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Busking as a Form of Protest in Asheville, NC

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Abstract

Busking, street performance monetized by tips, has a long history in Asheville, North Carolina, and a large influence on its tourism, artistic culture, and cityscape. In recent years, the city's rapid gentrification has blurred the lines between public and private spaces and raised the cost of living so significantly that it has driven out many of the artists who made the city what it is today. This leaves significantly less accessible space for buskers to perform, and, under the guise of middle class safety, creates a false narrative of danger and the need to control public spaces through anti-homeless architecture and policing that limits access for buskers and other public forms of art. Through this research, I examine cultural prejudices against unhoused people, panhandlers, buskers, and others living alternative lifestyles, and how this, in turn, influences gentrification and privatization. Particularly, I look into "'art-washing,' in which city governments tacitly support gentrification by promoting creative works to encourage social expression while overlooking the violent effects of redevelopment on existing populations" (Novak 2019). Additionally, I identify commodification of art as a means of repurposing artists' ideas and works for companies to profit from, and in turn, further artwashing the cities housing them. This paper, based on several months of interviews with buskers and pedestrians, participant observation, and my own busking experience, evaluates busking culture in

Asheville as a protest against processes of gentrification, privatization of space, and commodification of art. This ethnography builds on existing research into the distinctions between public and private space, particularly in the context of rapid gentrification, and considers busking as an everyday form of resistance (Scott 1989).

Introduction

I interviewed a busker for the first time in January 2025 under the cold concrete overarching an Earth Fare in West Asheville. His acoustic guitar riffs echoing off the grey walls distracted me from the freezing temperature. A man and his dog, some sort of black and white spotted lab mix, were sitting by one of the concrete pillars with a tip jar and a guitar. When I asked about his relationship to music, he told me that he teaches children to build their own instruments alongside busking regularly. In this short interaction, I was left with a few questions: namely, how he ended up with his career, how others respond, and how art, like busking, changes an environment, both physically and socially.

Asheville's government website links a brochure for its buskers and the Asheville Busking Collective which defines buskers as street performers and states that "Artistic performances on city sidewalks are a vital and welcome part of Asheville's unique character and culture. Street performances are distinguished from panhandling activities by the commercial nature of the performer's actions which provide the benefit of a live performance of artistic value in exchange for gratuities given in appreciation of the performance" (Ashevillenc.gov). Most of the buskers I've seen and spoken to have been musicians (although the breadth of interviewees has included unicyclers, jewelry makers, and snake handlers). For the purposes of this research, I define busking as performances in public spaces monetized solely by tips. One busker, Snake Guy, described the busking community:

> "Well, it's a big part of the culture, I think. Because Asheville is such an artistic town, it's such a tourist town, and so busking is an art form because you have guitar players, your drummers, you have voodoo, tarot card readers. You have jugglers, circus performers, unicycle riders, you have poets, you have Rascal and me, you have all ties, and we provide a survey, but we also are contributing to artistic sensibilities of Asheville and kind of just the weird vibe, the world. coolness that people come to see tourists that's well that's a big part of the reason that we're such a tourist attraction. The tourist town, the buskers are a big attraction."

Despite the difference in medium, most of the buskers I've spoken to have mentioned the impact their work has on children, a thread several buskers expressed in their work.

Through interviews, fieldwork, personal immersion, and outside research, I have examined Asheville's busking culture and how it changes the city's landscape. In the field, there are several factors that make busking difficult to preserve, such as overpolicing,

privatization, gentrification, and changes in public perception. However, I have also found a lot of community building aspects to busking that make it an imperative part of Asheville's culture. With both of these factors in mind, I have found that Asheville's busking culture is not only an art form, but also serves as a form of protest against increased gentrification of the city through reclaiming public space and making art accessible. Busking is particularly personal and accessible, making it all the more valuable. One of the most important things about it is that anyone can do it, making it stand out from capitalistic and gatekept art forms.

Methodology

My methods of collecting data varied throughout the research. I started by conducting interviews with buskers on the street. I had three main locations: downtown Asheville, the parking lot in front of Earth Fare, and the parking lot in front of the Whole Foods on Merrimon Avenue. I asked the buskers several questions, starting by asking about their lives, specifically how they started busking and playing music as a whole, if they'd found community through busking, why they chose Asheville, if recent events like the COVID-19 lockdowns and the devastation following Hurricane Helene had impacted Asheville's busking scene, how they were treated by pedestrians, and how they thought busking and public art as a whole contributed to the city's overall culture.

I conducted fifteen total interviews with seventeen total buskers from January to September of 2025. The vast majority of my interviews were with white men, with the exception of one black man, two white women, and one white nonbinary person. Most of the interviewees were musicians, but the breadth of interviewees included snake handlers and jugglers. For the sake of keeping buskers anonymous as most of them requested, I will either keep them nameless or use pseudonyms.

In asking these questions, I got brief glimpses into the buskers' biographies, passions, and life stories. It also gave me a sense and description of sides of Asheville I was not yet familiar with, such as many areas downtown, and the more underground cultures present before I moved here. However, I was limited in my understanding, since I was not able to completely immerse myself with Asheville's buskers. The buskers themselves varied in the amount of time they spent busking, with several of them busking to make a living, and others simply doing it on breaks from work or more so as a hobby. Several of them frequented the same spots, particularly the buskers who busked downtown. Despite the variation in buskers' backgrounds and general practices, I still felt somewhat like an outsider even among the buskers relying the least on it for income. Because of this, I started every interview out by stating my position as a student researcher, which

automatically alienated me from the buskers I was speaking to. In turn, I did not get the entire picture of their work.

In addition to conducting interviews, I tried busking on my own, starting in May of 2025 and ending in August. I went to three of the four locations listed, the Whole Foods, Earth Fare, and downtown Asheville. I played bass guitar and acoustic guitar. During my sessions busking, I noted how much money I made (if any), how I was treated, if there were other buskers nearby, and how a space influenced my experiencing busking. I wanted to see what factors impacted how much money I could make, which places were most welcoming, and how buskers treated other members of the community.

Finally, I tried to ask for pedestrian and local opinions on buskers in the city. In order to do this, I set up a Google Form. While the Google Form provided some insight into the public's opinion on busking in Asheville, it was significantly less personal and insightful given the medium. Using online forums makes it impossible to track body language and truly connect with an individual. However, I chose to use a Google Form because it felt like the easiest way to get in contact with a large, diverse group of people. In it, I asked the following questions:

1. What age group are you in?
2. Are you a resident in Asheville or a tourist?

These questions were to establish a demographic and see if there were any trends in what different groups answered, and just to get a general sense of who was responding.

3. Have you seen street performances in downtown or other places in Asheville?
4. If you answered yes to the previous question, what performances stood out to you and why?
5. What areas do you notice buskers typically performing?

These questions were intended to see how well known Asheville's buskers were and to find spaces they occupied, and which spaces were most noticeable.

6. Do you feel safe around street performers in Asheville?
7. Why do you or do you not feel safe around performances?

Using frameworks on gentrification and perceived safety (or lack thereof) in public city spaces, I set up these questions to see if there were any sort of prejudices toward or against buskers.

