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Street performer scene: Musicians, entertainers help form the fabric of downtown Asheville life

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ASHEVILLE — When the sun interrupts our bleak winter skies, music graces downtown Asheville's corners and storefronts. Even in the winter months, musicians emerge on sunny afternoons to play to sidewalk audiences of 9-to-5 downtown dwellers and curious travelers.

The theater also spills into the streets: Add mimes, jugglers and human statues to the bevy of musicians and downtown becomes a "mini-festival," said Misty Childs, marketing and advertising manager at Greenlife Grocery.

Street performing "definitely defines Asheville," Childs said. "It's a very artistic town ... I think (street performers) are not as apprehensive to show their talents here because (Asheville) is so open."

When Asheville becomes an open-air stage during warm months, it joins cities like Austin in the ranks of busking hot spots in the United States.

"A lot of people come to Asheville to play old-time mountain music," said Jake Collins, of Santa Cruz, Calif.

Collins bounces across the United States, playing mountain dance music with his fiddle on street corners in California, New York and Asheville. He played outside of Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, a popular site for street performers, Monday.

Linda Barrett Knopp, general manager of the bookstore, said she thinks the store "and street performers benefit each other, as our customers provide performers with a steady stream of potential audience, and live music cultivates liveliness and warmth on our street corner."

And if any music is too loud and distracting, she said musicians are normally responsive to requests to move along.

The city regulates street performing. For instance, performers must provide a minimum of 6 feet of pedestrian passageway. Lt. Wallace Welch of the Asheville Police Department said they "rarely" get a complaint about street performers, and if they do, it's usually a loud noise call after 10 p.m., which is when entertainers are required to pack it up.

Street performers also abide by their own code: Wind Motika, a bamboo flute performer, said that "whoever shows up first gets the spot ... then generally you get to stay there two hours."

"It's a system that just runs itself. There are no leaders, no unions," he said.

Maggie Holobaugh, a human statue from Washington, D.C., who once performed in Asheville, thinks the street performer scene fits neatly into the character of the city. "It just totally clicks into the resourceful, crafty spirit of Appalachia," she said.

Here's a look at Holobaugh and four other Asheville street performers:

Maggie Holobaugh,
of Washington, D.C.

Performs: Gender-bending ballet. She blends traditional male and female clothing and becomes a human statue. She also gives out fortunes, such as “An adventure awaits you,” on scraps of paper to onlookers.

Performance background: “I woke up one morning in May and decided I wanted to do something adventurous ... and the first thing I thought of was performing. I’ve really never been a performer, never as the one person standing there. It pushed me.” A leotard with a built-in skirt she found in her closet inspired her gender-bending routine.

Why she busks: It’s a great way for her to people-watch and meet interesting people, she said.

What she’s doing when she isn’t busking: In North Carolina, she worked for a community mental health services. She’s also an art model.

Most money made: She said she would make about \$15 an hour.

Strangest things people told her while performing: Someone told her, “You are very beautiful, even with this mustache on.” A child once grabbed her rear.

Mary Sparks,
of Asheville

Plays: Hammered dulcimer. She plays her own compositions that are “new age, classical, alternative folk.”

Musical background: She also plays guitar and piano, as well as drums in rock n’ roll bands.

Why she busks: “A big part of my income is playing music.” She also performs on the street “because of the interaction, connection with people. You can’t get that with a stage performance ... what I’m getting to experience here is direct, immediate feedback of emotion and connection to music that I’ve felt with music.”

What she’s doing when she’s not street performing: She performs at weddings, receptions and gallery shows. She also works for an agency that supports developmentally disabled adults.

Most money made in one session: \$130 in 4 1/2 hours.

Strangest things people have dropped in her basket: Chocolate, a purple blossom and a small ceramic skull.

Gabrielle Macrae,
of Asheville

Plays: “Old-time music” with a banjo, guitar and fiddle. She mostly fiddles when she performs by herself.

Musical background: “I’ve been playing music since I was a kid; I played a bunch of things growing up.”

She’s busked up and down the coast of California, Chicago and Ocean City, Md.

Why she busks: “When I was a teenager it was something fun to do ... it’s usually fun.”

What she’s doing when she’s not street performing: She paints houses and provides the foot-stomping beat at square dances in the area.

Most money made in one session: \$60-\$70.

Strangest things people have dropped in her case: Colored stones and an unsigned poem in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Kevin Jerome,
of Asheville

Plays: Guitar, saxophone, hand drums and also sings “thankful, thoughtful music.” He primarily plays original jams on his guitar, as well as some traditional spirituals.

Musical background: He’s played the guitar for about a year and sax since elementary school.

Why he busks: “You are pretty much on your own terms. You meet a lot of wonderful people on the street.”

What he’s doing when he isn’t busking: He provides care for a mentally disabled family member.

Most money made in one session: \$50.

Strangest things people have dropped in his case: Someone cut out a picture of Santa Claus and pasted it on top of the portrait of George Washington on a dollar bill.

Wind Motika, of Asheville

Plays: All original tunes on his bamboo flute that he said falls into the “adult alternative easy listening” genre.

Musical background: He also sings in bands, but plays the flute on the street.

Why he busks: “I do it because I really love it ... I get paid to rehearse. I compose stuff out there.”

What he’s doing when he isn’t busking: “I kind of do a lot of things,” such as cleaning the Rainbow Mountain Children’s School.

Most money made: \$60.

Strangest things people have left in his basket: A Squidward Tentacles patch from the Nickelodeon show, “SpongeBob SquarePants.”

What is busking?

Busking is defined as playing music or performing entertainment in a public place, usually while soliciting money.
