

January 14, 2010

Bob Bratina,
Councillor, Ward 2,
Hamilton City Centre, 77 James Street North #230
Hamilton, ON. L8P 4Y5

Dear Mr. Bratina,

Wednesday afternoon, January 14, Ken Steffler, a fine singer and guitarist, was busking on King Street. A policeman walked by, smiled, and threw a quarter in his guitar case. A few minutes later, to Ken's surprise, another policeman gave him a ticket for soliciting – \$65.

To my mind, this was a great mistake, one that sends a chill through the arts community. The officer was confusing busking with begging. Busking is an ancient and honorable profession that brings pleasure and beauty to the streets of a city. Passers-by show their appreciation by throwing money in a hat or instrument case, but many people give nothing but a smile – and get one in return.

Busking brings vitality, vibrancy, and safety to city streets. Nothing transforms the impression of a neighbourhood as quickly as someone (in the words of Joni Mitchell) “playing real good for free”. Quebec City, Toronto, Victoria B.C., San Francisco, London, Paris, Barcelona, are all known for their excellent street (and subway) music; it's part of what makes these cities attractive to tourists. Busker festivals now bring in millions of dollars. Many of the original stars of Cirque de Soleil were street performers.

Most musicians have played the street at one time or another, and this goes for classical musicians too. Long John Baldry wrote a fine song about his encounter with a police officer in London who didn't like his “boogie woogie music”. A great many of the popular songs that became huge hits – folk, rock, rockabilly, blues – made their debuts on the street.

There's a lot of talk about the arts revitalizing inner city neighbourhoods. This is how it happens, when art goes out on the street. I played the street myself in my younger days, and I'm thinking it's time to do it again. Go stand beside Ken and play my fiddle.

Could we please inform over-zealous officers about the difference between busking and begging?

Sincerely,



Ronald Weihs

Artistic Director, Artword Theatre

cc: Mayor Fred Eisenberger, Police Services Board (per Lois Morin, Administrative Assistant),
Lee Prokaska-Curtis, Hamilton Spectator