8. How do you think street performances impact Asheville's culture?
9. Do you think busking and other performances benefit or harm tourism? Why?

Here, I wanted to see how people viewed busking in its context in Asheville's larger community and reputation. Because tourism is such a significant part of the economy, I was interested to see how people thought busking influenced it.

10. Do you think public art is important, why or why not?
11. Does watching street performances and having buskers in Asheville give you a sense of community? Why or why not?

These questions are the most directly relevant to my research. Community and art in public spaces are the central concepts in my research, and I was interested to see what these things meant to the general public

I sent this survey out to several of my friends and family members, and posted it on the social media sites Reddit and Instagram. Instagram gave me limited success, due to the fact that my account is private and the only people who could see it are people I know personally. I had more success on Reddit, with more respondents from more diverse age groups . I received twenty-six responses in total, with 58.3% of respondents being older than thirty, 37.5% being 18-25, and 4.2% being 26-30. 83.3% of respondents were residents in Asheville.

Reclamation of Public Space

Across the United States and elsewhere, the lines between public and private spaces are becoming increasingly blurred, as city streets become over policed and city living becomes more and more expensive. Under the guise of safety, suburban and gated areas are growing evermore prevalent and all-encompassing (Jacobs 1993). This, effectively, pushes out people who are low income or live any sort of "alternative" lifestyle, such as buskers and other artists. Artists being priced out of the communities they built and put on the map is a common and well documented history (Kulka 2020). Today, increasingly so every moment, more and more places are becoming gate kept, blocked off, and hidden behind paywalls. Asheville is representative of this trend, as it "is one of the fastest gentrifying cities in the U.S." and most families in the city spend significant percentages of their income on housing (Lyons 2023). Especially following the disaster of Hurricane Helene, many areas in Asheville now have limited access or are completely closed, in addition to the increasing costs and gentrification of the city.

Tourism and Profit

Busking, an integral part of the city's tourism and artistic appeal, is in a strange position culturally. Buskers themselves reclaim spaces through using them to make music, but their positionality in the city is used as a tourist attraction, which, in turn, brings increased revenue and pushes for gentrification. Downtown Asheville touts its sculpture made to honor buskers. There's a whole subsection of the government brochure on guidelines for buskers, since "Asheville's street performer scene is part of our brand as a city" (Web Editors 2017). Many businesses encourage buskers as well, which I noticed through frequent occurrences of chairs, tip jars, and rules left for performers in popular busking spots.

For my first try busking on my own to truly get a feel of the experience, I set up my guitar, tip jar, and the chair the store provided in front of the Whole Foods on Merrimon Avenue. It's a smaller Whole Foods than most, nestled between a Harris Teeter and Trader Joes, and styled to look cabin-like. The spot buskers typically play in is in the middle of the parking lot, on a median between a crosswalk and the road. Stapled to the tree behind the metal chair set up for buskers, there's a laminated sheet of paper with rules for buskers and a Whole Foods logo printed on it. These formal rules include a time limit of two hours, something I would see mirrored in my interviews when buskers told me about an "honor system" where they support each other and allow for each other to play, not playing after seven pm or before nine am, no drinking or smoking, and a thank you statement. This highlights the relationship between buskers and the companies that, at least to some extent, support them. Buskers, too, support each other by following these rules and giving other buskers the chance to use the space.

However, because Whole Foods is a massive chain company run by a billionaire, there is a clear irony in their role in outsider arts. As the research will discuss, the buying out of artists by large, capitalistic chains is one of the contributors to the downfall of artistic communities. Although the Asheville Whole Foods' commitment to providing for the community's artistic pursuits makes it stand out against a sea of other identical markets, it does not completely relieve the company of any fault; Asheville's tourist economy has a significant root in the city's artistic endeavors. Utilising it for capitalistic gain is neither shocking nor new.

Culture and cities, according to sociologist Sharon Zukin, can function as a type of commodity. She explains, "cultural institutions establish a competitive advantage over other cities for attracting new businesses and corporate elites" and "like any commodity, 'cultural' landscape has a possibility of generating other commodities'" (Zukin 1995 page 12). She further explains that post WWII, American and European cities have become, in and of themselves, a brand. Asheville is branded as an artsy city, characterized by its galleries, murals, buskers, and generally gritty downtown. Its artistic reputation becomes its main tourist draw; Zukin describes city branding as an integral part of its people's identity and collective memory (Zukin 1995). She argues that "cultural producers who supply art (and sell 'interpretation') are sought because they legitimize the appropriation of space" and humanize the landscape (Zukin 1995 page 22). Asheville's art galleries, River Arts District, and street performers all sell its branding as an art town. The stores downtown, many of which sell stereotypically "hippie" esque clothing all sell its alternative and artistic branding. However, a lot of this reputation has become a profit structure rather than a product of genuine expression.

Buskers, including many whom I spoke to, travel frequently from city to city. Different cities' cultures and "brands" impact how buskers are perceived. One busker, Liam, told

me about his journey travelling in a van from Portland down to Asheville and stopping in major cities. The city itself, for example, New York which also has a rich busking culture, allows for more public spaces and places where people intersect. The denser populations allow for more frequent, and close interactions. This, however, also lends to more perceived dangers of social interactions, and, in turn, increased attempts at monetization and disillusionment of public spaces.

Cities, as Jane Jacobs describes them, "are not like towns, only larger. They are not like suburbs, only denser. They differ from towns and suburbs in basic ways, and one of these is that cities are, by definition, full of strangers. To any one person, strangers are far more common in big cities than acquaintances," following it up with "The bedrock attribute of a successful city district is that a person must feel personally safe and secure on the street among all these strangers" (Jacobs 1993). For buskers to work, it is fundamental that pedestrians have a level of trust in strangers, at least enough to want to give money to them. This, however, is not always the case.

Jacobs argues that cities are built fundamentally by their sidewalks and public areas. She states "A city sidewalk by itself is nothing. It is an abstraction. It means something only in conjunction with the buildings and other uses that border it, or border other sidewalks very near it. The same might be said of streets, in the sense that they serve other purposes besides carrying wheeled traffic in their middles. Secrets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs" (Jacobs 1993). Sidewalks are the primary structure that allow buskers to perform. Buskers utilize these organs and the path crossings with strangers to their advantage. When, as Jacobs explains, people do *not* feel safe in public spaces, the idea of the stranger becomes a dangerous figure.

This phenomenon of prioritizing safety over originality and integrity directly causes privatization and pushes artists away, even if the city itself claims to support them, as Asheville does. Art-washing, as Novak explains it, is a tool in gentrification that takes the long standing art scene and uses it for profit, without actually supporting its artists. He states, "In gentrifying cities, the recognition of 'local neighborhood culture' is both resisted and instrumentalized as a force of governance through arts and culture policy" (Novak 2019). Asheville both uses its artists to advertise for tourists and add to the city's perceived culture, and pushes the very artists they claim to represent out through raising prices, overpolicing, and changing cityscapes to include hostile architecture. Moreover, false notions of danger attributed to buskers and others in public spaces keep from being able to legitimately practice their craft. Labelling things like graffiti or making too much noise as crimes, buskers as "aggressive tweakers" as one responder to

my Google Form answered, directly contributes to the marginalization of public artistry, and by extension, the privatization of cityscapes.

