Bagpipes and Busking: Selling Yourself, Selling the City

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Going to school in the centre of Edinburgh, I spent my days in the city accompanied by the sound of bagpipes drifting over cobbles and down closes. As I embarked on this project, I had to begin looking at the bagpipers and buskers as more than just background noise or a soundtrack for my own life. Walking past them for years, their music often sounded exactly the same from player to player and day to day, and it alternately buoyed or irritated me. Now I was forced to focus on the white noise and consider the viewpoints of those who produced it.

My main encounters were with bagpipers, mostly in traditional Scottish dress and playing in well-known tourist-traps. I will focus on these players who, I found, did not fit the traditional idea of a busker as discussed in most of the anthropological literature on the subject, partly because of their strong association with—and even representation of—Scottishness and national pride. I will discuss this in more detail later.

One aspect unique to bagpipers is how they 'sell' themselves, and the city they see themselves as embodying, to their audience, especially tourists. By selling, I mean the way they present themselves to attract the most money, attention, and status. I will argue that the way the bagpiping community constitutes itself is closely linked to the way they then go on to present and sell themselves. This is done both by fitting into certain expectations of their audiences, but also by seeming to be uninfluenced and distanced from that audience. Furthermore, pipers may subvert these expectations to improve their 'selling'.

Approaching the field

The way the bagpipers sell themselves affected every aspect of the project, down to how I was able to interact with them. I began my encounters trying to chat casually with the players at the end of their performances, hoping to gain a degree of camaraderie and confidence this way. However, this seemed an unproductive approach as I was greeted with bewilderment and suspicion. I learned from one hurried piper that, in an 'unwritten' code of conduct they operated on, each piper had a half an hour slot to play in a certain spot, after which they would move to another or go for a break. Instead I began to approach the players in the middle of their slot to set

up a quick meeting at the end of it, normally on a nearby bench, and briefly stating the project as my motivation. Once in the interview, normally lasting about fifteen minutes, I used a notepad and a small iPod microphone and approached with a set of questions and themes, with the conversation guiding the questions I asked.[1] This more formal, etic approach made the informants more forthcoming. They seemed far happier to let me in on their experiences and to speak as a 'busker off-duty' (David), whereas previously they seemed to be stuck between roles, perhaps feeling their performativity as players to be compromised.

The need to sell

Indeed, this keen sense of performance and self-presentation seemed to extend to most areas of consideration for the pipers. The very nature of busking makes performance more informal, unstructured, contested and fragile than a normal musical performance, which has an audience who decides to be there. The bagpipers are forced to create a sense of ownership and authority over the space in the city that they occupy, and this extends to a need to embody a strong sense of artistic performance, whether through how they dress, what they play, or their manner. As Mason argues, 'social space submits to no single individual. It is produced by the community and becomes the site of constant negotiation… the more structured an event… the more artful it seems'(Mason 1996: 302-6). While people in the city might regard buskers as temporary, they themselves do not: 'we're not just here for a few days, we're here for the long term' (Neil). This need to present themselves in a certain way is important not only in relation to their actual performance but also to their status as musicians. More than one piper emphasised how different they were from 'just beggars just sitting asking for money' (Jamie). However, it may be noted that it was the 'normal' buskers who emphasised this more than the bagpipers, who perhaps felt sufficiently distinguished from 'beggars' or 'random street performances' by virtue of their costume and national associations.[2]

The busking community

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[1] I also found the use of a microphone very useful in relation to my own part in the encounter. Being able to listen to myself again helped me to realise when I was interrupting, talking too much, or asking my informants questions that might be too leading. I was able to readjust my own approach to let the field speak for itself far better.

[2] Nevertheless, pipers often felt the need to explain their busking . Neil told me it just "fills my afternoons" between professional engagements and gave me his card at the end of the interview, while Mike said that he only busked because 'the wife willnae let me practice in the house.' As Bywater argues, "The busker, like his or her audience, may be en route from somewhere to somewhere else" (Bywater 2007: 102).

This need to create structure (buskers don't need a license outside the Festival period) is also manifested in how the bagpipers organise themselves as a clearly defined sub-community. They described themselves as a socially cohesive group, with their own favoured places for drinking and resting in the city, such as the Hebridean pub next to Waverley Station[3]. Indeed, several pipers told me that this had affected how they viewed the city. Ian said that 'when I'm playing and like thinking about where to play next, I kind of imagine this network over the town of where I know there'll be a piper. It's kinda like there's these wee fixed point round the town that tourists and that just flow round.' Tommy commented that 'it's nice to know that you've got friends all over the city, and you can just go by and know there's somebody there.' This view of a 'network' perhaps gives the pipers a sense of ownership and monopoly of the city that contributes to how they sell themselves; I will later discuss this further.

