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The Busk Below

Kenton Cummings

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The Busk Below

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation

College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

May 17, 2016
**Documentary Project Proposal**

**Working Title:** The Busker Life/ Respect the Busk  
**Producer:** Kevin Cummings, Kenton Cummings, Michael Clarke  
**Director:** Kenton Cummings  
**Camera Operators:** Mark Davis, Thomas Atwell, Adam Chitayat, Ken Bollido

**Rationale**

In my experience as a straphanger in the NYC mass transit system, my daily commute consists of tight spaces filled with lots of people. They are our lawyers, stockbrokers, teachers, construction workers, doctors, students, homeless people, and random "crazies". However civic some of their duties may be, they still over pack the platforms and trains of the NYC mass transit system underneath the concrete jungle above. This can be a frustrating experience, not to mention the rising fare costs. But in this chaotic space, there are some that board the trains with a different outlook. The underground street performers - the buskers of the NYC train system. The musicians, dancers, and singers seek to single handedly transform a numbing atmosphere, into an enjoyable experience for everyone, or at least that is their goal. But why would a performer choose a venue so unconventional? With conflicts ensuing from disgruntled straphangers who want silence, police officers who uphold the laws, and other performers fighting for territory, what is it that these Buskers seek from the experience? For without these intimate therapeutic moments, we would all surely be savages in the jungle that is NYC.

Consisting of different talents, and levels of their musicianship, what kind of artists do they see themselves as? Can they achieve the goals that they want within the confines of the trains? As we follow these indie artists perform for the benefit of their audience alone, the documentary will aspire to display the motivation that comes from within each of these talented people.

**Topic**

The film will follow 7-10 Buskers who travel and perform in the NYC mass transit system. Beginning with hearing their music, then sharing their lives and inspirations, families, friends, hardships, and performing talents. Who are these individuals, where they come from, how’d they learn to play, and why they have chosen this venue will emerge. Being that their chosen location can be considered a crime, they are mistreated and shunned upon. We will follow them as they attempt to gain entry into the MTA’s MUNY program in order to display their interests, receive due praise, and hopefully change the MTA’s views on real street performers forever.

*MUNY Program* - [http://mta.info/mta/aft/muny/auditions.html](http://mta.info/mta/aft/muny/auditions.html)
Every year, the annual auditions are held in Grand Central Terminal to review and add new performers to the MUNY roster. In an effort to appeal to all, MUNY seeks musicians who reflect the culture and diversity of the people of New York City. All performers are welcome to apply for the audition. Audition application forms are available at the beginning of the year. Eligible performers are contacted and invited to perform at the auditions, which are held live, one-day only, and open to public. A panel of professionals, consisting of representatives from the music industry, cultural institutions, MTA station operations, fellow musicians and others, judge each of the five minute performances based on the criteria of quality, variety, and appropriateness for the mass transit environment.

After the auditions, the selected performers attend an orientation meeting to receive information explaining the procedures of the program and the regulations of the transit system, especially relating to passenger safety and comfort. As a member of MUNY, performers receive personalized MUNY banners to display during scheduled MUNY performance at the 30 designated MUNY sites. MUNY sites are busy, highly visible locations in the subway and commuter rail stations including Long Island Rail Road Penn Station and Metro-North Grand Central Terminal.

Throughout the year for the public, MUNY presents special events in the transit system with such themes as Blues Festival, Divas Underground, Summer Solstice, Jazz Festival, etc.

Characters and Interviews
The Buskers that are chosen will have different performance styles, content, and purpose. They will range in experience and age to show the vast community in the NYC area. They will/may represent the following:

- Hopeful Dreamer
- Drug Addict
- College Student
- Aspiring Musicians/ Female group?
- Provider (parent/ guardian)
- Natural Disaster Victim

They will be:
- Musicians (guitarist, violinist)
- Singers (gospel, R and B)
- Dancers (freestyle breakdancing, Step Dancing)
- Comedians
- Voice Talents

There’s a range of musicians, but only a select few frequent the same location to perform. They are consistently engaging based on their joyous personalities and heartfelt performances. Will this be enough to gain entry into the MTA’s MUNY initiative?
Conflict
Buskers want to be respected as the talented performers, and mood changers, that they are. They want a general respect from the public and authorities that seek to remove them from the audiences they love. While some characters are only interested in sharing their music and performance, some are strictly about panhandling and soliciting funds. These characters will conflict as the lines are drawn between appreciated artist and problematic panhandler. These conflicts will meet as artists begin promoting themselves and audition to be a part of the MTA’s MUNY program.

