

STREET ART

Summer provides the richest time for musicians to make money from impromptu outdoor performance. Experienced buskers tell **DAVID KETTLE** how they go about it, and why the rewards can be greater than you might expect



David Juritz performed in Seoul, South Korea, as part of his round-the-world busking tour

IF YOU PASS SOMEONE PLAYING A STRINGED instrument for money in the street, or in a station, what's your reaction? Do you think, 'Poor guy – he's obviously not good enough to get proper work elsewhere?' Or maybe, 'It must be so hard for her having to play the same boring things all the time?'

Speak to anyone who busks and you'll find that there's a lot more to it than you might have first assumed, and probably that it's more satisfying too. If you've never considered street performing before, since summer is upon us, maybe now's the time. With a little preparation, and following the advice of experienced buskers, you might discover the significant rewards it can bring you, both financially and musically.

GETTING PERMISSION

The first step – and it's an essential one – is to make sure that you're allowed to busk in the first place. When British-based violinist David Juritz undertook a round-the-world busk in 2007 to raise money for his charity Musequality, which supports children's music making in developing countries, he found that he needed permission to busk in most of the places he stopped. He explains: 'The key thing is always to

check what the local by-laws and restrictions are. It's not just different laws in different countries – in a city like London it can be different boroughs, and even within boroughs.'

Historic cities that are a draw for visitors usually have clearly defined street-performance policies. In the UK, for example, Edinburgh and Bath require their buskers to follow a code of practice, and in York you must register for and display a 'busking badge' to be allowed to play on the city's streets.

But there's another alternative. 'You can find some private property,' explains Juritz, 'like a shopping centre or the grounds of a church, and try to get permission from someone to play there.' In privately owned spaces where large numbers of people gather, there are usually also restrictions. Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, US, for example, is famous for its street performers, but you'll have to apply and audition to gain a permit to play there.

Public transport networks are some of the strongest draws for buskers, but they're also some of the most tightly controlled spaces. The London Underground has 200 licensed buskers who perform on designated pitches that they book in advance, and who have to pass an audition to gain their permit. San Francisco's BART subway requires its musicians to apply for a 'permit to engage in expressive activity'.



On the Paris Métro, around 2,000 performers audition for the 400 annual permits. And New York's subway has one of the most elaborate systems for regulating its buskers. More importantly, though, the Music Under New York (MUNY) programme actively celebrates them and promotes their activities. New York-based violinist Luellen Abdo, who has busked for about twelve years, explains: 'You have to audition, and the auditions are pretty big these days – it's getting a bit like *American Idol*. But once you're in, you're in for life.' Violinist James Graseck, another New York busker, continues the theme: 'You get a schedule every two weeks, but once they get to know you, they know which places you like.' MUNY even organises festivals within the transport network to showcase its performers.

CHOOSING A LOCATION

Once you've organised permissions, you need to decide exactly where you should play. Think about where your potential audience will be, and how to make yourself sound good. 'Ideally you want somewhere with a bit of an acoustic,' says Juritz, 'and also where people aren't moving too quickly. My favourite spots were in bus or train stations, or restaurant areas in the early evening, when people were strolling around.'

In more than 30 years of busking, Graseck has played on the streets and in railway stations, and now focuses on the subway: 'You can play on a mezzanine level with people passing, where they can stop. Or in a hallway where people are walking by, but where there's a good sound. At the top or bottom of escalators is a good choice – the people on them have to listen to you whether they like it or not. And there's the actual platform itself – usually there's a crowd already there.'

WHAT TO PLAY, HOW TO PLAY, AND HOW LONG TO PLAY

The question of busking repertoire is a fraught one. You might certainly end up playing popular classics that you don't much like, but those might be the very pieces that get listeners to stop. 'When I play something like *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, or the "Méditation" from *Thaïs*, or "The Swan", suddenly people can become really involved with the music,' says Graseck.

Juritz stuck mainly to Bach for his round-the-world trip, and found that it was a sure-fire winner just about everywhere. 'Even when I was in Rio, I had quite a group around me when I was playing Bach, but someone asked me for more lively music,' he says. 'So I changed to a few more up-tempo things, but the >

COURTESY MUSEQUALITY

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crowd dwindled. I went back to Bach and a crowd soon gathered again.' How does he explain this? 'For a string player, I'd say that you can't do better than Bach. Baroque music in general works well – it's pretty positive music, and people like it.'

But you might find that jazz, world music or rock suit your passing audience better. 'Once you have some flexibility, you can really connect with people,' says Graseck. 'If they actually request something, I'll try my best. I've done some Beatles songs and I can do a couple of things by Led Zeppelin.' But make sure that you're playing music that means something to you, he advises, otherwise your audience will notice: 'People can see when you're really involved with the music. That's what listeners like best.'

For Abdo, emphasising the music's emotional content is a high priority. 'I play with a lot of passion. Obviously I do the best I can technically, but you should try to communicate a feeling to the people passing you.' And for Juritz, it's important

to look the part: 'Body language is incredibly important. I always tried to look like I was performing on stage in a concert hall. Also, I always tried to thank people if they gave me money. A little bit of eye contact or smiling at people helps a lot.'

As for how long you should busk for, it depends on the response you're getting. 'If you find a good spot and nobody chases you away, and the coins are falling into your case, just keep going,' advises Juritz. 'Sometimes I found I'd been playing for two or three hours. But make sure you've got some food and water with you – you can't take a break, because someone else might come and grab your spot.'

