

A Study of Busker Culture in the City of Denver

Sabine A. Fernandes

Writing and Research 1133

Professor Richard Colby

May 27th, 2009

Introduction

Street entertainers, better known as “buskers” are important components of the landscapes of many of the world’s cities. Their trade, busking, is an age-old tradition, which has its roots in medieval Europe, during which small, local merchants would bid artists to perform at their store fronts, plazas and market squares to attract customers and boost sales. In the United States, busking grew out of the many travelling circuses, which made their way across towns and cities, entertaining audiences with sword swallowers, acrobats, jugglers and musicians. These performers eventually established a degree of individual autonomy, creating a street culture of art and entertainment that has become an integral and enlivening part of today’s cities, generating a number of benefits. Many famous musicians started out as buskers. Musician Rod Stewart, who has recently been urging artists to go out into the streets and participate in “Busking for Cancer”, acknowledged that, “Busking is how I started, in the early 60s, on the streets of Paris. It is what music is all about – just getting out there and singing or playing for the sheer joy of it” (The Financial Times Limited, 2009, p.1).

Busking is an important and beneficial aspect of city life. Street performers draw the attentions of pedestrians, encouraging them to drift through cities and explore them, being entertained all the while. They do as such, often constitute economic advantages to stores and restaurants, as they attract crowds to these establishments if located nearby, when they draw public interest to themselves through their performances. Pedestrians and tourists on the other hand, are granted the experience of unique performances to color their visits to different cities. Finally, it is needless to say that busking benefits the performer himself because it is a means to an income.

The right to perform on the street is a constitutional law in the United States according to the First Amendment, as was famously determined in the *Goldstein v. Town of Nantucket*, 477 F. Supp., 606, (1979) case. It is a regulated activity however and the laws controlling street entertaining differ from city to city. At the 16th Street Mall in Downtown Denver, Colorado, where the famous Downtown Denver International Buskerfest takes place for instance, street entertainers are required to apply for permits to perform on the street. Among the many rules that they are expected to abide by, they are particularly required not to interfere “with special events taking place on private plazas nor the flow of pedestrian traffic. A minimum of ten (10) feet clear must be maintained at all times to allow for pedestrian traffic.” (DEVELOPMENT ENGINEERING SERVICES OF PUBLIC WORKS RULES AND REGULATIONS FOR Rules & Regulations: For Vending on the 16th Street Pedestrian and Transit Mall)

I, thus, decided to do a study on the busking community at the 16th Street Mall in Downtown Denver, to establish how and why street curbs and pavements were their choice of stage and obtain an insight into the lives of buskers. I sought to determine if the often harried and sometimes listless pedestrians were the only audiences they ever desired to entertain, as well as if the profession was a profitable one alone or if it only supplemented another. I attempted to discover why busking so often entails negative associations and is even sometimes deemed pan handling by society. Finally, I wanted to present an overview of the community in the city that society might better understand and appreciate its existence as an important part of the city’s many attractions.

Studying this community is undoubtedly important because of the significant role street performers play in the identity of a city and the attractions inherent in their entertainment. Understanding their culture and motivations may lead the public and government to better

address their need, to ensure the best interests of not only the performers, but also the commercial establishments, and the public at large.

Methods

In order to adequately address these questions and establish a fairly accurate evaluation of street performers at the 16th Street Mall, I undertook about 8 hours of non participant observation, over a period of two weeks, of street entertainers at the mall, and supported these observations by conducting interviews with many of the performers who consented to share their experiences and views with me. My observations helped me form a reasonably informative picture of performer-audience relationships as well as grant me adequate insight into the ways in which buskers in the city operate. The interviews provided me with more detailed and personalized information on the lifestyles of the buskers I interacted with and provided me with an overarching image that represented the lifestyles of the community as a whole. I conducted my research on weekdays and weekends to comprehend as extensively as possible most aspects of the profession.

Study

Denver has been home to buskers for many years now, especially since the Denver Downtown International Buskerfest was initiated in 1993, which has with time generated increasing popularity. Street performers are found in plenty, ranging from musicians, magicians and puppeteers to the “Robot Man”. Through my research I learnt a great deal about this community.