Biases
Many people believe that Buskers are simply homeless people with no motivation to find real work. Panhandlers are deemed criminals by the law, thus making them hazardous in the eyes of society. Buskers believe uninterested patrons are simply too “far removed” from themselves, warranting their music. The NYC police department has a duty to fulfill a quota by issuing tickets. Performers who are not a part of the Music Under New York program are considered not good enough performers. To see these truths that exist, interviews will be conducted of the Buskers, the NYC police Department, The Mayors office, MUNY representatives, Panel Judges, straphangers, and music industry individuals.

Tim Higginbotham, Schedule Coordinator, Music Under New York at (212) 878-4678
Lydia Bradshaw, Manager, MTA Arts for Transit and Music Under New York at (212) 878-7225

Structure
The documentary will be shot over a 6 month period as the Buskers promote themselves and ready for their audition for the MUNY initiative.

4min – intro/Setting
8 min – characters development
2 min - MUNY
6 min – character/ conflict/ aspirations
5min – practice and promotion/ doubts/ hurdles
5min – Performance and selection
2min – Update

6 minutes into film will see conflict between others
Climactic sequence is whether or not the Buskers will make it the MTA’s MUNY program. After the performance, gauging the audience to see if they truly appreciate the music.
**Form and Style**
Reflexive, Participatory.
Iphone Videos of train performances
Parallel storytelling
Juxtaposition of Paid performer getting ready vs. Buskers

**Camera Equipment**
Sony FS700
Canon C300
Mov10
Panasonic GH4
Nikon D800

**Schedule**

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The BuSk Below
The Busk Below

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ABSTRACT

Whether above, or below the concrete jungle a.k.a. NYC, there is no doubt that this town is a proving ground. Countless individuals flock to the mecca city in search of success, money, and fame-looking to share their talents with anyone who will listen. No exception to this ethic, are the subway tunnels below ground that harbor an abundance of talent. Known as Street Performers, these subway buskers are more than the title mostly associated with panhandlers and beggars. Their talents captivate an audience, mostly distracted by their everyday lives, as they travel from one destination to the next. These performers essentially entertain the millions of commuters who use the MTA system everyday. Yet, regardless of mass appeal, and abiding by MTA rules and regulations, buskers are forced to succumb to the practices of the NYPD. Organizations like MUNY have made efforts is gaining notoriety for buskers by managing their performances to set schedules and locations. MUNY's selection process are rivaled by freelance buskers and organizations like BUSK NY, that believe that the artist should have the right to share their talent in the non-traditional venue. Here lie the stories of all the aforementioned players, and their allies, in the fight for the busk below.
When I was in high school, like any other graduating student, I wanted to attend prom. Being a good son, I didn't want to worry my parents for the funds to attend it. See, I was born into a hard-working immigrant family, and surely, good grades were expected, and only rewarded with food and shelter. Again, I did not want to bother my parents for the money. Instead, I figured I’d do something else—earn it. My friends and I shared the same sentiment, and thus began to ponder the possibilities. Though there were available ways to earn funds quickly in our communities, most were not conducive with our plans for the future. None of us wanted careers in retail, of any kind. Surely there had to be a way for us to acquire the funds necessary to attend our prom.

In addition to this anxiety, my friends and I were simultaneously practicing for a step-dance competition at the end of the year. Being performance based, we were nervous that our routine was not as captivating as we aspired it to be. One evening, while traveling home on the subway after practice, an idea was expressed. I’m not sure exactly which one of us suggested it, but by the end of the train ride, we were all in agreement. As dancers, we wanted to be certain that the audience was pleased with our performance. We also needed to fundraise for our prom. We had solved both of our present issues in that moment. We had “fed two birds with one seed.” We decided to perform right then and there for the “audience” we had. Their donations would surely display their enjoyment. After thirty minutes or so that day,
we were able to fund one member of the team to attend prom. We raised good money—we had become buskers.

