

The Intrepid Fiddler

By Gus Garelick

Busking in the Digital Age

I don't know where the term "busking" comes from. Apparently it's been around for centuries. Maybe it refers to wandering troubadours of the Middle Ages. But basically it means playing for tips in open spaces. I had been a busker in San Francisco over 50 years ago, when I was just starting out as a fiddler. I graduated to "real" gigs and began climbing the ladder to becoming a professional musician (still climbing). I never thought I'd be a busker ever again.

Then along came the pandemic. During the big lockdown, music totally shut down. There were no longer any clubs, fairs, music festivals, weddings, concerts. There was nowhere to play. Even jamming was restricted; no one wanted to risk catching the virus in a closed space. We've all been there.

At first, I thought I could use the time to woodshed. I had no work of any kind (even the day job was shut down). So, no excuses: here was a time to learn all those new tunes I was meaning to learn, come up with some new licks, fill in a lot of holes in my playing technique. But that got old after a while. Playing in my isolated apartment was too frustrating, so on a whim I thought about my old busking days. Why not give it a shot? I had nothing to lose. I could do my practicing on the street and get paid for it.

I grabbed my fiddle, a chair, and an old vase, and set up in front of a local supermarket. The vase was my tip jar, and it filled up almost immediately. Folks were starved for live music; they couldn't put the dollars in there fast enough. Some folks were in tears as they told me how happy they were that I was there. I felt like a kind of hero.

I will say, as a kind of warning, that not all supermarket managers shared the public's joy. I was asked to leave a couple of times for various lame excuses: trespassing, soliciting, disturbing the peace. I was playing acoustic fiddle music, and I didn't think that would disturb anyone (unlike some buskers who showed up with amplifiers and pre-recorded backup bands). But most stores here were more supportive; for a while, busking was almost as good as playing a real gig. No pressure. No set lists, sound checks, arrangements. I could pick and choose from my repertoire of fiddle tunes, Klezmer tunes, Italian tunes, classical favorites. Whatever felt right. I could make some decent money, and I could leave at any time. Great gig.

Of course, playing on the street or in front of supermarkets is only one way to busk. These days, there's a whole new way of doing it, and that's by way of social media: digital busking. Many fiddlers set up on the street with their phones or laptops or other electronic equipment, and send their music out into cyberspace. You can catch them on Facebook or YouTube or any number of social media outlets. And people all over the world can send in money through PayPal or Venmo or other means. They probably make even more money that way, although I haven't checked.

Many readers of this magazine are probably familiar with Henry the Fiddler, who has been busking for years all over the country. Lately, I saw him on Facebook, setting up on a quiet street in Yuma, Arizona, taking requests and getting tips electronically. He is quick to respond to emails and requests, and I'll bet he makes a ton of money in Yuma before taking off for some other venue, or fiddle contest, or festival.

Another online busker is the Farnum Family, from Galena, Missouri. Rather than playing on some lonely street corner, they do their show direct from their living room. They come online every Friday afternoon (or evening, depending where you are) sitting on a very crowded little couch while fiddler Hannah plays some amazing fiddle tunes and her brother Benjamin plays equally



Hannah and Benjamin Farnum: online buskers from Galena, Missouri.



Gus Garelick took his music to the streets during the pandemic.

amazing backup guitar. You can email them and request tunes, and sometimes their dad comes in on banjo. It's not the same as watching them in person. The video suffers from just one camera (no closeups or different angles) and the audio is sometimes wanting; you can hear the music, but what they say between songs is often hard to hear (they could use another mic). Still, people all over the country contribute to their digital tip jar every week. There's no room on that little couch for the rest of the family, but the entire Farnum Family frequently performs bluegrass and gospel music (offline) in various venues around southern Missouri and the Midwest. Check out FarnumFamily.org, and listen to Hannah and Benjamin on their FarnumFamily Facebook page (facebook.com/farnumfamily).

I haven't figured out all the mechanics of doing an online fiddle show. I guess I'm satisfied playing in front of local markets and getting feedback and requests in person and not online. The other day, I was playing some Kenny Baker tunes and a man asked me to play "Devil Went Down to Georgia." I said I could play the fiddle part, but I didn't know all the words. No problem; I started the familiar theme (it's actually Vassar Clements' "Lonesome Fiddle Blues") and the man recited the entire song. He gave me a \$20 tip and said I made his day. Then he got in his big truck and turned up the stereo full blast and, as he drove away, the Charlie Daniels

version went drifting out all over the parking lot.

Well, most days aren't that dramatic. But it's nice to get a sense of who I'm playing for. I know one or two Ukrainian tunes, and I discover how many Ukrainians there are living in my town. I can play some Italian standards, and I get to hear wonderful stories from Italians and Sicilians living here. Jewish music, western swing – the fiddle makes the connection. Little kids start dancing; an older couple starts dancing; a woman starts crying and tells me that one song reminds her of her father. It's things like that that make it worthwhile even on days when I hardly make any money at all.

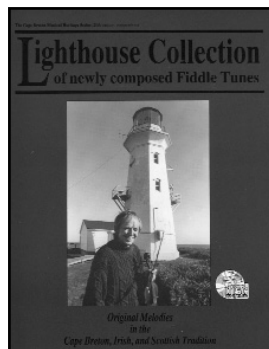
Right now, a lot of musical venues are opening up again. Some say the pandemic is over (or they wish it were), but bands are playing again, festivals are happening, fiddle camps are running, contests, weddings, parties... Just like pre-pandemic days, almost. I am glad to return to "normal" music performance, although being a busker again was a great experience. Playing "legit" gigs is great too, but playing "on the street" you really get face to face (or mask to mask, as it were) with your audience and see how important and powerful music really is. You cannot take it for granted. And you don't know you're going to miss it till it's gone.

[Gus Garelick plays a variety of genres, from Classical to Zydeco. He plays Italian mandolin tunes in small cafes in San Francisco, and leads the Gravenstein Mandolin Ensemble, in Sebastopol, California. The Intrepid Fiddler has appeared in this magazine for 10 years, and counting.]

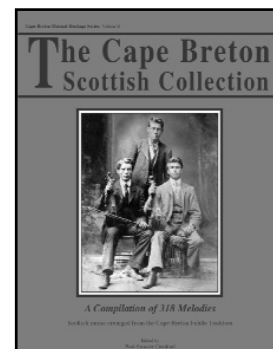
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