If you have taken someone else's regular spot, and they ask you to move, do so as quickly and easily as you can. It's best to keep on the good side of other street performers - they might prove to be useful connections. If the performer is one whose art is visual instead of musical, they might want to be set up close to you (for instance a balloon artist or a mime). This arrangement can benefit both parties as people who might not stop for one, will stop for the other, and possibly tip both of you.

If you choose to use an amplifier, and it is allowed, then be courteous toward fellow performers. There is no need to crank up the volume to 11 (Spinal Tap). Everyone needs a chance to be heard - including the other performers who may be playing close by. Remember that acoustic guitars and harmonicas cannot normally be heard quite as well as an accordion.

SAFETY IS IMPORTANT

Place your box or tip basket about 2 feet in front of you - with the seed money in it! You might not be able to do this if pedestrian traffic is too busy. Generally though, most people don't really want to get too close to you.

Sometimes things happen while busking, so be watchful. Do not set your instrument down and walk away from it - not if you want it to be there when you turn back around! Hover over it if you must set it down. If someone comes up and looks at your tips - you look at your tips too. . . keep an eye on them. Keep your belongings close to you. Sometimes beggars will take an interest in your tips., so keep an eye on them, and be ready to kick your case closed if you need to. Some beggars will actually ask for money or cigarettes. It's your choice whether you give up this hard earned money or not - do what makes you happy. If someone wants to make change from the money in your box, *you* do it for *them*. We learned a lesson the hard way after money was stolen one day by someone wanting to make change out of our box.

If your box gets too full of money, sometimes, depending on the crowd, it is best to scoop up some of your money into a bag and put it into something where it can no longer be seen. There is always the question: will more people tip us when there is a lot of money in the box or a little money in the box? If you have a lot of bills or get a few 10s and 20s, put them away, to keep from having your money stolen. One thing that works for us, when a beggar wants our money, is to say, "We're trying to make our rent money".

What if someone won't leave you alone? An amorous gentleman? A beggar? If you need to, whip out your cell phone and dial 911, or yell out to a passerby or policeman or security guard, if one is close by.

POWERFUL PERFORMANCE

Will you sit or stand when you perform? Generally, standing is more powerful, but if you are going to be

out there for hours, then you might just choose to sit. Be passionate about your music! Enjoy yourself! If you are enjoying yourself, then there is a greater chance that the audience passing by will enjoy themselves. Put some energy into it. Do not be timid. Do not frown. Put a smile on your face. Occasionally you will draw a crowd - maybe even a few times in an evening. Most of the time, however, you will not. This does not reflect on your talent. Some passersby feel intimidated by you. They try not to look at you - some quite successfully. Some will walk by and smile and give the thumbs up sign, but they aren't really all that interested in your music and have no thought of tipping you. Some will stop and watch and then move on, and some will cross the street just to hear you and watch you play up close. Some will come back again and again, requesting a specific tune they have heard you play. Sometimes, the same people will pass every time you play and always tip you. Sometimes you will have people dancing past. Some people might stop and dance right there in front of you. Have you ever watched a musical and thought, "people don't dance in real life like that." Well, become a busker and you will see that they do! Some people will love what you are doing but will not tip you. Do not expect even 10% of the people who pass by to tip you. Do not be disappointed. Some people will take your picture without asking. Just smile anyway. Some people will ask if they can take your picture and then not tip you. Some people will take your picture and tip you. Some people will want to have a friend take a picture and get behind you or beside you and be in the picture with you. And some people will pass by with their cell phones on - and want someone else to hear you play - or they will stop with a video camera and record a whole tune or two. Just relax - let them take your picture or video, enjoy yourself, and have some fun. After all, that's what it's all about - enjoying yourself while you entertain.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Do you break out in a sweat just thinking about playing in front of an audience? Do you lose your breath and feel nauseous? Do your hands shake and your knees quake? Then busking is for you! It's the perfect venue to work out your performance problems. It's not the same as playing on a stage in front of people who are all looking directly at you. Most people are just passing by. Some do stop and stare, and with time and continuing busking, you will learn to get used to it, and come to enjoy it.

