

# Busking

**T**he street performer's bug is like any other artistic addiction. You crave the excitement and the terror of putting yourself on the line every time out. Edith Piaf started on the street and continued to perform in Paris on her corner at times all through her professional stage career. For some it's just an easy way to make a few quick bucks when they move to a new town, but for most performers it's an art form.

In any city the lowly Pan Handler can make substantially more than minimum wage on the street. Determined ones with a plan can make a lot. Some pan-handlers have a straightforward method of creating capital, like the blind guy who sees a little, whose act consists of repeating the same line "got a penny nickel dime quarter dollar." The phrase ripples out in a staccato four-four rhythm in time with the tapping of his cane, and he goes home

ten pounds heavier in change. Another nice compact begging act is the kid about 20 or so dressed in a heavy plaid shirt, jeans and half worn-out sneakers carrying a sleeping bag. He is every mom's runaway son. It's a fine-tuned act that works well as long as the kid is on the move and doesn't stick around the same neighbourhood for too long.

Any busker who has reached the stage of their craft where a living is viable, i.e. they can afford a place to live, food, dental and health care, plus kids, is usually involved with some form of indoor entertainment. The gigs are usually far enough out of the mainstream club and concert hall scene, keeping the busker spirit intact. Daycare

centres, old folks homes, store openings, anniversary parties and prisons are a few of the fringe gigs that could supplement a well-tuned and determined

**In the politics of fun, individual participation is the beginning and end of democracy**

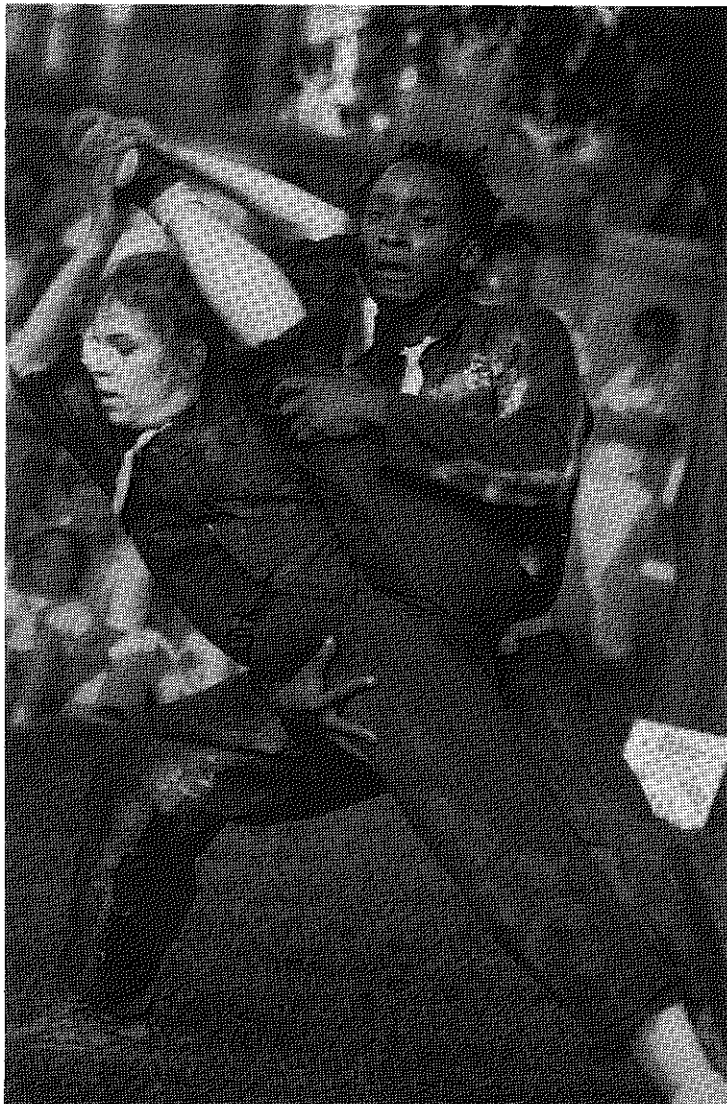
street act. Some buskers do make a living on the street, but they are the exception.

It's a rare busker who has never worked indoors.

Top of the line street performers are to be found in cities around the world. In 1987

Halifax invited buskers from Amsterdam, Paris, London, Boston, Key West, New Orleans, Toronto, New York, Montreal and Los Angeles to participate in the first International Buskers Competition. First prize was ten thousand dollars, with another ten thousand for categories including most photogenic act, children's entertainer, best music act, etc. The first prize, called the People's Choice Award, was determined by votes from the public. One vote was included in a three-dollar picture brochure of all the acts. Thirty-eight busking acts, including jugglers, (lots of them, and eventually the big winners) musicians, puppet and mime troupes, one-man bands, novelty comedy groups, a travelling family band, an organ grinder with monkey, and a story teller performed on the streets in some of the warmest sunny weather the city had seen in years. The people came out nightly in the thousands blocking the streets and enjoying each other's company while children ran from crowd to crowd to get autographs from overwhelmed entertainers.

Busking is usually a spontaneous answer to the need for self-expression and the desire for freedom from conventional forms of work. It is also a way to make money with very little capital investment. Equipment can range from relatively expensive unicycles to a few pieces of coloured chalk, some metal cleats for taps or nothing but the human voice. Some parents find their most valuable resource is their children. Four young girls from four to 14 with dad on guitar sang for their



◀ *Special Blend* members Jessica Goldberg and Eugene Poku at the Halifax Buskers Festival / photo: Christopher Majka

supper as well as their lunch in Vancouver and could always make a buck from the tourists.