The Stage: Location and Territory

My observations revealed that the street performers maintained careful distances from each other in order to ensure each entertainer earned as much as he or she possibly could without diminishing the earning opportunities of a fellow busker. Thus, they were always either located at extreme ends on the same side of a given street, or on opposite sides of the street. It is also important to note that they always placed themselves at prominent establishments, where they might confront crowds. The Robot Man for instance usually frequented the United Artists movie theatre, which the magician I interviewed also liked to perform in front of. "Children and younger people are always around the place," the magician informed me, in reference to his choosing to perform by the stairs that lead up to the theatre, "it's easy to get them interested in what I have to show them," he continued, grinning. Other establishments the performers liked to entertain by, included café's like Starbucks and the Paramount Café, stores like Sunglass City, restaurants like Maggiano's Little Italy, and the light rail station.

"Territory" was usually sought on a first-come, first serve basis, although sometimes superiority due to having been a performer at the mall for a longer period of time guaranteed right of way. None of the performers stuck to a fixed location, however, as they felt it limited their opportunities to interact with different audiences. The "Guitar Guy" who also sold the *Denver Voice*, spoke for most of his peers when he said with a shrug "I go where the wind blows". The performers claimed that they tried to avoid altercations to as great an extent as possible, and most of them were explicitly weary of getting into fights over where to perform. I observed a quarrel between a violinist and a drummer over territory, by the light rail station, following which the drummer walked away in a huff. "Dreadlock Dave" who has earned himself a degree of fame among regular pedestrians at the mall because of his Bob Marley covers, told me that many performers were prone to being terribly aggressive about territory. He also told me

that while playing in front of a store that will remain unnamed, he was told to relocate by the store manager or have his guitar broken. He responded by telling the manager he would break his neck. Thus, it is evident that while the performers are reluctant to get into fights over territory, the unspoken code of “first-come, first served” is not always easily put into practice and they do additionally, experience difficulties with commercial establishments over where they play. They also experience problems due to “spare changers”, which include individuals who simply beg for money. Some street performers highly dislike “spare changers” because buskers are often negatively associated with them, while others remain indifferent towards them for the greater part. It is when spare changers locate themselves by buskers, however, that serious trouble and arguments ensue. The “Guitar Guy” for instance, informed me that he would definitely send a “spare changer” on his way because he was not willing to compromise on any of his earnings.

While street entertainers battle their ways through the street for the right to a spot, they have different reasons for the street as a choice of stage. Some do it because they have nowhere else to go while others do it because it is where they feel they essentially belong. David, a young musician on the harp, told me very frankly that he had no other avenue to earn money through his music. Dreadlock Dave seemed to agree when he explained that he would play at gigs and clubs but that he couldn't sustain himself on what he earned at those venues, because in his opinion, “there is unfortunately no recognition for talent!” Rather vehement, he declared, “All people really want these days, is a D.J. belting out unoriginal tunes. They have no appreciation for good music!” So he played on the street because he felt he had access to a larger audience and a potentially more appreciative one that wasn't bound by the expensive constraints of commercial establishments that dictated what music people got to listen to. Scarlett, a young African American musician, who plays guitar and primarily entertains with rhythm and blues

told me that she plays on the street because she can personally interact with a far wider range of people than she would otherwise have access to. For her, the individual and personalized connections she establishes with members in her audience are the main reasons she is a busker and she is completely disinterested in perusing musical performance at any other venues. Thus, street performers at the 16th Street Mall were primarily motivated by economic need, lack of better options, or passion, to play on the street. They all did however, seem to agree with Scarlette, that they enjoyed the unique interaction with their audiences that performing on the street granted them. Summed up in the words of a violin major at the Lamont School of Music at the University of Denver, who occasionally performs at the mall, “Sure I do it because I can use the money, but there is something so cool about playing on the street and interacting with the random people who pass you by or stop to listen to what you are offering them. It’s really cool and very different from recitals or playing in the orchestra. It’s like you’re playing to a world that is constantly in motion...”