Now, as a NYC straphanger, and no longer a busker, I existed only as an audience member to the performing community. I knew that it was important for me to gain access to their extensive network in order for me to capture the moments I thought necessary. Without personally knowing anyone to allot me such an opportunity, I desperately needed a way in. For this hurdle, I exercised my use of social media. With everyone connected via this social network, surely I would be able to find someone through the six or seven degrees of separation. My initial contact was with a busker named Heidi Kole. Heidi had been a musician for over 20 years, and had been performing in the NYC subway system for more than 10 of those years. She had written about herself, and other subway buskers’ experiences as subway musicians in her book entitled *The Subway Diaries*. In her book, Heidi recounts her days spent submersed in the artistic environment of the subway. Broken into short stories, each chapter introduces new characters within the subway performance community. It was grand, and categorized, and competitive. A good hustle. In addition to her extensive knowledge, and vast network, she shared a common feeling at the heart of the documentary. In her book, she recalls being a young creative defending her art expression. She said, “When I brought up really studying and pursuing anything artistic for life, I was reprimanded; when I pushed the subject, I was punished. So, though I’d done my best to be true to my heart amidst these strict controls; despite my ‘out of the box’ nature, everything I’d done up to this point in my life as an artist had somehow remained safely within the
confines of those (Kole 2009).” Her desire to freely express herself as an artist was in tune with the themes and motivations behind making *The Busk Below*. Facebook proved vital to the advancement of the project. When Heidi introduced me to Matthew Christian—Organizer of the subway performer advocacy group BUSK NY. Everything started to fall into place. The ball started rolling.

Matthew Christian is the Director of the non-profit organization BuskNY. As stated on it’s website, “BuskNY was founded in 2013 with the mission of generating broad awareness of the legality of artistic performance in the New York City subway, in order to end wrongful ejection, ticketing, and arrest of subway performers.” (Wissig 2013). With such a large undertaking, Matthew works with other members of the initiative, to organize and protect NYC Buskers. Both Matthew and Milo can be seen within the NYC subway system advocating for performers of all kind. They are well versed in the controversial MTA Rules and Regulation, and maintain the argument that performers are allowed to busk below the streets of NYC—legally. They believe that most of the confusion originates from a biased view towards subway musicians in the media. BuskNY advocates for buskers using protests, press conferences, and performance events to both fundraise, and inform, fellow riders and the general public about the injustices that occur down below ground. Unsure of what the road ahead was in 2013 when they begun, BuskNY would quickly find themselves at the center of legal battle that would potentially alter the harsh misconceptions and acquire an appreciation for the performers that busk, and share their talents beneath the street of NYC. Despite the negative labels, there was something about busking below ground that kept performers coming
back—a nuance. BuskNY was there to methodize their determination and achieve fair treatment for all performers in the NYC MTA subway system.

BuskNY is not the only group of individuals with interests in uniting NYC subway performers. The counterpart to the grassroots organization is the more known Music Under New York (MUNY) program known as MUSIC. Their website says, “MUSIC, one of Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Arts for Transit’s visual and performing arts programs, whose purpose is to increase the attractiveness of transit facilities for customers. Initiated as a pilot program in 1985, MUSIC became official in January 1987 garnering great enthusiasm from the commuting public.” MUSIC has systemized a lot of its practices, turning performers into members by putting them through an audition process. Every spring, Music Under New York holds auditions in NYC at the grandiose Grand Central Terminal to both review and add performs to their roster. In order to participate in the audition as a newcomer, musicians and performers must submit a package of information, which includes the MUSIC Auditions application form, a sample of a live performance, a bio, resume, and any press. All documents must be compiled and mailed-in months prior to the audition date. At the audition, a panel of professionals, consisting of representatives from the music industry, cultural institutions, MTA station operations, fellow musicians, and others judge each performance; specifically focusing on quality, variety, and appropriateness for the mass transit environment. When the auditions have concluded, the chosen performers later receive detailed workshops about rules and regulations of the transit system, and
are given personalized Music Under New York banners to display during their allotted performance times and spaces—usually well visible and busy.

Though seemingly honest in their endeavor, the MUSIC program has garnered some dissatisfaction from buskers in NYC. The contention comes from the fact that Music Under New York program does not represent other buskers who are not a part of their organization. The banner, which they present to musicians, or performers who have successful auditions, was once believed to be a permit. Thus, when a performance occurred with the absence of a banner, the general public, and authority personnel, were made to believe that these performers were somehow in violation of the MTA’s rules and regulations. However false, the usages of the word “permit” in its promotional literature supported this general misconception. During the making off the film, several commuters explained the difference between buskers as those that have the permit, and those that do not—as if it is an indication of professionalism, talent, or reputability. From a free-lance performer’s perspective, if the only was to perform is to audition and your craft be judged be an oligarchy form of government is almost contradictory to the idea of busking. The public gives the donations, and the donations affirm their approval—not a group of selected individuals with their own specific tastes in musical talent and performance. This important dynamic constantly creates conflict between the Music Under New York member, and the free-lance busker who chooses to perform.

