

Buskers in Calgary face an uphill climb
Published in the Calgary *Herald*, May 6, 2005
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After a pretty rough couple of weeks, I'm relaxing with a book of poetry. Not any poetry, but a collection called *Corner Stores in the Middle of the Block* by a Harlem poet called Blue.

It's terrific stuff -- raw, biting, screaming to be read out loud. I can't quote much of it in a family newspaper, so you'll have to trust me on its sheer power.

It's a self-published book; Blue (real name Derrick Wilson) wrote it, professionally laid it out, and printed it.

I have it because of an encounter on the Q train about a year ago. It was early Saturday morning, and my houseguests were still in bed. I was taking the train from my apartment near Central Park to downtown Manhattan to pick up half-price theatre tickets for that night.

I was half-asleep myself, vibrating along with the subway, when Blue burst into the car and started reciting some of his work. It woke me up, so I motioned him over, gave him 10 bucks for the book, and had a quick chat before the next stop, when he went to the next car.

Now, technically, Blue was performing an illegal act -- while artistic performances and the soliciting of donations are allowed on transit property in New York City, doing them in a subway car or on the bus is actually forbidden.

This is, however, widely ignored, and I have never seen it enforced. Indeed, every day in the subway and on the streets of Manhattan is an adventure. Singers, violinists, street artists, mimes: it's all part of the crazy collision of humanity that we call a city.

As the weather gets warmer, can we look forward to the streets of Calgary filling with this kind of life? Not likely.

There are no fewer than five organizations that regulate street performers in the city -- the Calgary Downtown Association, the

Kensington BRZ, Calgary Transit, Eau Claire Market, and the city parks department. Each has their own set of rules and regulations that aren't always aligned with one another.

For example, to perform at Eau Claire, you have to pass an audition. Don't bother dusting off your devil sticks, though -- according to their website, they're not accepting new applications until the New Year.

Want to perform on C-Train platforms? Forget about it -- the Calgary Transit bylaw forbids it without previous written authorization from the Director of Calgary Transit, whoever that is. (His name is John Hubbell, but your guess is as good as mine for the procedure to apply for his permission).

Even the Calgary Downtown Association, which has the most progressive regulations, requires those who want to perform on Stephen Avenue or Barclay Mall to cough up \$40 for a permit and another \$25 for a police check -- yup, we need to save ourselves from dangerous mimes, since no one with a criminal record need apply.

The CDA guidelines also prohibit busking after 11 p.m. -- note to Richard White: no one lives on Stephen Avenue.

The worst offender here is the city itself. The Parks department allows street performances in a grand total of two locations: the absurdly named Busk Stops are on the rear side of the Olympic Plaza and North of Eau Claire Market. That's it. You can't play your guitar in Prairie Winds Park or on 17th Avenue. Not along the riverbank nor in front of the bars on 1st Street.

If you choose to hit the busk stop, you must start only at the top of the hour. You only get one hour in total, and for God's sake, don't play past 8 p.m.

Ald. Druh Farrell sardonically pointed out a couple of weeks ago that there are more regulations on busking in this city than on panhandling. This is ridiculous. So, here's my proposal for a new busking bylaw:

- No permits are needed to perform on any public property anywhere, including transit property;
- Busking may not occur between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. in residential areas, but there are no restrictions if there are no homes within 150 metres;
- Sounds may not be amplified to greater than 80 decibels measured at 15 metres away;
- Musicians must rotate locations every hour if someone else is waiting to perform;
- No trumpets, bagpipes, or creepy silver Euro-robot mimes.

OK, maybe that last one is just for me. There's no accounting for taste.

Seriously, though, that's it. There's no need for a nanny state on this -- let the market decide. If the performers are bad and no one gives them money, they will go away.

Who knows? We might even find another Blue. (And if you want his book, e-mail him on greatpersuader@hotmail.com)

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