The Audience: Pedestrians and Passersby

The performers are not very appreciative of their pedestrian audience. While they did acknowledge that they enjoyed the audience interaction that street performing enabled them to experience, they opined that most of their audience members do not adequately recognize their talent, or appreciate the value of their performances. The research revealed that the musicians were more prone to entertaining this point of view than the other performers, like the jugglers, magician, puppeteer and “Robot Man”, interviewed. The puppeteer and ventriloquist I spoke to, told me, “It’s all good. I perform, the kids laugh, sometimes they don’t. I make money, sometimes I don’t make money.” Musicians, however, were more concerned about people not understanding the importance of their music or the messages inherent in them. “It sucks, they

don't really get what I'm about," said Jake, another guitarist and songwriter, who writes music inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's poetry; "They don't get what I'm about." Dreadlock Dave told me he didn't take it personally. Like he mentioned before, it was all accounted for by the fact that no one in the United States could discern good music from rubbish anymore. All these performers did however persist with busking for the afore mentioned reasons, implying that even if pedestrians weren't their ideal audience, they were by far the best available or most viable one, in the eyes of the busking community in the city of Denver.

During my observations, I also focused on the audience and how its members responded to the performers. Most people hurried by pausing occasionally to drop a quarter or a dime into the boxes left in front of performers. Others paused and listened for 1-2 minutes at the maximum, before dropping anything from a quarter to a dollar in the box, and continuing on their way. Only "special requesters" actually stopped to attend an entire performance and contributed 1 – 5 dollars in appreciation. I noticed that some pedestrians had built up relationships with performers and paid them in "smokes", cigarettes, which smokers like Dreadlock Dave and Guitar Guy are only occasionally appreciative of. I also observed that a lot of homeless people and passersby, begged "smokes" of the buskers.

Ticket Prices: Money and Earnings

Street performers, passion and idealism aside, essentially perform on the street as a means to a livelihood. Much to my surprise, all the buskers interviewed, except for the Lamont School musician and Jake who works for the Greenpeace, busk as their sole occupation. When asked about the money they made, most declined to offer a definite answer but provided ranges that included one to three hundred dollars a day. Jentry D. McCombs, a flute player, who spent the greater part of his busking career in Washington D.C., was the only performer who offered a

consistent rate, when he claimed “I make thirty dollars an hour kid, but I made way more in D.C.” He admitted that it was subject to variation however and there were days when the pay wasn’t as good. It was evident that none of the performers felt that they made enough money to sustain themselves with, but were reluctant to share how they managed to make a living alternatively. Busking seems to be monetarily unproductive in general, however. For instance, the famous musician Joshua Bell “performed for 45 minutes during the morning rush hour at the L’Enfant Plaza station in Washington. The US violinist made just \$32 (£16) while 1,097 people passed him by. Only seven people stopped to listen to him and 27 gave him money” (The Strad, 2007, p.13) While speaking to David, who plays the harp, I noticed his box had only a handful of pennies, nickels, dimes and two dollars. It was doubtful if he could actually buy himself a meal with the money he had collected and it was already three thirty in the afternoon.

I also noted that the time of the day and the day in the week made significant differences in the amounts performers earned. On weekdays more people were in a hurry and less likely to stop by and be entertained. On weekends, large throngs of families and groups paused and appeared to be able to afford themselves the leisure of a song or a magic trick. “Sure they pay more on weekends”, the puppeteer and ventriloquist told me, “More people around too.” Dreadlock Dave also informed me of the fact that people were more likely to pause and listen during the afternoons, when they were probably on break and in the evenings. “Heck yea! Couples in the evenings are always up for a serenade,” giggled Scarlett. While there might have been truth in her claim, few others seemed to share her point of view. On the whole, it could safely be stated that buskers’ incomes were highly inconsistent and unpredictable, at the mercy of far too many variables, presented by the weather, broken strings, bad timing and the like.