Despite the perceived divide amongst MTA artists, it is difficult to grasp why performers choose to perform in such an environment in the first place. Underground can be a dirty atmosphere, uncomfortable, and overall harsh.
Nonetheless, buskers keep returning to do it. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, busker is defined as a person who entertains in a public space for donations. As for Music Under New York members, they have their specific spots and times providing a safety net in the fast paced and unforgiving MTA subway platforms. They have a schedule, and all they need to do is stick to it. That’s how they get their donations. It’s safe, so they continue to do it. A free-lance busker on the other hand, has a much more difficult job. Without the banner, performances are perceived more as a hustle. Benefit or not, free-lance buskers operate on their own schedules and choose their own spots. This can prove risky for many performers, by attracting authority figures that believe that they are in violation—because they don’t have a banner. While researching for the documentary project—interviewing individuals, I was made aware that there are a multitude of buskers that perform in the NYC MTA subway system, for a multitude of reasons. Though they do receive donations, their desire to share their talents with the public was much more consequential. When Thomas Kopie, a banjo player in the band Coyote and Crow plays in the subways of NYC he explains, “that’s why we do it, for that feedback”.

The very act of busking connects the commuter to the performer, makes them a part of a larger audience, and promotes an engaging intimate moment of expression with others. Ideally, nothing should come between that except the performers themselves; as stated in the 1st Amendment of the United States of America – everyone is given a freedom of speech. However, when it came to busking in the NYC subway system, there seemed to be enough room for interpretation.
In October of 2014, Andrew Kalleen, a musician in New York City was playing his guitar at the Metropolitan Ave. G-Train Station in Brooklyn, N.Y. In fact, he was openly busking. A NYC NYPD officer named Michael Franco approached Andrew on the platform. Andrew did not stop playing. Officer Franco asked Andrew to stop playing. Andrew kept on playing. Officer Franco threatened to eject Andrew if he did not stop playing. Andrew kept on playing. The video recording of their meeting that day would become the catalyst for change, as well as for discussion regarding broken-window policing and other social issues.

Andrew plays a couple of instruments, sometimes wheeling his piano through the streets and subways to play in his favorite location—The Metropolitan Avenue Station. He is quite a spectacle on those days, pushing his piano through the cobble stone streets of SoHo. He travels past large glass front boutiques, and clothing stores, down into the underground stoic subway-tile backdrop. There is where he plays his music. On that day in October of 2014, Andrew played his music as usual. Though this time, he only had his guitar. Officer Franco began to argue with Andrew, telling him that he was in violation of the MTA rules and regulations. Andrew calmly protested saying that he was not guilty of any infraction, and well within his rights. Officer Franco disagreed and proceeded to physically stop Andrew from playing his guitar. When other officers arrived, Andrew was hit in the face with the guitar, making his lip bleed. He was then arrested, and charged. The MTA rules and regulations states, in Section 1050.6 section C, “The following non-transit uses are permitted by the Authority, provided they do not impede transit activities and they are conducted in accordance with these rules: public speaking; campaigning;
leafletting or distribution of written noncommercial materials; activities intended to encourage and facilitate voter registration; artistic performances, including the acceptance of donations; solicitation for religious or political causes;”. No matter the clear allowance of such performances, buskers are being harassed, violated, and assaulted while simply trying to share their music well within their civic rights.

With a clearly written set of rules and regulations, it was difficult at first for me to understand why there were any discrepancies at all. Still, there was something interesting about the conundrum. What was it about busking that ruffled so many feathers? What was it about busking that attracted so many performers? And why, when faced with opposition, would someone want to continue to make themself vulnerable to ridicule, disrespect, and possible arrest? There were many factors that were interesting about busking, and naturally, I sought answers.

Busking is a common practice throughout history, and is present in various cultures around the world. However prevalent they are, and artistry that they share, street performers have always had a stigma attached to them. Certainly if they were good enough artists, they wouldn’t be performing in the street, and certainly not for donations. However, while developing and researching the film, I quickly learned the mindset of these individuals—filled with dedication, honesty, and creativity.