Jacobs describes the gentrification and limiting public usage as a means of ensuring safety by saying

> "The barbarism and the real, not imagined, insecurity that gives rise to such fears cannot be tagged a problem of the slums. The problem is most serious, in fact, in genteel-looking 'quiet residential areas' and other middle class individuals prioritizing their ideal of safety and civility in the long term creates detrimental impacts on cities' cultures, people, and landscapes" (Jacobs 1993).

Minimizing use of streets pushes buskers, artists, and pedestrians away, creates gatekept and privatized cities.

When formerly public spaces like parks, parking lots, and sidewalks are privatized and altered in response to perceived barbarism, artists are often priced out of the areas they previously worked in, or otherwise completely barred from them. Anti-homeless, or hostile, architecture permeates downtown Asheville and mark the trend toward increased gentrification of the city. Many of downtown's benches have bars across the center, some areas of sidewalks in alleys have oddly placed sculptures or even spikes. While buskers are not the intended population anti homeless architecture targets, they still suffer from it, like I did trying to hold my guitar. Minimizing and sectioning off public property prevents *everyone* from using it, particularly those trying to exist in public spaces for extended periods of time. Bars across benches prevent guitarists from comfortably holding guitars and other performers from having space to perform. In his explanation of art-washing, Novak argues, "For urban policy, it is an attempt to include the cultural values of existing communities in processes of economic redevelopment" (Novak 2019). Right now, Asheville is redeveloping and undergoing significant economic change. This includes its overpolicing, hostile architecture, and privatization. While the city boasts its buskers and directly separates them from panhandlers, the actions taken to harm panhandlers and the homeless harms the entire city, particularly its artists. Therefore, using buskers as a means of attracting tourists has a bitter irony to it, since as the city becomes more of a tourist trap, it becomes more sanitized, and in turn, more expensive and private.

One notable and well known example of art washing and monetization outside of Asheville is the graffiti on the Berlin Wall being transformed from a medium of expression and protest to a high end attraction. The article "Street Art, Placemaking, and Anticapitalist Spatial Activism" Kulka explains how outsider arts in Berlin have led to its gentrification, arguing "Over the past decade or so, Berlin—famously a 'poor but sexy' city known for its disproportionately affordable and plentiful housing and strong renter-friendly policies—has increasingly become desirable to foreign investors and property developers, looking to take advantage of the city's popularity with immigrants and its still-empty spaces" (Kulka

2020). Major companies have bought out land previously used by squatters, art has been removed or branded and drained of its message, and the complicated history that birthed the city's artistic movements and "spatial activism" has been sanitized and profited off of. Asheville is undergoing a similar transformation; Buskers are leaving downtown and settling for places like Whole Foods to avoid competition and other issues. Downtown Asheville was once a hub for buskers, but the "golden age of busking," as one interviewee described it, has ended because of economic and cultural changes in the city, though Asheville still markets buskers as a tourist attraction.

The roots of gentrification date back centuries, prior to even the Industrial Revolution. In the medieval feudalistic period, many people, particularly lower class people and women, took advantage of common areas outside of kingdoms for recreational activities, hunting, and an escape from oppression. During the transition into capitalism, these areas were privatised, a phenomenon known as "enclosure." In her book *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici details land privatization and the scapegoating of "vagabonds" and those refusing to conform to the changing society taking away commons, which "were the material foundation upon which peasant solidarity and sociality could thrive" (Federici 2004). Previously socially acceptable behavior was turned into crime against property, and propagandized that "vagabonds were swarming, changing cities, crossing borders, sleeping in the haystacks or crowding at the gates of towns" (Federici 2004). The moral panic surrounding vagabonds in the Medieval period led to privatization of cities and kingdoms, and the dissolution of the commons. Similarly, today, there is a moral panic surrounding who takes up space in cities. The usage of vagabonds as a scapegoat to expand infrastructure into the commons is a mirror to Jacobs' notion of barbarism. Fearmongering over panhandlers, the homeless, immigrants, and any marginalized groups leads to fear of the public nature of the cities themselves, and through that, privatization. Privatization like anti homeless architecture, overpolicing, and monetizing public areas like parks are actions that typically mark gentrification.

Buskers, in many ways, serve as a modern day equivalent and mirror for the vagabonds and figures existing outside of the social norm that Federici describes. In the space they take up publicly, buskers are reconstructing a commons. In my interviews, multiple buskers brought up fear mongering and conflation with pan handlers, criminals, and others, and how this makes their work busking more dangerous and often pushes them into the margins. Buskers themselves provide a service to the city, although a service that is not directly monetizable. The city often recognizes buskers' aids for tourism and general additions to the city's culture, however often lacks follow through in properly respecting and aiding the practice.

As a city, Asheville exists in the uncomfortable in-between of using art as a capitalistic venture for tourism and as a genuine form of expression. There are a few literal ways in

which the landscape has been altered as a result of busking, such as the sculpture commemorating the city's busking culture. However, in the wake of things like gentrification, overpolicing, and implementation of anti-homeless architecture, these things are a moot, and performative, point. While the sculpture draws attention to buskers, it doesn't actually provide them with support in any financial or tangible way. The sculpture itself becomes just another tourist trap; Although the intentions of it are good, it only tangibly serves to add more draw for tourists and doesn't really aid buskers.

Gentrification fundamentally alters landscapes, art, and culture, impacting marginalized communities in particular. "No 'Blank Canvas:' Public Art and Gentrification in Houston's Third Ward" details this phenomenon, with a focus on black artists in Houston. Its focus is the Third Ward in Houston, a predominantly black neighborhood undergoing significant changes and gentrification that "deviates from classical notions of the process whereby individual gentrifiers invest capital in disinvested properties, dislocating long-time residents of the community" (Wright and Herman 2018). The neighborhood began to be referred to as a "blank canvas." About this name, Wright and Herman say "The metaphorical recasting of the Third Ward as a 'blank canvas' reveals one of public art's effects: the marginalization of existing communities, rendering them invisible in the larger scope of urban gentrification" (Wright and Herman 2018). The article describes how many of the once free art and cultural experiences, like celebrating birthdays in a park, turned into expensive and heavily policed areas. These forms of gentrification and privatization "not only challenged developers' spatial imagination regarding what the space is (i.e., a threat) and can become (i.e., a safe and profitable space of townhomes and condominiums" (Wright and Herman 2018). Buskers, like the artists described by Wright and Herman, are similarly impacted by the sanitation and privatization of public spaces.

Asheville's art scene is strongly impacted by gentrification and marginalization. One article from 2023 in *Asheville Watchdog*, "Asheville Buskers are Singing the Blues" zooms in on the city's history of art washing, with one busker describing it as "'This is the story of gentrification. Artists make a place cool, and then when it's cool, they can't afford it anymore'" (Reinan 2023). He continued, "'Half of us live in our cars,' Rickards said. 'And we live farther out, because we can't afford to live in Asheville. We are being marginalized'" (Reinan 2023). This highlights the class issues, particularly between the tourists and buskers themselves. Using buskers, many of whom are members of already marginalized communities as Rickards argues, to draw in more money for the city to continue to profit from tourism, build new settlements for upper middle class individuals, and in turn make the city more and more expensive to live in, ultimately harms them in the end.