Denver as a city for busking

When questioned on the Denver's social climate and if it was particularly conducive to street performing, viewpoints seemed to be very different. Several, like David and Scarlett who have played in cities like New York and Santa Cruz respectively, felt that the people in Denver were far more receptive to their music than in the bigger cities they had played in before. David was particularly disillusioned by New York, where people just walked by him, barely acknowledging his music. Others like Jetry D. McCombs and a mandolin player I spoke to by Starbucks on a rainy Monday morning, told me that they had much better experiences in other cities, Washington D.C. and New Orleans respectively. The audiences there were larger, more enthusiastic and paid far better too. Finally, there were those like Dreadlock Dave, who felt that the busker scene was the same all over, dismal and increasingly unproductive.

Conclusion

“Project Save the Buskers?”

The research I did helped me draw several conclusions about the busking community at the 16th Street Mall in Denver, Colorado. From a wide range of interviews of veteran street performers like Dreadlock Dave and Jetry D. McCombs who have been in the business for 25 and 33 years respectively, to newcomers like David and Scarlett who only have a couple of years of experience, as well as my hours of observation, I was able to infer a number of important patterns. Firstly, the busker community was not really a well knit, interconnected community that functioned as a whole, but a loosely connected one that comprised of individuals with related interests. These interests, making money through performances, actually separated them, while maintaining a reasonable status quo so as not to lead to a disruptive chaos, because they primarily looked out for themselves alone, as was evident in the disputes over territory.

Additionally they were critical of each other's performances and quite competitive, with most performers attempting to assert their own superiorities as entertainers and "crowd pullers".

Having said that, it was also significant, that while for most of the buskers interviewed their street performances constituted their sole avenues to money, they barely earned enough to sustain themselves and were reluctant to find alternative sources of employment. They viewed themselves as artists and did not think it fit to employ themselves in any other capacity. Money, therefore, while an important factor, did not seem a significant enough motivator for them to continue in the business. The lack of motivating factors was additionally highlighted in their evident disenchantment with their audiences and the city of Denver itself, as possible but failed incentives to remain buskers.

Thus, I have come to the conclusion that for the greater part, for most of Denver's buskers, street performance was an end in itself and not a means to an end. They enjoyed the freedom through art that they were able to embrace in busking. This is supported by the fact that almost all the musicians interviewed, did not want to get signed by a record label for fear of losing the creative independence they enjoyed on the street, if the opportunity arose, and many were generally contemptuous of contemporary, mainstream musicians. None of the other performers wanted to be on T.V. shows for the same reason. Several were interested in getting their music on the internet however, in order to reach wider audiences.

These conclusions reveal that the busking community merits further research into their societies, especially in cities like Denver, because, as already established, they are significant constituents of city life, and are struggling to survive. During my research to inform myself better on street performers I came across several studies on Buskers but none that gathered the opinions of street entertainers and evaluated their culture from their perspectives, as a whole.

Quite a few studies spoke of individual performers, particularly celebrities, but none captured the experiences of a significant section of the culture. This is precisely what my research project sought to do, because understanding their professions from their point of view, i.e. gaining an internal perspective, would enable society to better respect them and address their needs.

While the study proved very informative, granting me a great deal of insight into the way buskers in Denver operate, and felt about their “jobs”, it suffers the probability of a host of inaccuracies because of the short time over which it was conducted. 8 hours, over a period of two weeks, is not sufficient to learn about a community and account for all possible variables associated with it. Additionally, only thirteen buskers were interviewed, and while they were reasonably representative of their community, they were not satisfactorily so. Public opinion, admits to at least fifty odd buskers at the Sixteenth Street Mall, and while this figure may be inaccurate, it is true that there are a lot more than thirteen street entertainers at the Mall, who are either regulars or drift by occasionally to perform. Thus, in order for this study to be more effective and accurate it will require at the minimum, a year of research and many more interviewees to adequately represent the population and its interests. It would also be a more successful study if public opinion on the importance of the roles of street entertainers at cities could be secured, so as determine if the community is as purported, truly an integral part of city life.