In my experience as a straphanger in the NYC mass transit system, my daily commute consists of tight spaces filled with lots of people, many different kinds of people. They are lawyers, stockbrokers, teachers, construction workers, doctors, students, homeless, and even random “crazies”. However civic some of their duties may be, they still over-pack the platforms and trains of the NYC mass transit system
underneath the concrete jungle above. This can be a frustrating experience, not to mention the rising fare costs. But in this chaotic space, there are some that board the trains with a different outlook. The underground street performers—the buskers of the NYC train system. The musicians, dancers, and singers seek to single-handedly transform a numbing atmosphere into an enjoyable experience for everyone, or at least that is their goal. But why would a performer choose a venue so unconventional? With conflicts ensuing from disgruntled straphangers who want silence, police officers who uphold the laws, and other performers fighting for territory, what is it that these Buskers seek from the experience? For without these intimate therapeutic moments, we would all surely be savages in the jungle that is NYC. Consisting of different talents, and levels of their musicianship, what kind of artists do they see themselves as? Can they achieve the goals that they want within the confines of the trains? As we follow these indie artists performing for the benefit of their audience alone, the film would aspire to display the motivation that comes from within each of these talented people.

Each stage of the production proved to be both challenging and informative. Regardless of the capacity that the final film would be screened, I began in the same way almost all creative projects do, with pre-production. The research I carried out consisted of a lot of observation, short conversations, donations, and train rides.

After drafting, revising, and finalizing a treatment for the documentary film, I was confident in the story that I wanted to tell. However, in order to tell this story, I would have to locate ample subjects that were willing to devote their time and their
craft to the project. Armed with my early research, and NYC savvy attitude, I entered the subway system in search of the talent that I needed.

Initially, it seemed to be an easy enough task. Ride the trains, introduce myself, and everyone would be interested in telling me their story. My first conversation with a NYC subway busker, in regards to the film project, revealed a lot about the task that I was about to undertake. It all began with me standing on the 34th Street Penn Station platform—awaiting the #2 Train going towards Brooklyn. On the platform were 4 musicians. They struck my attention because of their instruments and Motown sound. I waited for them to finish their set (about 2-3 min of reasonably quiet time in between arriving and departing trains), and I approached them. “Nice, you guys are good!” I said. All but one musician nodded their head in approval. I began talking about an opportunity that I thought they’d be interested in. I continued my spiel anyway. “I’m working on a short film about NYC subway buskers. It’s a documentary. My idea is to show musicians like yourself in a light that has not usually been displayed.” The one “non-nodder”, who I later found out was the band leader, slid his saxophone to the side in a “rest” position. He made eye contact with me; he then proceeded to ruffle through his pockets—still not saying a word. I continued, “I would love for you guys to speak a little on camera about what you do, and why you’ve chosen to do it here.” I ended my little pitch with a smile, extending my hand for a confirmation handshake. The sax player looked me up and down while finally pulling his hand out of his pocket. He reached out and shook my hand. Success, I had an interested subject. Then he handed me a card. On the card was his contact information with the words “For booking inquiries, please
call Phillip @...” My coy smile, calm demeanor, and personal subject matter did not fool Phillip. I quickly learned that I had been fooling myself. Despite their perceived economic, work experience, or education status, the common thread between all performers is that they hold their performance at the highest level—regardless of where they were performing it. This changed my approach in acquiring subjects drastically.

I rethought my pitch, reworking it from the ground up. Though these musicians and artists performed below the streets of NYC, this in no way reflected their work ethic or artistry. Firstly, I had to make sure the purpose for the film was clear and concise when explaining it to others. Secondly, create video content that supported my ideas that could be easily shared with prospective subjects and investors. Thirdly, I needed to upgrade my equipment. Lastly, I needed to raise funds for “breaking-the-ice”. Of all the things that I could think of that buskers would respond to, the most acceptable form of gratitude was not a handshake, an excited smile, or selfie photos, but simply good ol’ cold hard cash. These adjustments would prove to be highly beneficial in the goal of acquiring subjects in the future—regardless of their talent and experience.

In order to create sufficient documentation, the heart of my thesis would exist in the stories surrounding the sincerity of the buskers within the New York City subway system. Visually, the video of Andrew Kalleen and Officer Michael Franco depicted the conflict needed to stage the question “Is it legal or not to busk?” To flush out the narrative of the film, I asked a series of questions that the edit would answer.
Though busking dates back to the times of antiquity, not many people were familiar with the term “busker”. Thus, my first question was “What is a busker?” Instead of doing the conventional style of using archival footage, and voiceovers to establish the content, I opted for a different approach. We went down into the subway system and interviewed random New York City commuters about their knowledge of what a busker is. I made sure to cast individuals that represented the various demographics that the city is comprised of. The result was phenomenal. What we found out was that many people did not know exactly what a busker was. When asked, “what is a busker?” one commuter responded, “I dunno, what is a busker?” Though they had been extremely familiar with the music underground, most commuters were unaware of the trials and tribulations that the buskers had to face under the streets of New York City. Through these series of quick random interviews, we were able to introduce the appreciation that many commuters had for the busk performances. By the end of the intro montage, one commuter was quoted in saying “It’s where people show off their talents for funds in order to feed themselves or take care of their families.” The interviews gave the understanding that buskers were generally appreciated for their contributions.

