Liverpool busking permits will choke city life

Opinion by Denis Joe June 2012

For centuries, street entertainers have been an informal part of public life, but thanks to the ever-officious Liverpool City Council, this centuries-old tradition may soon be under threat in the city.

On Wednesday, 8 June 2012, the Council announced new regulations, effective from next month, to restrict busking in the city through, what are in effect, licencing laws. Buskers will need a £20 permit as well as liability insurance to continue performing on our streets. Whatever we think of the talents of certain individual buskers, we should be very clear on what we stand to lose culturally should these regulations be brought into effect.

Busking has always been an informal part of public life. It allows individual artists to practise their repertoire in front of an audience and make a few bob in the process. It has also become an important source of income, especially for newly-arrived immigrants, whose access to welfare benefits or a decent living wage is greatly restricted. This initiative by Liverpool City Council is not the first to place restrictions or outright bans on street entertainers. Covent Garden tried to restrict the number of buskers in the vicinity of the Opera House. Councils such as Worthing demand that buskers register with the local authority. York City operates a Busking Badge scheme and places many restrictions on what can and cannot be performed.

So it would seem that what Liverpool City Council demands is in line with other councils in Britain. Cabinet member for neighbourhoods Councillor, Steve Munby , has gone on record as saying:

". . . we have had regular complaints from businesses and shoppers about noise levels, repetitive performances and the number of buskers at certain times. On some Saturdays we have had 12 performers in a short stretch of Church Street alone – that can't be good for the buskers themselves as they are, in effect, competing against each other, for limited cash.

"So, we are trying to strike a balance between the needs of buskers and other city centre users by regulating the situation."

As long as there is a public life, there will be people who will complain about aspects they don't happen to like. Personally I find buskers an irritant, especially those who sing Oasis, Smiths and, of course, Beatles songs. But I have a pair of legs which propel me from the offending noise and so no harm is done.

But what Liverpool City Council is attempting to do goes much further than simply registering buskers and setting noise and Health & Safety regulations. Councillor Munby's justification of the restrictions is very telling:

"These measures will greatly enhance Liverpool's ability to attract *the very best buskers* [my emphasis] and will add a new dimension to the visitors experience[sic]. "

It really is extraordinary how explicitly he states Liverpool City Council's claim to be an arbiter of taste on our behalf. This is not about **how** a busker should perform, but **what** they perform. Can we expect to see X Factor-style auditions in the Council chambers at some point in the future? This is surely not what our councillors should be spending their time on. When we elect council officials it is represent us at a local level in the decision-making process. We do not endow them with omnipotence to determine what our favourite songs are – these are judgements that we make for ourselves. Yet these are the very powers that our elected representatives are assuming. It is as if Liverpool City Council sees public life as a school, in which they alone set out the syllabus.

I spoke to Kenny Brew, the City Centre Coordinator for Liverpool Council. He assured me that this move was not intended to get buskers off the streets of the city. When the city celebrated its Capital of Culture status in 2008 many street entertainers contributed to the events, and some have remained in the city. But the major problem has been one of noise levels, with complaints coming mainly from local businesses. He told me that some street entertainers have also approached the local authority to ask them to regulate street entertainment more effectively.

Mr Brew outlined the new policy, which will be launched at an event on 9 July. He emphasised that it is aimed at helping buskers and local businesses by offering advice on the best

performance locations, such as tourist areas like Pier Head. The council will provide a list of 20–25 sites around the city and buskers will be required to move from one patch after two hours.

The policy will also require registered street entertainers to opt into a badge scheme which will allow a complainant to identify a particular individual. The badge will have a photo of the performer as well as their names and an ID number.

Already local authorities have been given far too many powers to dictate what can and cannot be tolerated in public life. Alcohol free zones are a common sight now in our towns and cities. Leafleting is strictly regulated throughout the country, and smoking restrictions in public areas such as bus shelters are not even considered to be objectionable.

I spoke to some buskers in the city centre. An elderly Romanian accordion player, whose repertoire consists of traditional folk music, told me that she had been on the patch for a few years and had never received a complaint from either the public or from any nearby businesses. A young guitar-playing singer told me that he had received a handful of complaints but always during quiet periods, as if local retailers were somehow blaming him for the drop in business.

He told me that the manager of a high street retailer, near to his pitch, recently approached him and told him to move on in such an abusive manner that members of the public, sitting on a bench nearby, followed the manager into the shop to give him ‘a mouthful’ back.

Another busker could not understand why he would need liability insurance, when his only equipment was his trumpet, which could hardly be considered a hazard. He had been busking for 30 years and had never had a complaint from a member of the public, although he had received one from a local business in the past year.

He told me that he enjoyed busking and felt that he was providing something positive to daily life. Most of the comments he received from members of the public were positive about his repertoire. For him, busking also allowed him to experiment with tunes and work his way through the music. It was not for the money and the couple of 50p pieces in his box certainly suggested that he was doing this out of love and not necessity.

I also spoke to a few people who were sitting around and asked them how they felt about street

entertainment. One woman said that she really liked the fact that there were so many different musicians in the city and all nearby. An elderly man told me that, although he wasn't particularly fond of many of the songs young people play, he nevertheless had great admiration for their musicianship and the "guts to get up and play in front of so many people". He felt that the council was being too officious and that busking was no more a nuisance than any other aspect of daily life.

It does seem that the authorities are intent on colonising every aspect of our lives. What was formerly understood as the public sphere, where people met and interacted on a day-to-day basis, is being taken away from us. At a national level, ministers tell us every day what is and isn't good for us or our families. It is as if we are incapable of making decision for ourselves, and this is what seems to be driving this move to impose restrictions on buskers. It is not simply a judgement on how well singers can perform 'Imagine' with the right amount of emotional emphasis, or whether they can reach those high *Wooooooohs* in 'She Loves You'; it is a judgement on each of us – on our ability to decide what we like or dislike, and whether we can be trusted to shrug our shoulders and say 'Let it be'.

Editor's Note: Trying to understand what impact the exaggerated desire to nudge or bludgeon us all into a new etiquetted way of living in the City, the Manchester Salon is organising a discussion on Monday 18 June entitled ' City 2.0: Forging a new urban outlook? ', where we'll be able to work out appropriate responses.