LOOKING AFTER YOUR INSTRUMENT

There are, of course, simple precautions you can take to ensure that you don't cause damage to your instrument while you're busking. 'You shouldn't subject it to dangerous weather,' says Abdo. 'Don't play in direct sunlight or in the rain. I don't play when it's too cold, or when it's too hot.'

But should you swap your regular instrument for a special, less valuable one for street performance? You might be surprised at the answers. 'Of course I wouldn't recommend taking out a classic Italian instrument that's worth a lot of money,' continues Abdo, 'but I use the same instrument for busking that I use for everything else, because I like to sound good.'

Nevertheless, accidents can happen. Graseck relates a hair-raising experience he had with his instrument while busking on the subway. 'I had a Luiz Bellini violin and it fell on to the platform – then someone knocked it on to the train tracks. I jumped down and managed to get it before a train came. There was a crack in it, but Luiz managed to fix it for me.' According to all official guidance, you should alert an official if anything falls on to the tracks in a station. But despite his experience, Graseck wouldn't have done things differently. 'You should use the instrument you're happy with. The dangers are generally minimal.'

Amplification is generally frowned upon, especially in enclosed spaces. But it might be helpful to take along a CD player to play concerto accompaniments. 'I've found that it enhances the performance to have the harmonies and the orchestral back-up,' says Abdo.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

'I was expecting to be mugged three or four times,' says Juritz of his round-the-world busking trip. 'Sometimes I had more than \$1,000 in cash in my violin case – definitely enough to make it worth someone's while grabbing it. But it didn't happen once.'

That's not to say, of course, that you shouldn't be aware of your own vulnerability while busking, and take precautions to ensure your safety. 'Occasionally I've had someone who pretends to put money into my case, but in fact they're taking money out,' admits Abdo. 'I keep money hidden, and I usually have a bag or something behind me to put it in.'

Juritz adopted a similar strategy. 'I'd hide away the money I was collecting. You should have enough showing to look like you're not doing badly – it encourages people to give – but not so much that it looks like you're raking it in.' You should also be careful about any personal information you're giving out: it's useful to have cards advertising your skills to encourage other bookings, but only give them to people who express a serious interest, and be careful about the details you include on them.



Luellen Abdo emphasises the music's emotional content

TIM HIGGINBOTHAM



Two young string players perform on an Edinburgh street

COURTESY MUSEQUALITY



James Graseck has busked in New York for over 30 years

WHAT YOU'LL GET OUT OF IT

How much you'll actually earn from busking is hard to predict. 'It varies a lot,' explains Abdoo. 'Around Christmas it can be very lucrative, but at other times it can really slow down.' But you shouldn't rule it out as a way of making a regular income, she believes, even if it's a modest one. 'I usually busk two or three days a week, and it forms a fairly substantial portion of my income. I can usually pay for my groceries and daily things with it.'

But quite apart from the money, there are other benefits you can gain from street performance. For a start, you never know who might be listening. 'I've got a lot of other work out of it,' says Abdoo. 'I've done weddings and other events, and sometimes you might end up on TV or the radio, which is fun – and useful for your profile.'

And it certainly offers practice opportunities. 'I'd really recommend it for anyone preparing for a performance,' explains Juritz. 'There are certain things you'll really only learn when you perform a piece to an audience. Busking gives you the opportunity to perform something three or four times a day if you want to.' And there's nothing like getting out there and playing to people for overcoming performance anxiety. 'I used to be a nervous wreck at auditions,' says Abdoo, 'but now my confidence has improved hugely, which is all down to street performing.'

So the next time you pass a busker, don't look down on them or pity them. Think about the money they're earning, what they're learning, and the opportunities street performance is bringing them. Abdoo is realistic about the limitations of busking, but also about its benefits: 'If you want to make proper money, with a steady income, try and get into an orchestra. But if you want to be a bit more creative, spontaneous, and take more risks, try playing on the street. It's not glamorous and it can be irritating at times, but the good things it'll do for you far outweigh the unpleasant stuff.' ■

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GOLDEN RULES FOR BUSKING

Get permission

Check with your local authority, police or other buskers whether there are rules, and if you need a licence.

Choose the right location

Find somewhere with a good acoustic, plenty of passers-by, and not too much background noise.

Select your repertoire carefully

Bach and Baroque music work well, but you can explore jazz, folk or rock in different situations. Respond to listeners' requests if possible.

Look the part

Passers-by may see you before they hear you, so dress to get yourself noticed.

Respect other buskers

Never pitch too close to them and don't try to steal their audience.

Acknowledge your listeners

Make respectful eye contact, smile, and thank them if they give you something.

Protect yourself and your money

Keep most of your cash hidden away, but leave enough on show to look like you're doing well. Don't give out too much personal information.

Be prepared for a long performance

If things are going well, you might be there for a few hours, so bring some food and water.

Obey the police

If you're asked to move on or stop playing, just do what you're told.

Look after your instrument

Avoid direct sunlight and rain, and don't play when it's too hot or too cold.

Pay your dues

You may need to pay tax on your busking income. Keep a record of how much you've made and when, and declare it to your country's authorities – and keep track of any busking-related expenses you've incurred.