With the appreciation being expressed, and the act of busking defined by the commuters themselves, the film then introduces the audience to real buskers beneath the streets of NYC. The first busker that the audience was introduced to is Andrew Kalleen. Using old photos, crosscut with his main interview, Andrew gave reference as to how he ended up playing his music in the New York City subway system. From his conversation, the audience understands that some artists choose
to play in the subway, and do not end up there like castaways. More importantly, performing in the subways of New York City does not label your artistry or musicianship as “less-than”. Instead, it speaks volumes about the type of individual you are, to risk ridicule and judgment and perform in a space that otherwise would not be ideal. Andrew connects the busker to their art by describing his level of commitment to improving. When referring to the station that he plays his music in, he states, “I find myself going every single day, to that stop.”

The next montage takes us through a “picture book” of artists that I had crossed paths with in the NYC subway while doing my research. What we see are enjoyable moments filled with compassionate, joy, camaraderie, musicianship and overall talent. For the audience, it is made clear that if buskers were to disappear from the New York City subway system, they would surely be missed. There are some questions that may arise for the audience after this montage. One question may revolve around the fact that if buskers are appreciated, then why are they so at risk of being ticketed, wrongfully arrested, or ejected from the subway. When asking myself that question, my only thought revolved around misrepresentation in the general public. Of all the busking that occurs beneath the streets of New York City, all buskers are placed into to categories. Buskers can either be considered freelance, or a contributing member to the Music Under New York’s MUSIC program.

Freelance buskers are generally any performer who enters the subway system to share their talents, and sets up wherever they want to setup. Matthew Christian is the director of the not-for-profit organization BuskNY. In his interview, Matthew Christian discusses his understanding of the freelance busker. He says,
“they love people, they love surprising experiences, they love to make music, and they generally don’t care what someone’s judgment of that is going to be.” Audible Chocolate is a freelance busking band comprised of three female members. They primarily play on the “Shuttle” line traveling from Grand Central Terminal to Times Square Station. Cheeki Pow Pow, vocalist, says “We are not really seeking a stage or an audience, we are going down there, and grabbing one. Demanding that they listen”. This gregariousness seems to be at the heart of the freelance busker, and allows them to best connect with the commuters that they come into contact with. With a mix of a violin, guitar, and strong vocals, the band gathers large amounts of donations daily. After one performance, one commuter can be heard saying, “This is interesting”. There are many freelance buskers that can be seen or heard throughout the New York City subway platforms and trains. They range in talent choice, and ability level. Still, they share their talents in belief that they are worthy of donations from the public.

The other buskers that are found in the subways of New York City, are those that belong to the Music Under New York Organization. Those artists, chosen by the organization, are only allowed to play their music in specific spaces underground. As mentioned before, they are given a banner to be displayed when they play. The large banner has the musician or artist’s name printed largely next to the name and emblem of the Music Under New York organization—it looks very official. The documentary addresses one misconception about the banner that many commuters shared. For many years, the banner administered by Music Under New York was believed and identified to be a permit. Though the banner itself isn’t harmful, using
the word “permit” implies that there are some legal regulations on busking underground, and that Music Under New York is the only organization that can allow artists to perform in the space legally. This is grossly incorrect. BuskNY, the not-for-profit organization ran by Matthew Christian, and other volunteers, worked diligently to get the word “permit” removed from all documentation and literature distributed by Music Under New York. BuskNY believed that, because of the improper term used, the general public, as well as city workers and authority figures believed that performers without the banner are deemed to be busking illegally.

After many letters, and finally attending the auditions to make their presence known, BuskNY was finally able to get the Music Under New York organization to remove the word from all distributed material. Because of their association with the New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority, Music Under New York only allows their awarded performers to perform in designated areas. Thus, MUNY artists are given a schedule for him or her to stick to, unlike the freelance busker who can choose when and where they want to go. Thus, the two different groups are somewhat divided, not so much by talent level, but more so by personality types. Buskers who are eventually selected by Music Under New York do not have the stress or worry about finding locations, or when to show up. In the film, Natalia Paruz, a MUNY 20 year veteran, says “[MUNY] tells me where I need to be, and I love it”. Freelance buskers on the other hand, favor the freedom of their choice, free from judgment or regulation.