An act I met at the Halifax festival from Texas got started up when the man got sick and had to leave his job. His wife



▲ **Bounty Brothers**  
David Aiken, David Gomez and Henrik Boethe / photo: Christopher Majka

took the family guitar and went out on the street to perform. When he got better he joined the act instead of going back to work. Now the whole family travels and plays from the subways of New York to the streets of Halifax and Paris. They've even added an ageing uncle who plays fiddle and tells Henny Youngman jokes. Four kids play an assortment of instruments and dance. The youngest, barely walking, sits in a shopping cart and beats the drum, keeping great time.

▶ **Ron Parks in Halifax**

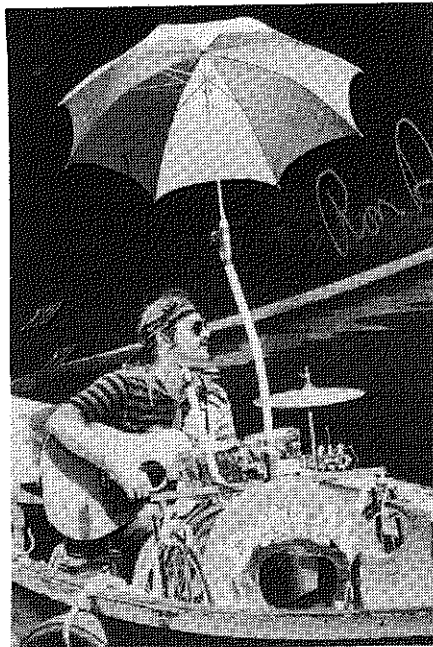
The oldest buskers I've seen perform at Historic Properties on the Halifax waterfront. Sadie and her troupe of old folks, all over seventy, play a snappy selection of memorable tunes and sing-alongs. Even the skateboard generation stops to listen. I dream of cutting such a gig someday.

The busking stage is also there for beginners and for those whose entertainment abilities don't fit into the mold of the more formal venues like clubs, TV or radio. A man with bottlecaps clamped to his fingertips, tapping out a rhythm on a tin can has his place in the music business, even if it isn't in the recording studio or as a warmup act for Eddie Van Halen. Outdoors is also a great place to practise, and young performers who have few places to play amateur gigs can always find a corner to cut their teeth on.

At St. Lawrence Market in Toronto there is a weekend busker who arrives at four a.m. He does a regular job during the week, so he's raring to go with the first light, full of all that pent-up job frustration energy. He has a spot that he likes and in order to get it he has to get there early. Market shoppers are up with the birds. After playing his classical guitar for eight hours he goes home with considerable cash. During a Saturday at the Market there will be 25 or so different acts including an old man playing spoons to taped tunes on a boom box, another old fella playing his guitar singing the praises of his elixir, cayenne pepper pop, three gents from Peterborough hoein' down some hot fiddle music, a complete South American ensemble, boom boom, toot toot, a Neil Young clone, an alley full of jugglers and a young girl playing bagpipes you can hear for a mile.

All this and more within half a city block in Toronto the Staid.

One of my most memorable busking experiences took place in Terrace Bay, a little town east of Thunder Bay. I just happened to stop for lunch after leaving Thunder Bay where I learned, for the first time, the rules about playing on liquor store property in Ontario, a big no no. There was a liquor store in Terrace Bay right next to a movie theatre. I could play on the theatre sidewalk and still be close enough to get the people's attention and donations. I was enough of a novelty in town to do some good trade. Then a whole swarm of kids came to the matinee at the theatre. They were with a birthday party so I got them involved with a few shakers and noisemakers. The mom came up with a nice folding bill and I was set to leave town with plenty of gas money for the old Chev. It wasn't to be. The theatre manager came out with an offer for me to play that night before the main show. The



theatre had just been refurbished and was having its grand opening. This was a real gig. I decided to play a bit more to fill up the afternoon when out of the liquor store comes a guy loaded up with rum and beer. He walks straight over to me and says, "It's me thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. Will ya come and play for me at my house party tonight? I'm a Maritimer, there's a priest who sings, he'll be there, all ya can eat and drink, and I'll pay ya thirty-five bucks besides."

## Street performers are beginning to see their art as a vital expression for people to counterbalance the megabusiness of global TV culture

With the economy threatening to bottom out any day, more and more of us are looking for alternatives to the 40-hour work week that seems to be fast disappearing. Busking certainly isn't the answer to a sagging economy, but it does make sense for those with a little ham in them and the nerve to get over the first few times out on the street. After that

it's an addiction no matter what the hat pulls in, and it's an honest living. It's entertainment for the people who pay what they can and see what they get before they pay. There are usually no big line-ups to get in and the biggest pollution by-product from the industry is laughter. As the world appears to shrink under the blanket of communications systems and the word "international" comes to mean "next-door," street performers are beginning to see their art as a vital expression for people to counterbalance the megabusiness of global TV culture. Given the eccentric, anarchistic nature of the busker, a natural, spontaneous, unique, original folk entertainment can survive the drone of the mass-produced tyrannical pop show.

In the politics of fun, individual participation is the beginning and end of democracy. The watch phrase should be a musical instrument in every home, or better still, an instrument or piece of busking gear for every TV in the house. Despite their individuality, minstrel buskers remain public property. They are accountable daily to the people. They are naked, vulnerable, and open to judgment every time out. There is no free lunch, no hiding out in the washroom, or sleeping on the job while the hourly wage ticks away. This closeness to hand-to-mouth existence is what expunges the tyranny of the pop show and by example strengthens resistance to it. ♦

*Ron Parks has been a musician for 30 years: a rock drummer in the 60s and 70s; a one-man band in the 80s; and a concertina, clarinet, portable, acoustic street-musician-on-a-bicycle in the 90s. He currently maintains street corners in Toronto and Halifax.*