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Photo By Berge Arabian

HONOURING OUR MINSTRELS WHY BUSKERS DESERVE MORE PUBLIC SPACE TO PLY THEIR CRAFT

By ANDREW LEFOLEY

You wouldn't know it watching some of the best jugglers and twirlers in the world at last week's St. Lawrence street festival, but buskers have become the dramatis personae of a long-raging battle for control of public space.

The fact is, despite Toronto's self-concept as a city that honours its wandering minstrels and fire-eaters, our sidewalks are still tensely contested terrain. Ask anyone who sells entertainment by passing the hat.

Mike Wood, a young busker-cum-engineering-graduate, has been removed by security or bylaw officers from ostensibly public spaces too often to consider Toronto a street artists' haven. Wood is a comedian. He draws a crowd with promises to catapult a cabbage into the air and impale it on his spiked helmet. He then does a set of jokes and commentary, spikes that cabbage ("I've only missed once") and moves on.

"I get invited to busking festivals all over the world, so I know what a busker-friendly city looks like," he says. He doesn't rate Toronto among them. Here, you actually need a licence to busk (it costs \$33.93) and can be fined "a couple of hundred dollars," the fellow at the municipal licensing and standards office tells me, if you don't have one.

It wasn't always like this. Modern busking as we know it, usually solo musical artists, began in the 19th century when sidewalks usually paid for by nearby property owners became common. People immediately used them for all kinds of activities: food and household goods could be purchased at every corner, businesses displayed their wares outside, and street performers, from organ grinders to poets, added to the hurly-burly of the scene. The public reading of "broadsides" was one of the earliest forms of political activism on this continent.

But today, even Dundas Square, the city's most heavily trafficked public space, is off-limits. "It's a shame," says Wood. "Dundas Square could be a world-famous pitch, like Covent Garden or Washington Square Park." (A "pitch," in busking lingo, is simply a lucrative place to perform.) "You want a sidewalk or square that has good pedestrian traffic and that's wide enough so people can stop and watch the show without congesting the whole place."

While the square is owned by the city of Toronto, it's run by a management board stacked with local "business improvement area" types. The result: private security on public space telling buskers to get out.

Mayor David Miller acknowledges the criticism and offers hope that the situation will change. Council passed a motion in June to have the city take a more active role in the management of the square. "I think you'll see things open up over the next couple of years in terms of who can perform there," Miller says.

Dundas Square isn't the only trouble spot. Harbourfront, which is run by the feds (Miller points out that the city has no control there), runs an audition system for a limited number of permits. Because the audition system gives the permits to the "best" buskers, you often wind up with nothing but (outstanding) hammer dulcimer players or cellists or whatever.

The TTC, while ultimately responsible to the city, also runs its own audition system and awards a limited number of permits. Twenty-five of 65 subway stations are open to buskers. (Each license costs \$150.) Vancouver's program allocates 10 places at 14 stops. Montreal's Metro allows busking in 40 of 65 subway stations.

When asked whether the TTC's auditions might also lead to nothing but technically proficient musicians as opposed to creative ones, Miller says, "I think the solution to that potential problem would be to have more buskers on the (selection) jury."

Generally, most mass-transit authorities worldwide have audition permit systems. But David Lewis Stein, a professor of urban studies at the University of Toronto, argues that there should be no regulation, period.

"I think busking works best when performers are left to compete among themselves," he says. "Then a kind of harsh democracy takes place: people who don't really entertain or move the public don't get an audience and don't make any money."

Busker Wood agrees, although he'd like to see some law specifically allowing street entertainment. "Otherwise, you get bylaw enforcers at some public events saying, "I know there's no bylaw against it, but there's no bylaw allowing it either, and I feel like being a jerk today. ""

In the 1960s and early 70s, young players performing for pocket change sparked a renaissance of all forms of street entertainment in most large cities across Canada. This resurgence of street culture was noted by Canadian filmmakers and choreographers, inspiring Ryan Larkin's animated fantasy *Street Musique* (NFB, 1973) and Charles-Mathieu Brunelle's experimental dance piece *Street Music*.

Until the first federal government of Pierre Trudeau, busking was classified as criminal "vagrancy." Slowly, though, urban design philosophies began to change and sidewalk performers continued to stand their ground. Some even become icons of a particular city, as did Toronto's recently deceased Ben Kerr. The ageless country crooner occupied a corner at one of our busiest intersections for 20-odd years and ran for mayor in every election since 1985.

Kerr died this spring at the age of 75. His warble haunts the corner, where sidewalk chalk messages regularly thank him. Nobody has dared try to take his place.

Miller calls Kerr "an institution" and "part of what gives our city its soul. I think Ben and I shared a vision of Toronto as a city for the people, and he inspired Torontonians every time he ran for mayor. Street performers like Ben really add to the mis-en-scène of a city; they're part of what gives a city its character."

But ongoing battles suggest that sidewalk entertainment will always be politically charged. So perhaps Mayor Miller should be a little afraid when Wood jokingly threatens to take up Kerr's torch and run for the city's highest office if the promise to open up Dundas Square fails to materialize.

And perhaps the healthiest condition our society can leave busking and street performance in is exactly as it is: just slightly out of control.

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