In the book “the Fiddler in the Subway” writer Gene Weingarten recants the viral story of violinist Joshua Bell. Joshua is a world-class musician based out of
Washington D.C. In his experiment, Joshua went down into the subway station to play for spare change. Joshua is quoted saying "It was strange feeling, that people were actually, ah... ignoring me". The experience was difficult for the $350 a ticket musician. "When you play for ticket-holders, you are already validated. I have no sense that I need to be accepted, I’m already accepted. Here [in the subway], there was a thought: what if they don’t like me? What if they resent my presence..." The experiment helped bring positive attention to the musicianship of buskers. If a great musician plays music but no one hears, was he really any good? The answer is simple. Yes. The choice of venue does not dictate the artist, and thus the thesis of *The Busk Below* gained practical support in its mission of proving non-believers wrong.

Coyote and Crow, a folk band also featured in the documentary, had a viral video supporting the benefits of buskers in the New York City subway as well. The eclectic couple usually plays their music on the platforms underground. In the viral video, the busy platform, filled with commuters, is enjoying their music. A young child turns the space in front of the band into a dance floor. After a brief solo, several other commuters who were previously just standing and listening join her. Soon, the lifeless platform transforms into a flash dance. No one is complaining, if anything, they are gracious for the moment of entertainment allowing the commuters to forget the stress of their day.

After defining busking, introducing the audience to buskers, and identifying why they choose the unconventional venue, the film further addresses the major difficulty faced by New York City train buskers—the New York City Police
Department. Beginning with Andrew Kalleen’s viral video of his infamous run-in with the cops, the film revisits the video to discuss the amount of wrongful arrests made by the NYC police. As the video plays out, the audience sees the conflict at its worst when Andrew defies the officers orders to vacate the platform and is hit in the face with his guitar as the officer physically stops him from performing. Andrew was arrested that day for legally busking in the New York City subway system. Other buskers also disclose their experiences with the NYPD. Erik Meier, a ukulele and vocalist for the band Bird Courage, discusses his interaction with a police officer that ticketed him for busking in the subway. He expresses that the officer would not show any leniency when he explained that previous tickets had been “tossed out” in court. He was also wrongfully arrested. There are many stories of buskers being treated this way. Not because there is a specific vendetta against buskers, but mostly because of the misinformation spread throughout the general public. Clearly, this needs to be addressed. The counter argument is embodied in the remarks made by retired police officer Scott Baker. In the film Scott explains that the relationship between cops and buskers has a lot to do with communication. Generally, everyone is operating in his or her best interest, but if a busker is being arrested, they should never resist arrest. Instead, get arrested, and follow up in court. “If your claims can be substantiated, then you will at least get some go-away money”, says Scott.

The film’s narrative wraps up with Andrew proclaiming that he, along with several other buskers, were suing the NYPD for wrongful practices in regards to the wrongful arrests. It would be a large undertaking in the current climate of police activity. Broken Windows policing is a term given to the strategy used by the police
department to address and deter crime in the city. Under the criminology theory, “maintaining and monitoring urban environments to prevent small crimes such as vandalism, public drinking, and toll-jumping helps to create an atmosphere of order and lawfulness, thereby preventing more serious crimes from happening.” (University 2014). Under this approach, many individuals, otherwise harmless, are now targeted as creating an environment where crime can develop and flourish. The article further discusses the effectiveness of Broken Windows policing saying, “There is concern that any effectiveness of broken windows policing in reducing crime may come at the expense of reduced citizen satisfaction and damage to citizen perceptions of the legitimacy of police.” Starting off as a thesis to find respect for nuance performers has grown into a larger social discussion on the ideas of freedom in our society, and it all plays out in The Busk Below.