LENGTH OF TUNES

You will learn what is the proper length of time to play a tune before stopping and starting with a new one. If people are just passing by, you might be able to play the same tune for 20 minutes before getting tired of playing it. If people stop to listen and watch you, and you have played a tune for a sufficient length of time, then you may need to end it, as they could be waiting to see what tune you will play next. Or, they might want to speak with you and ask you to play a tune, or tell you how much they enjoy your playing.

ACCEPTING TIPS GRACIOUSLY

Some people, when tipping, expect a response, so you will need to be able to say "thank you" while continuing to play. If you have trouble with this, as some people do have trouble speaking and playing at the same time, then just learn to smile and nod your head, and they will be happy with that. Many people don't expect a thank you, and if you do try to say "thank you," they are already gone.

POLICE PROBLEMS

Many times we have been asked to quit playing by the police. It would scare us off for a month or two, but we would always return. It seems to come in waves. After several hasslings by police, we contacted city officials and wrote letters to the editors of the major newspapers. We also contacted the city music commission and managed to get a meeting with the city liaison. Then, we attended a music commission meeting (then many more of those meetings), and meetings with other city officials - city attorney, head of the police department, city supervisors, etc. - until we were able to get them to understand that we were providing a service to the city, and that we were not beggars. We were able to make them understand that we are dessert: after people have been out to see a concert or eat dinner, they pass by us, and we are the ones providing the flavor to the city! We help make the city what it is today - the Music Capital of the World. Now, whenever a policeman tries to run us off, we politely pull out a card with the names of the

officials and tell them we have permission. So far, this has worked to keep us as busking musicians. If we get run off again though, we will immediately contact our city liaison and start again with the meetings.

READING AUDIENCES

Who is your main audience? Depending on where you play, your audience could be quite different from one time to the next. We have noticed that if we are playing earlier - around dinnertime - then our audience is a bit older. . . people out to dinner, tourists. So, we play some of the slower, prettier waltzes. Depending on your repertoire, you may have to make decisions as to what to play. Is it mostly drunks passing by at 2 in the morning? Ah, then play your peppy fast music - get them dancing, and they will trip over each other to put money into your box. What if they request a tune, and you don't know it? Maybe they want a French polka, and you don't know one. . . then say, "Well, I don't know a French one, but I do know a German one," and play it. People from different countries often request tunes that they know from their homeland. If you don't know the requested song, just smile and say, "I'm sorry. I don't know that song." They won't mind a bit.

OTHER ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Always bring a folded up raincoat or plastic bag with you in case of rain - you might have to cover your accordion quickly! Find your restrooms before you start to play - don't wait until you can't wait anymore. And learn from us: don't squat down behind a dumpster in the alley just because it's close by and you don't want to have to go a long way to the restroom - you might fall and hurt your shoulder and not be able to play for a couple of months! Take occasional breaks. Depending on where you are playing, many places will require a purchase for you to use their restroom. So buy something - coffee, water, slice of cake, whatever. If you are playing alone, then in order to take a break, you will have to pack up your instrument and all your other gear and take it with you. Take snacks with you - don't let yourself get too hungry. Always put your clutter in the trash - don't throw it on the street.

BUSINESS CARDS

Essential!!!! People will ask for them , and you might get other gigs this way. So, hand them out freely.

BUSKING FRIENDLY CITIES AND BUSKING FESTIVALS

Many cities in Europe are particularly busking friendly. Check online to find out which cities allows buskers with no problems, which cities require permits or licenses, and where the busking festivals are. Some cities have very cool busking festivals - Halifax, Nova Scotia, for one. They even give out monetary prizes to the best buskers! Some busking festivals require an invitation to play, and others do not. One of the best busking resources we have found is <http://www.performers.net>.

BE PREPARED TO BE SHOCKED AND AMAZED

Busking is great fun. You will be amazed with the things that happen on the street while you are busking. Every time we busk, something interesting happens - maybe several things. You get used to it after awhile, but in the beginning everything that happens is fresh and strange. Just enjoy yourselves, and maybe even accept the leftover food that people offer from posh restaurants - you might find in the bag a fabulous, yummy, untouched dessert!