Legality, Marginalization, and Consequences of Gentrification

Buskers, particularly the ones belonging to marginalized communities, are at risk for their crafts being overtaken, illegalized, and demoralized. According to the review *Underground Harmonies: Music and Politics in the Subways of New York*, "the history of street and subway performing in New York City and the ways such performers have usually been legally marginalized and classified as vagrants" (Glasser 1997). The colloquial classification of buskers as panhandlers, drug addicts, "tweakers," and homeless beggars puts them in a vulnerable position. Although buskers are not inherently or necessarily unhoused, mentally ill, or members of a vulnerable group, many pedestrians, tourists, and locals alike sometimes conflate them with members of those groups. Because of this, buskers receive unfair and sometimes even cruel treatment.

Some buskers themselves note concerns about sharing public spaces, as Reinan's article points out:

> "The COVID pandemic brought diners onto the sidewalks and took away prime busking spots. And aggressive panhandlers, some buskers say, interfere with performances and scare away the audience" and "Not everyone knows the difference. So a person sees me, and there's [a panhandler] next to me, and they lump us together: 'Oh, those are both people asking me for money.' I get treated in a way that's less than respectful. I've been honing my craft for 10 years" (Reinan 2023).

The conflation of buskers and panhandlers, as well as the issues buskers face with public interruptions works to marginalize both groups at once, and prevents artists from feeling safely able to perform, because, as one of my interviewees put it, "In downtown, any maniac can come up to you." One plausible solution to this is to change social language around the unhoused populations as well as people suffering drug addictions and mental illnesses and trying to undo the ways in which they have been dehumanized and attempting to find proper rehabilitation, rather than punishment and discrimination. However, until public opinion is altered, the blurring of lines between artists and the legally marginalized is deeply harmful and dangerous to both populations.

Another busker, an acoustic guitar player, commented on the phenomenon of buskers leaving Asheville and the city's overall culture changing:

> "The culture here in Asheville because the city of Asheville specifically marketed busking as a reason for this place to be a destination I think spoiled it in people's minds. In the locals' minds as well. I've heard locals say at a time now there's not really busking going on, but at a time there was so much of it, but people would stop walking downtown just to avoid busking."

These changes, particularly the emphasis on busking as a form of profit for the city rather than its legitimacy as an art form, take away both the allure and the perceived authenticity of busking.

Asheville is, like most "artistic" cities globally, guilty of art-washing. Through the gestures of corporations and the subtle and outright pressures to kick homeless people out of public areas while trying to commemorate buskers and their artistic draw, especially while the city gentrifies at an alarming rate. Although there is a clear distinction between buskers and the unhoused, both groups of people exist and make their livelihoods through utilizing public spaces. Issues that impact one group, like prohibiting unhoused people from staying in public areas, also impact the other, regardless of intentionality. With stronger restrictions on when and where people can stay in parks or other public spaces, buskers have more to be concerned about in relation to police and how laws are enforced in public spaces.

While Asheville is accepting and even encouraging of its buskers, many other places are not. An acoustic guitar player told me that he "started busking because a friend of mine showed me how. It's not legal in some places, that's why I'm in Asheville. A lot of places, if you go out on the street, the cops will come and arrest you. But not here, that's why it's great." Therefore, there is a precedent of major cities outlawing busking and using the police force to stifle it. Asheville's willingness to accept and support buskers makes it stand out from other major cities, however, the support is not unconditional, or inherently permanent. Based on historical and contemporary precedents, marginalization and outright outlawing of busking is a possible future, even in cities that celebrate their buskers.

New York City, another city lauded for its artistic culture and high cost of living, has had a tumultuous relationship with its buskers as well. Historically, "street performances were popular in New York early in the 20th century, they were outlawed in 1935 and not permitted again until 1970" (Merry 1989). While Asheville does not outlaw busking, there are particular rules and permits created for buskers, such as to "Not violate the prohibitions on disturbing, annoying and unnecessary noise set forth in the Noise Ordinance" and "Not violate the prohibitions on solicitation as set forth in the Solicitation Ordinance (Sec. 11-5 and Sec. 11-14)" (ashevillenc.gov). Even without specific written law, there have been policies pushing buskers away, like usages of anti homeless architecture, overpolicing, and rapidly increasing prices, which have pushed several of Asheville's most popular buskers, like Spoon Lady, who moved back to Kansas because of rising prices, out (Reinan 2023). Attitudes from pedestrians, such as dirty looks, disparaging comments, and forms of discrimination against female and nonwhite buskers, all push people out of the scene.

Christmas Day of 2023 in downtown Asheville is an example of how dehumanization of different groups leads to harm for *all* groups of people. The article "Homelessness and the First Amendment on trial in Asheville" describes an incident on Christmas of 2023 in which police kicked homeless people sleeping in a park out (Lyons 2023). The article states

"'Parks and public spaces in Asheville, the city does not see them for what they should be,' said Elsa Enstrom, one of the demonstrators. 'They should be spaces to build community and spaces for any community member to feel safe'" (Lyons 2023). Although not all buskers are unhoused, both groups use public space for their livelihoods and recontextualize their usage. The notion that unhoused people, and people taking up public space are dangerous and in some way harmful, snowballs and creates false ideas of danger about people like buskers and artists. My research is hinged on this idea, specifically looking at buskers and how the negative attitudes toward encampments and "unsafe" uses of public spaces impact them. By cracking down on usages of public parks, this puts buskers in a more vulnerable position and gives less safe access to public spaces. This makes it increasingly difficult for buskers to make their livelihood and stay in the city, as some live in their vans or make their income solely on tips.

All of these instances back up many buskers' answers in the interviews about the "golden age of busking," existing, or maybe never having existed at all, around a decade ago. Undoubtedly, things like Hurricane Helene and the COVID-19 Pandemic did irreparable damage to social conventions and landscapes in both Asheville and Western North Carolina as a whole. However, outside of these, social changes surrounding how people view Asheville's homeless population, policies targeting low income people like rollbacks on EBT and SNAP benefits, and privatization also alter the "average" person's perception of buskers. While most responses to my survey questions were positive and accepting of buskers, there were answers such as "They mix with the homeless who have become more violent in recent years," mentions of gender having a role in feeling safe downtown in general, and "Folks are just trying to make $, if anything I feel that they are at risk" which describe violence among people both directed toward and from buskers. This highlights genuine issues with the community in Asheville, as well as the ideals it is founded upon.

Accessibility and Cultural Shifts

In recent years, according to many of the local buskers I interviewed, Asheville's busking community has begun to dwindle. One busker, a mid thirties guy with longer hair and a shaggy beard, described his entree into busking and changes in how buskers are treated and paid, saying

> "I was doing some freelance writing and I thought I'll go out and play some music and I made like sixty bucks in an hour and I thought that's easier than what I've been doing. So yeah, there was a period of time where you could make money. But that was 2014 or so. So that's like the golden era."