The observational style of the documentary allowed for the best aesthetic for the content of the film. The subways of New York City are an eclectic mix of interesting people, places, and things. Going underground gave the feeling of being in another world. The uniformed subway tiles provided the boundaries for the hustling and bustling crowds that meander throughout the tunnels like worker ants. The goal of The Busk Below was to see these buskers in their natural performances. This is shown in the handheld shots of each performance, whether in a designated performance space, on the subway platforms, or in the trains themselves. Commuters are in abundance, and their attention and reactions validate the subjects that the audience is experiencing. Instead of simply being a commuter, they become an active participant in conveying the message that buskers are appreciated.
Through the use of user submitted videos, we were able to continue a similar feel as well as support the idea that numerous people found busking entertaining—worthy of their time to stop and film. It was important that the film depicted the authenticity of every performance. The New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority does allowing video production in the subway, but does not allow and apparatus to be placed on the ground without proper permits and insurance. This restriction worked in my favor. Without the use of a tripod, each shot in the subway appeared as the eyes of a commuting New Yorker—further supporting the immersive style of observing the busking culture underground.

To further represent the needed respect for their craft, I decided to do main interviews for buskers in specific locations. Though their performance was to feel raw, and free spirited, the interviews, which expressed their opinions, were generally held in a studio or controlled space. This allowed for several other artistic choices. Instead of the dusty subways where their audiences mostly saw them, we placed them in spaces that had art direction and ambiance. The idea was that visually, they would appear grand and respectable. Through the use of proper lighting techniques, the subjects were treated like amazing products being sold to the viewer. Through the use of art direction, a loft space appeared as a nice home for the busker Andrew Kalleen. Surely, he must do something well enough to afford living there, and the audience should think so. For Coyote and Crow, I chose to interview them on a white cyc backdrop. Staging their instruments in the space, and putting their craft on “display” for a television style audience.
The Busk Below embarked on a difficult journey from the beginning. Each step of the process posed its difficulties. Though prevalent, gaining access to buskers’ personal stories was a task in itself. Throughout all of production there were moments where I felt that the film would not be completed on time. Without the financial help of grants and other donations, I would not have been able to book locations, or provide compensation for the labor that I needed. I am grateful for the experience and the major take-away that I now have as a filmmaker. I was reminded the importance of believing in yourself, and believing in your process. The fear of rejection can sometimes cripple the creative mind, and hinder it from thriving. But if I was going to think ahead to what people thought about the film, I thought I would need to have a completed film I was at least proud of. I would not submit something I wasn’t proud of. This perspective motivated me to produce, direct, and edit the project myself despite all the setbacks.

A support system is still important for multiple reasons. After gathering hours of footage, I became overwhelmed with the undertaking of editing it all. Pressed with a deadline, I was sure I was not able to complete it on time. My brother, which I hold in high regard, inquired about my progress one night. He said, “So, how’s the movie coming?” I wasn’t sure what to say as he was invested in the film financially as well. I said, “I’m not going to finish on time, gonna’ finish in the summer”. There was a brief moment of silence. Then my brother’s only response was, “You got this”. That I did. I am thankful for all the supporters of the project. Without them, there would be no way that I would have been able to complete it on time, much less at all.
The other form of support that proved beneficial for the making of this film was feedback. After the film was picture locked, I asked several people to watch *The Busk Below*, both before and after its official screening. There were many compliments, which were great to hear. Still, what helped my process most were the opportunities to improve the film. Many people commented on the content that I included, agreeing and disagreeing with subjects and events. Some people critiqued my handling of the Andrew Kalleen's wrongful arrest subject matter. They believed that I provided a one-sided viewpoint representing the current negative climate towards police officials. Other feedback regarded wanting to see more content—specifically more performances from the buskers. It was suggested that having more music performances would allow the audience to become more connected with the subjects in the documentary. Because I included a lot of buskers, there was not enough on screen time to get connected with them all. All in all, the audience did feel informed by the documentary, and expressed gratitude for informing them of buskers, and their rights to perform below the streets of New York City.

I appreciated this vital information since my eyes and my hands, under my own critique, made most of the decisions. In regards to the content surrounding the footage of Andrew Kalleen’s arrest, I did not seek to do so in the interviews or edit. I would say that I wanted to create drama during the climax of the film when the viral video plays out, but I had no other agenda when doing so. I did think it was important for the retired officer to appear in the film in order to provide a strong alternate view. To me, the conversation was a lot bigger than Andrew’s arrest and would require a lot more time to tackle in film. If anything, I just wanted to focus on
the options of handling the situation if you are in it as a busker. I agree with the music notes given, and will make the addition in a later iteration. My goal was to give respect to the performers who take the time to share their talents with commuters daily. I wanted to inform the audience of the rights that buskers had under the streets of New York City. In the end, I strongly believe we achieved our goal of getting people to appreciate The Busk Below.

APPENDIX

Works Cited