

Arts & Features

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Downtown offers lucrative venues for street performers

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Balloon-twister, magician and fire-juggler Kenny the Clown is one of Asheville's many buskers who make a living out of an upturned hat or open guitar case on the sidewalk—and still have a home and a running vehicle.

"There are a lot of people that make a living on the street and prefer to," professional street performer Kenny Cowden said.

Any downtown Asheville street corner can become a platform for a working busker, who may seek more than cigarettes, food or alcohol. They are not all homeless.

"We definitely get grouped into that category occasionally, which is valid. It's a common misconception," said Shane Conerty, who has busked all around the world. "And there are a lot of homeless buskers for sure, it's just more that they do it for booze or something to eat and we do it to pay our rent."

Conerty plays guitar in a local three-piece band, Now You See Them, who established themselves in Asheville through busking.

"We've never had to question going out and finding a real job since we got here because, as long as we were out on the street working, we were paying our bills," drummer Jason Mencer said.

Busking paid the band's rent, but always required a very frugal lifestyle, according to the third member Dulci Ellenberger.

"You have to be hitting the streets every day, and it doesn't matter if it's sprinkling out, it's a Wednesday and there are no tourists in town," 32-year-old Mencer said.

Now You See Them treated busking as a full-time job to earn an audience and a venue in the city, as well as cash, according to the band.

"As long as we've been busking we've been trying to get legitimate gigs," singer Ellenberger said.

The band now has a full October schedule of performances at festivals and venues in Greensboro, Charlotte, Pittsboro and Asheville and considers busking paid practice time.

"The term busking or buskers is pretty common anywhere else besides America, especially in European countries," said Conerty, a Pennsylvania native. "In a lot of foreign countries it's common and



Photos by Timothy Meinch

Street performers John and Lyric strum acoustic guitars and sing in front of Bistro 1896. Some street musicians, also known as "buskers," have earned a living by performing acoustic music downtown.

more accessible as a profession than it is here in America. But in Asheville, it's pretty easy to do it."

Cowden learned the trade throughout a 17-year career as a street performer. He performed in many different acts around the world, from the Caribbean to Japan, all over Europe and in Canada. There's a healthier respect for street performers internationally, according to the Asheville local.

While twisting balloons together to form a miniature Jerry Garcia, Cowden listed several U.S. cities, including Miami and St. Augustine, Fla., where civic law no longer allows busking.

"There aren't too many places you can still do it in this free country," the 39-year-old street performer said. "We've been

kicked out of a lot of places. Sometimes it had to do with the homeless people saying they aren't panhandlers but street performers, and they screwed it up for everybody."

The practice merges social classes and often creates tension between the professionals and nonprofessionals, according to the buskers.

"It's really interesting to see the people that are homeless or traveling, train jumping from city to city, and the way they respond to us," Ellenberger said. "A lot of times we see distaste in their eyes, and they think we don't deserve it because we have a car and a house."

Cowden does not mind paying for a permit, as required by some cities, because it keeps certain undesirable characters from

performing on the street.

"A lot of people are just bums that found an instrument from wherever," said busker Sarah Holloway of the O'Reallys. "Paul and I have been playing professionally for three years. We moved to a town where we don't know anyone and it's hard to get a gig here. We gotta feed ourselves."

Holloway and Paul Mozo moved to Asheville three weeks ago and spend several days a week performing on the street to make some money, but ultimately look for shows.

"It's kind of the means to an end, trying to get exposure," said Mozo, who is from St. Simon Island, Ga.

The presence of this unique subculture affects the business atmosphere, accord-

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