There are multiple reasons for this shift in the feasibility of buskers making their living through busking that I gathered from my interviews: the COVID-19 pandemic, devastation

following Hurricane Helene, limited tourism, less aid from locals, and less interest in busking and other community efforts.

Prior even to the hurricane, many areas in Asheville were simply inaccessible for buskers. Downtown works because of its many parks and rest areas, but some buskers expressed hesitancy to busk there because of competition with other buskers and dangers presented from other people. Other areas like West Asheville and the River Arts District (which suffered some of the worst destruction from Helene) are set up in a way that limits the amount of public areas large enough for buskers to set up and stay there long enough to make tips. COVID prevented buskers from accessing public spaces for long periods of time; One busker described to me their experience busking from balconies in New York, others talked about fear of being in public during that time. Even outside of a pandemic, though, the past ten to fifteen years of Asheville's history have been incredibly focused on tourism, and through that, rent and cost of living have rapidly increased. This has pushed many of the city's original buskers and artists out. Several buskers talked to me about Spoon Lady and other prominent buskers who left Asheville due to its shifting culture. These changes came about significantly more slowly than COVID or Hurricane Helene, but certainly set a precedent for how the snap changes associated with both disasters would occur.

Hurricane Helene caused significant damage to public spaces and infrastructure in Asheville. Entire neighborhoods were destroyed, lives were lost, and water contaminated. As a result, the city's landscape both physically and economically fundamentally changed. One busker told me he lost his job following the hurricane, which is why he started busking and living off of tips. Other buskers commented on the sense of community following the hurricane with mutual aid; however, there were a lot of difficulties given the road blockages, power outages, and general destruction of different parts of Asheville. The lack of tourists and money to go around during the recovery period following the disaster negatively impacted several buskers. Fewer people could access the city, and the flow of people through its sidewalks and other public spaces was halted briefly. Power outages also prevented the use of amps, which altered the volume buskers could produce.

One busker described the issues from the hurricane by saying "Just with the hurricane, we lost a lot of buskers, you know, not thankfully, everyone, all the buskers that I know were okay, thankfully, but a lot of them left after they were okay, understandably, so they left. So we did lose the buskers in the town, unfortunately," before adding that many buskers did stay, and that, "Nothing can keep Asheville down for long." He emphasized the impact of Helene on the busking community, particularly the negative aspects of it, but also highlighted the sheer impact buskers have on the city. Contextually, nothing keeping Asheville down being used as a reference to buskers, shines light on how entrenched busking is in the city's culture. Unfortunately, though, issues of space and destruction of

public space either through natural disasters or otherwise negatively impacts the busking community, and pushes some of the "original" buskers away from the city.

In opposition to downtown and other grocery stores and small businesses, West Asheville has a notable lack of buskers. The setup of the neighborhood certainly lends to a less accessible landscape: Haywood Road is often busy, and there are significantly fewer nooks and crannies a busker could store an amp or a chair in than downtown. Additionally, there are fewer places encouraging or supporting buskers. Unlike in downtown or in front of grocery stores, there are no chairs or guidelines for buskers. On one trip to West Asheville, I watched a police officer berate a man for smoking a cigarette outside of a bar and ask him a lot of questions, telling him to leave. Although this man was not a busker, this attitude toward loitering and taking up public spaces does, inherently impact buskers because their work relies on taking up public spaces, like the sidewalks in front of bars or stores. This struck me because it presented a much different attitude and presentation than downtown, where alongside buskers, many people sit around smoking, laughing, and setting up tents to sleep.

Downtown Asheville, while usually accepting of buskers, is not without its accessibility issues. It touts buskers as an integral part of the city and performatively supports them, however, continued building of hostile architecture, like extra guards on benches, prevent buskers from being able to set up comfortably. I ran into this issue several times while trying to busk on benches, where my guitar's neck would keep bumping into the bar in the center of the bench, causing me to hold it at an odd angle or flub a note. Not every area in Downtown uses hostile architecture, and many businesses find ways to work around it. Several shops provide resources for buskers. One store, Mast General, has an outdoor patio leading from the sidewalk to the store entrance, which protects buskers from any sort of inclement weather, and a provided tip jar and chair. In my experience busking, the architecture of the store was very helpful for actually propelling the sound and acoustics of the music I was playing. In going to play there, I also received support from another busker, a long haired younger man named Ryan dressed in jeans and an oversized t-shirt. He happily gave the spot up to me and even gave me a dollar to put in my tip jar and told me to invest in an amplifier.

Frequently in my own busking experiences, I ran into issues through not having an amp. Initially, looking at the big arches and enclosed walls of spaces like Mast General Store, Earth Fare, and other spots downtown, I thought the acoustics would help carry the sound, which they did, but not quite enough. A stranger rolled down his car window and shouted at me from the street that getting an amp helped him "get more tips." Buskers, I realized, have a much closer knit community based in helping one another and finding ways to reclaim available space in a way that's noticeable. Ryan, upon seeing me at Mast General Store asked me to "jam" with him once, but my bass was drowned out over the sound of

his guitar. If you can't catch eyes with a boa constrictor draped on your shoulders or juggling bowling pins, you have to catch ears with the kind of music you can feel shake the ground.

Because of differences in architecture and social expectations, how buskers take over the spaces they occupy varies significantly. I asked two shop owners downtown on the corner of College Street and Lexington what they thought of buskers; both of them mentioned one specific busker. He played electric guitar alongside an amplified metal track, as well as carried a large cardboard sign displaying the message "JOBS R FAKE." Certainly, every detail of this caught the eye, due in part to its social norm fighting slogan. The shop owners described themselves not usually being bothered by buskers, but wishing he would turn the electric guitar down a little bit. This busker was particularly interesting because of his ability to command the space and draw attention to himself and his message. Most buskers I interviewed were situated in some sort of alley or enclosed space, which made sense for sound purposes, since the walls help amplify the sound of the music. This busker, however, was positioned directly on the sidewalk beside a park in a wide open space. At first, this was confusing to me, but it later made sense because so much of his performance was about visual elements, like the sign protesting jobs, that being in an enclosed space would take away from his messaging.

In the article about Berlin referenced earlier, Kulka explains the concept of "spatial seizure, or the intentional illegitimate appropriation of space, is inherent to the squatting tradition. Whereas Hirt focuses on the private seizure and commodification of public and unowned space. In Berlin, seizure is often designed to protect spaces from capitalist colonization through forms of intentionally anti-capitalist occupation" (Kulka 2020). Similar to graffiti artists, buskers reclaim public spaces and fundamentally alter them. For buskers to get their messages across, it is imperative to use tactics to amplify themselves. When I busked myself, multiple pedestrians and other buskers told me how important it was to buy an amp so people could really hear the music from a distance. To grab the attention of an entire block, sound, space, and sight all have to be taken into account.

Protest

Buskers use their art as a means of shaping the landscape, public opinion, and supporting an alternative lifestyle. Most buskers are not protesting in the typical sense of holding a picket sign and yelling for change. However, everyday forms of protest and resistance are of long-term importance. Carving out space in crowded, gentrified, and privatized spaces to make art is, in and of itself, a form of resisting the status quo. For this reason, I am defining protest as a resistance to cultural norms and expectations.

Everyday Resistance

Many of my interviewees stated they lived in their cars, travelled, or otherwise lived an unconventional lifestyle. One elderly woman came up to watch me while I was busking downtown. I was particularly drawn to her because of her handmade clothing and the large suitcase she carried around, and ended up speaking to her for nearly an hour about her life and her commitment to living outside of social norms. She told me about how and why she had renamed herself after an extended stay with a Indigenous American nation, about her years hitchhiking across the Americas, as well as her pamphlets that have allowed her to spend her whole adult life living beneath the taxable income level because she doesn't want to "give money to the Feds." She told me a bit about her day to day life and how she does research at the library, and that she had never used a cell phone or computer in her life. While she wasn't a busker (although she mentioned having busked in the past) I was intrigued by her commitment to alternative lifestyles, and I found some parallels in her approach to life and some buskers I interviewed, who expressed their desire to stay away from traditional jobs. She outlined her methods of resistance to me, including refusal to use airplanes, refusal to actually purchase a car, use social media and cell phones, and pay taxes.

These small actions are not protest in the conventional sense. However, they are small ways of resisting larger structures, and effectively protest against them. Buskers in Asheville resist the takeover of the city's sidewalks by businesses, police, and private structures by using them. James C. Scott sets up a framework of everyday resistance and its historical context saying:

> "Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own. It is largely in this fashion that the peasantry makes its political presence felt" (Scott 1985).

While buskers, panhandlers, and other perceived public nuisances seem small-scale and unimportant, their large-scale reclamation of space completely reshapes the city and its culture. This, in turn, reshapes the notion of what is public and what is private, acting as a resistance to privatization and taking back public spaces.

In their own lives, according to my interviews, buskers use music as a form of protest. One interviewee, an older woman, Lila, with purple hair playing acoustic guitar outside of Earth Fare with a tip jar decorated with a stuffed penguin, detailed her journey to becoming a busker to me. She told me about how she formerly played in high end restaurants in New York, describing their attendants as "People in galleries would always be drinking wine and eating cheese. Sometimes they'd come up to me, but not always." The personal approaches busking allowed for had more allure for her, and she explained that she liked

the laid back nature of busking, with more flexible schedules and a stronger community. She also told me about how her start in music was, in a way, a protest against her abusive mother. “I played trumpet for about a year and a half, but I always wanted to play piano,” Lila explained, “My mother, who was very abusive, wouldn’t let me. So my neighbor taught me. I made myself cardboard keys to practice on. Then it was actually my mother who told me to start playing guitar. She said I could take it anywhere, and I just fell in love with it.” Here, she showed me aspects of DIY in her own life, but also how far a passion could take her. The handcrafted cardboard piano worked as a protest against her mother, her authority figure as a child, and as an act of genuine love for music and creation. is emblematic of small-scale protest against capitalist and bourgeois aspects of daily life.

Performance as Protest

In addition to its usages for small scale protests, busking as a medium can and has been used for much less subtle forms of protest. The article “Porousness, Theater, Possession, being Consumed, Death, Sanctity: Narratives from the Field with a Radical Street Performer” by Laura Balán details the life of a well known Columbian busker, Bernando Angel Saldarriaga (Balán 2024). He used his street performances, typically plays he wrote and performed in, as a means of radical self expression and protest for the aspects of his country he didn’t agree with politically, such as the church and its widespread influence politically. Laura Balán interviewed Saldarriaga and asked details of his personal life and how his busking has been received by the public. As a response to his performances, despite his fame and his title as a “madman, a hermit, a genius, and a cursed poet,” many people retaliated by chasing him with knives and looked at him as a nuisance or pest rather than a person (Balán 2024). Through performance, Saldarriaga was able to stir up conversations, as well as incite violent reactions. His continuation to busk proved his commitment to his message, and therefore, served as a protest against those trying to counter and silence him.

While few of my interviewees were busking for the express purpose of protesting against a specific event or structure like Saldarriaga was, the majority of them lived an alternative lifestyle that in some way resisted the status quo. Some buskers lived out of their cars, many were travellers, and all in some way participated in unconventional subcultures. The idealized and romanticized idea of the average American life involves a nine to five job, an intense focus on salary and wages, and a much less communal and public lifestyle. The freelance nature of busking avoids a conventional salary, conventional hours, and genuine stability. Even with things like the Asheville Buskers Collective that set clear rules for buskers, the job and monetization are entirely self directed. The actual payment of it, too, is based upon community, donations, and kindnesses rather than

entitlement. Pedestrians can hear the music for free, and it's up to them whether or not they want to tip. This puts significantly more trust in community and mutual aid than a more conventional job, like at an office or a customer service job. While not every busker abandons conventional work for busking, even those who busk recreationally are still using public spaces unconventionally and building community through creating music, making even their actions a protest against the conventional and private sway of average American life.

My first interviewee, a man with an amp cord duct taped to his acoustic guitar, described the route to his current situation. "I live out of my van. I'm one of those guys. And I heard Asheville was kind of founded around busking, even though not everybody knows that. I make up my own music, which not a lot of buskers do. But I figured if I'm gonna be practicing, I might as well put a box out," he told me. He added to this when I brought up how he technically asked for money by saying "I'm not asking. This is just the tip jar." His lack of focus on money and instead focus on craft and convenience is a strong deviation from capitalist measures and social structures. Even his method of amplifying his music was centered on something self made; instead of purchasing a new guitar or paying for alterations, he engaged in a method of DIY and created his own method of amplification. Moreover, his mindset toward tipping was focused on kindness, a connection between two people, often strangers, rather than a focus on a salary, "earning" money, and music as an artform entitled to payment. The mentality required to distance the creation from monetization holds an inherent distance from traditional, socially accepted means of jobs and the idea of work, music, and art as something that needs to be traded for profit. Therefore, the usage of music as a *tool* and not a *career* is in and of itself a form of protest.

Another interviewee, known colloquially in Asheville as "Snake Guy" carries his python, Raskalnikov, and allows people to hold him and drape him around their necks. His performance is unlike the stereotypical busker's, but for the purposes of this project, will be referred to as busking since it fits the Asheville government's definition of busking as a live performance. His act hinges on handing people his snake, engaging the community and pulling crowds from silent, solitary trips down public sidewalks. Despite his busking career starting purely because of his love for snakes, the denim vest he wears has Communist symbols and statements embroidered onto it. These symbols are not the focus of his busking, but the use of imagery and representations of his beliefs draw attention to them. This is doubly interesting given the context of busking, which exists outside of the world of corporate, capitalistic jobs while still maintaining itself as a source of income.

Moreover, buskers' usage of the cityscape, particularly places like downtown Asheville which is primarily made up of small businesses and unaffiliated with larger corporations like Whole Foods, serves as a protest against large corporations and privatization. In the

article “Excavating the Hidden City of Social Reproduction: A Commentary,” Cindi Katz brings up how businesses and city governments have driven gentrification and classist changes to the urban landscape. She describes these notions as being “anti-welfare, anti-worker, anti-poor, anti-women, anti-children, anti-minority politics” (Katz 1998). She argues that the elimination of these small-scale, often free and public, forms of art and culture has a much larger ripple effect than just keeping buskers off the streets or replacing an establishment. In addition, she describes that “Neo-liberal public-private partnerships such as New York's Grand Central Partnership and the Central Park Conservancy, lovingly and lavishly restore, refurbish, preserve, and build only those landscapes visible to and treasured by the bourgeoisie” (Katz 1998). Here, she connects performative actions to preserve nature and culture, but asks who they really serve.

Buskers do more than just use spaces– they draw attention to them. Pulling in crowds and making noise forces attention on the public. At the No Kings protests in July, which took place in Packs Square in downtown, people used similar tactics; protestors honked their car horns, played kazoos, and played Latin American music on massive speakers. Although different from busking, protests use similar strategies and often yield similar results. Amplifiers, whether the standard plug-in amps or noise bouncing off of walls, forces pedestrians to hear buskers’ messages. This both creates a community in everyone hearing it in the moment, and forces people to see and understand the power of public spaces.

Community Building

Buskers have a unique ability to lure people away from their everyday lives, as well as to bring people together. The American zeitgeist is heavily focused on individualism and leading separate lives. Art, throughout history, has been an imperative tool for communication and understanding. However, we have come far from the days in which art was viewed as a viable form of making money, and sometimes even a valuable form of spreading information and perspectives.

Creating the Collective

One of my interviewees, who was performing original acoustic guitar songs in front of Earth Fare, described the average pedestrian by saying “They’re always on their phones looking for directions instead of actually looking at the world around them.” On the general influence of busking, he added, “This digital age has us forgetting the value of art and music. It takes you out of the daily life- bills, the fucking dentist. Plus,” he pointed to a kid walking with his mom to the store, “Kids think it’s really magic. Adults are already

poisoned, but kids' jaws drop." This harkens to people's experiences with buskers globally. The article "Busking: Creating a Place One Performer at a Time" backed this up, describing a Chinese street performer as causing a lot of reactions, that "People who heard him missed their trains on purpose. I saw one man with tears in his eyes listen for a full hour. I saw children dancing, couples holding hands, brows un-furrow, and complete strangers turn from potential threats to companions, as we'd smile at each other, making full-on eye contact. Beggars used to empty their cups into Chen's clear plastic moneybox" (Doumpa and Broad 2014). Art and busking, like what Chen was doing, have a unique way of pulling people out of their perspectives. Through his art form, he is able to communicate to pedestrians in a way he wouldn't have access to otherwise.

Walking through downtown Asheville, there are mirrors of the experience Chen brought to train riders everywhere. One busker, playing a Peruvian hand held drum, even let a child play with his drum, despite telling me about someone previously having broken it. People crowd up around buskers, sometimes dance to their music, or somehow play along. In watching him perform, people were briefly taken out of their errands, tasks, and separation from community. Busking, particularly when it attracts crowds the way this drummer did, serves as a form of collective effervescence. Coined by Emile Durkheim in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, collective effervescence is "when human beings feel themselves transformed, and are in fact transformed, through ritual doing" (Durkheim and Fields 1995). Drawing a crowd together and allowing them to dance and reinterpret the sidewalks they've been walking on serves as a ritual in and of itself. Groups of complete strangers go through one unified experience, and through that, connect with one another our individual lives usually prevent.

Community in Tragedy

Although busking serves as collective effervescence, in times of intense disruption, it works as a type of solace for many people. Overwhelmingly, when asked about Helene, the interviewees commented on how people tipped more after the disaster, and there was an overwhelming sense of community toward buskers and artists. This, surprisingly, was more from the locals than it was from any sort of disaster tourism. Following Helene, some Asheville neighborhoods, like the River Arts District, one of the premier spaces for artists, were completely destroyed. Many people's houses were flooded, lost, or deeply damaged. This pushed people out of their homes and into public spaces, and, especially in a time of serious reconstruction and economic downfall, people felt a need to come together and pay each other in turn. This idea of community through tragedy is a fascinating topic that followed me throughout my research.

Experiencing a tragedy like Hurricane Helene, while a deeply traumatic situation, brings another shared experience, thus uniting people who would not normally be united. The article “Making the Scene and the Making of a Scene: The Loose Marbles on Royal Street in Post-Katrina New Orleans” deep dives into this phenomenon (Colby-Bottel and Handler 2022). It discusses Katrina and reconstruction efforts, and how buskers and New Orleanians found themselves situated in the aftermath. The article describes it saying “Natural disasters—or, more precisely, the classed and racialized social structuring of specific places so that powerful visitations from natural forces (themselves rarely unaffected by human doings) lead to inequitable human catastrophes—create places where altruists and heroes of various kinds exercise their understandings of selfhood” as to how reconstruction and immediate aid can rejuvenate a music scene (Colby-Bottel and Handler 2022).

Asheville’s focus on mutual aid immediately following Helene mirrors this phenomenon. One busker I interviewed got his start as a busker in the aftermath: “After Helene I lost my job. I’ve always played music, so I just started playing out here. I’ve been living off scrap money since then,” he told me. Through the setback of losing his job, the community uplifted him, even though it was in a deeply vulnerable place. Pedestrians tipping buskers enough for them to make a living even in the wake of a natural disaster expresses the close knit and uplifting nature of the community, but also the pedestal buskers as pillars of communal living.

The Busking Collective

In addition to their place in the larger local community, buskers have a community within themselves. In my interview with Ryan at Mast General Store, he explained to me the ins and outs of buskers’ overall culture. When I told him I was working on a project, he happily gave me advice and gave me a short explanation on some of busking’s history. He gave me a dollar bill, the “communal dollar,” then told me that people were more likely to tip that way, since it looked like someone had already given me money. The communal bill, to me in that moment, felt like more than a dollar. It was an invitation, and an acceptance into a community that I hadn’t before understood. The ideas of knowledge being passed around and people helping each other, even if there is a sort of competitive nature present over spaces, tips, and abilities. Other buskers passed me by and suggested I use a cordless amp, one even going as far as to yell from his car window about how much it helped him get tips, all of which felt like their own forms of invitation.

Another invitation into Asheville’s busking community happened to me in front of Earth Fare. By that time, I had begun to theorize that busking has a high social currency in artistic fields, but others, such as business or the typical nine to five ideals, it’s rather low. The

placement as an outsider art makes it something that everyone can enjoy, but not everyone can necessarily completely understand. In my experience, it's hard to conceptualize the vulnerability of busking until you've actually done it. While I was playing, one man stopped his car and gave me a twenty dollar bill, saying "Keep going, girl. I'm an artist too." This suggested that artists support other artists, sometimes more than other locals. A teenage hand pan player's perspective added to this idea, describing the importance of busking in his eyes as:

> "there's a lot of gifted people who can't get their stuff out there. And that's like a way to let people express themselves and still support themselves financially. I think that's a really big aspect of it. You know, I would be stuck to my room with my hand pan and. It's not kind of hard to get it out, you know? So this is a really nice avenue knowing that it's so rich even."

The accessibility of busking really hit me in that moment, particularly the accepting nature of it. Anyone can do it, which is what makes it so fascinating. It's a form of expression for anyone, those who have no other way of getting a message out there.

One of the most striking instances of community based mindsets within Asheville's busking scene was from an interview at the North Asheville Tailgate Market. There were two buskers there, playing guitar and singing together. They both detailed their busking experiences with me, one of them, Ellis, having started during the pandemic while living in New York, describing their experience as "And the pandemic hit it, and I found myself unable to play shows, but knowing that I wanted to share music. I felt super important. So I brought my amp out onto the stoop and just played for this street in Brooklyn, and people were like watching from their balcony and like saying this meant so much to me and all this stuff." This was a fascinating peek into the genuine impact of busking and public art. From the stoop, particularly with social distancing requirements, Ellis could not have received tips. The only payment for their busking was the solace it provided their community, which to them was why busking felt good for the first time, since it was so touching to people.

Later in the interview, a farmer's market customer came up to the buskers and mentioned how they knew her brother, who had passed away. Both of the interviewees mentioned how they loved him, busked with him, and used songs to carry on his memories. Ellis explained their feelings as "it's really sad, and this has been, like, a healing piece in that, like, I've he was, you know, at markets, sometimes he's come down, like, sing with us. just, like, you know, support us and be loving and kind. I feel like in some of the songs we do, it's like we're carrying his memory and his record as well." This, to me, expressed the level of importance that busking holds to the communities it exists in. A glimpse into the personal lives of buskers and those close to them provided a lens for which to view the actual tangible impact busking has. Music, art, and performance all serve as forms of communication and expression. Sometimes, words, phrases, and conversations can't express the same depth of connection and feeling that an action can.

The act of placing oneself in public spaces to convey any sort of message is a vulnerable act, but through that is how people can communicate effectively with strangers. Whether it's carrying a memory or trying to put forth a method of healing, busking becomes a type of communication and ritual.

Another contextualization for buskers' impact came when Lila compared busking to the grieving process, describing it as "I think public art is very important for community. We're so disconnected and on our phones now. This is a weird analogy, but back in the thirties and forties, people who lost relatives would wear black bands on their arms. It let people come together in their grief. We don't have that anymore. Live music brings people together, like on a cellular level." She beat on her chest. "It's so different from, you know." She mimicked putting on headphones. "I think there's science to back me up. The cells in our bodies just react differently to live music." The idea of coming together in grief was very reminiscent following Helene, personal tragedy, and the difficulties of simply existing.

Throughout my interviews, too, there seemed to be an air of wanting to go back to a simpler, more community oriented time without as many distractions, cell phones, and existence in private worlds. Even in less extreme cases, some interviewees described busking as being healing in their social anxieties and self confidence issues, with Jonah explaining

> "I started doing it probably the first time it was probably about a year ago. I've been on this healing journey of being extremely afraid of people. And I started playing music a few years ago and I've just been envisioning that part of my healing is to get out there and like, get over my social anxiety and share some songs that I've written."

Jonah's experience with busking, therefore, is not only important to bringing people together, but to these artists' self actualization. The act of busking becomes a presentation of self, and a request for communal acceptance. In turn, it provides community and ritual for everyone involved.

Limitations

In a similar vein to safety concerns and exclusionary action toward busking, there is a noticeable lack of women and people of color represented in the busking scene in Asheville. I interviewed two women, one gender nonconforming person, and one black man for my project. Because I am white, I cannot speak directly to the struggles people of color face as public artists here. However, as a feminine presenting person, I had certain experiences with men downtown that gave me a deeper understanding as to why I was encountering fewer female buskers. The majority of my experiences were overwhelmingly positive, but I had one uncomfortable conversation with a man on a bench. He was very

clearly high, and I could smell alcohol on his breath. He was smoking a cigarette and asked me why I was walking alone. I said sorry, to which he said never apologize, told me he played guitar, and asked me to sit beside him. I agreed and sat down. While talking to me, he ended up putting his hand on my thigh, which prompted me to try to leave. Another comment I received was that "a pretty girl like you would do well in front of Malaprops," which was not an inherently threatening or upsetting comment, but felt as though it had a misogynistic undertone to it.

Several buskers also told me about their resistance to busking downtown, namely because of the fact that "any crazy person can come up to you," which, while I was hesitant about the language, I understood the reasoning and concern. Particularly, my concerns laid with prejudices of the public, and how buskers are perceived. With the notions some buskers presented about people's cruelty because of their lack of understanding the difference between buskers and panhandlers in mind, I wondered about how classist notions impacted buskers' experiences in the field. Moreover, prejudices against women in music and racist rhetoric were forefront in my mind when thinking of limitations. Safety concerns, often valid, make busking exclusionary for groups like women and people of color; Setting oneself in public, particularly to present an artform, is an inherently vulnerable position to be in. This can make busking a more difficult and dangerous experience for some.

One other issue I felt was relevant in my research was my lack of ability to completely immerse myself in the busking community. After my first time busking, I wrote in my field notes "Most people actually weirdly kinda avoided eye contact and wouldn't look at me, which did make me feel a bit strange. I felt a weird sense of guilt being there (I was only there for around 45 minutes) because unlike a lot of buskers who live out of their cars, I have a comfortable dorm room to go back to, so I felt strangely privileged and like I was taking up space and resources." My relative privilege compared to many buskers who rely on busking as their sole source of income gave me a very different perspective and experience than many of my interviewees, despite my best attempts at forming connections with them.

With the limitations of my research in mind, I maintain that I think busking is an important and imperative part of Asheville's culture and community; however, it is not without its faults. With my research, I believe that stigmatization and factors like privatization, ironically, are major contributors to buskers' exclusion of minority groups. Marginalization forces people into limited areas and limits the number of people who are actually able to safely busk. In order to address safety issues, we have to first address the social and economic issues and marginalization causing it to be unsafe first.

Conclusions

As an outsider art, busking presents performance in a different light than more standard, business-minded art forms. In wake of gentrification, natural disasters, and increasingly isolated lifestyles pushing people away from community, public and outsider arts are more important than ever. Cities known for their tourism, culture, and people, like Asheville, rely on their artists to keep these things alive. However, inflation and social struggles are pushing buskers out of our cities.

Before I started my research, I knew I enjoyed stopping for a few minutes on the sidewalk and watching buskers perform. I knew that seeing them play and seeing crowds form around them made me feel closer to my community, but I never really knew why, and I never really knew the extent of it. Speaking to buskers and hearing their stories on how music served as a guiding light in their lives, and how bringing music to public spaces rallied people together even in deeply traumatic times like the pandemic and Hurricane Helene fine tuned my understanding of the sheer impact buskers have on the community. Asheville in particular, as a small, close-knit city that depends on its bustling art scene, benefits from its buskers' presence on the city streets.

Buskers have an inherent ability to bring life to a space. Standing under the concrete roof of the West Asheville Earth Fare feels weak and brutalist in biting January chill. But, with the soft sounds of guitar plucking from a man and his dog, it feels warmer, alive and awake even under clouds and concrete.

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