While older players might know more fellow buskers or have more stories to tell, even younger players, such as David, 'knew who was who', and could distinguish between 'the old-timers' and more reclusive or unsociable pipers, to whom he gave names like 'the goatee man' or 'the quiet bagpiper'. Furthermore, David discerned a certain hierarchy within the piping community. He said that he would defer to older pipers in terms of claiming spots—and to other types of buskers—if they had been busking for a long time or did it as their full-time job. I asked David if he did so out of respect for the players and he said, 'there are some buskers who are older or busk more often who can be a bit peeved if you're in their spot.' This would suggest that pipers, while operating around a code, do tend to gain a sense of entitlement and legitimacy within the community, through the development of skills or time spent practicing the activity.

Furthermore, bagpipers, especially the older or more regular ones, also seemed to view themselves as slightly separate from other kinds of buskers, like violinists or guitarists: in fact, they seemed to view themselves as more legitimate than other buskers. Ian commented that, 'people, tourists I mean, just think they're a bit random. But they actually want to see us.' Indeed, I spoke to one violinist, Katy, in order to get some perspective on the bagpiping community from a 'normal' busker. She said that 'the pipers think they're all that and they should get a place easier over me… just because the tourists like them they think they rule the [Royal] Mile.' I will discuss

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[3] I had intended to visit, both to talk to the bartenders who attended to the piping community but who were not part of it, and to talk to the pipers in a less formal way. However, time constraints made this impossible.

later how the bagpipers seemed to use this special[4] status they give themselves to sell themselves better to their audiences.

Furthermore, the pipers spoke of a shared past. Three bagpipers I spoke to referred to a period in the late eighties and nineties when there had been a lot of conflict and territoriality over 'players' turf' (Tommy), before this was 'sorted out', with the conflict now being 'all gone'. It was agreed amongst the community that players would restrict themselves to 30 minutes a slot, and form an informal, if not physical, queue to play on a spot. No one could really tell me how these agreements came about, though younger players, like Tommy, said that older more seasoned pipers had let them know about it. Thus the bagpipers seemed to feel they shared some kind of common history, a period of conflict that preceded and resulted in the more 'peaceful times' (Neil) that they operated in now.

Setting up an interview, one piper, John, told me to meet him in the area above the Princes Mall, just up from the 'prime spot' between Waverley Station and Princes Street, saying that 'no one bothers us up there.' He referred to it as the 'green room' or as the 'office' for the pipers, a public, yet enclosed and un-overlooked, area of the city they had informally appropriated. The pipers assign a specific space to the waiting that they do before performing, and to the nervousness or at least anticipation that comes with that waiting, with the name 'green room' likening their performances to those in a theatre, and 'office' with its connotations of professionalism. This method of carving out contested spaces in the city for themselves not only helps the pipers to constitute themselves as a community, but to enhance their own sense of performativity within a mode of performance where a lack of ordinary audience seems to delegitimise their efforts.

Selling and expectations

Thus it may be seen that the bagpipers create internal structures and norms for their community in order to enhance their sense of performativity and how they present and sell themselves. Another large part of how they do this is the way they fit into audience and tourist expectations. Indeed, this is perhaps what sets bagpipers apart from other buskers, especially, but not only, in

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[4] David articulated this status this way: 'I think that the piper is interesting because it lies somewhere in between say, someone dressed up as a gladiator outside the coliseum which is purely for tourists and not at all part of "real" culture, and like a Frenchman busking with an accordion which is a stereotypical image but probably something that would be done even in the absence of tourists.'

Edinburgh. Although, as buskers, pipers have no set audience, neither are they a random occurrence in the city for passers-by: they are expected. Neil said to me,

> 'the tourists love to hear the pipers here; quite often they'll say, "thank goodness we found you, we've been all over Scotland looking for pipers, and we're leaving tomorrow and at last we've found a piper." People ask around and ask where they can find them. So it's a popular thing, *it's not just busking* here, it's people come to Scotland and they expect to see pipers in kilts.'[5]

Both Tommy and John also commented with Tommy saying, '...the council dinnae mind us, I think because they ken we do them a favour with the tourism and all that.' It seems many pipers view their playing as meeting a demand in the city of Edinburgh, whereas the violinist I interviewed said, 'I think the people probably come for the pipers, they don't really know what to make of me,' and said she would 'just take whatever I can get,' rather than viewing her playing as a 'favour', or something 'above' busking. Thus bagpipers do have an audience in the traditional sense in that people do seek them out specifically, and they view their performance more as a service than a 'shot in the dark.'

As mentioned previously, it is not enough for the pipers to just *be* there, they must also represent 'Scottishness' and tradition[6]. A large part of this is in what they wear. As Neil said,

> 'it's an image as well as a tradition. It just wouldn't work without a kilt. It's peculiar, it's the only instrument you get really worked up for, sometime I do see people playing in jeans, they're not regulars, and we look at them and think "it doesn't look right, it just doesn't look right." And it's interesting, the young kids, right from an early age, they know that piping and kilts go together – it's weird really but it's obviously engrained in the culture.'

Thus Scottish national costume is both a key into the community of bagpipers—note the 'we' in opposition to the denim-sporters—and a signal of authenticity for the audience. By embodying the traditional Scottish stereotype, pipers wearing kilts sell themselves by attracting more attention, and therefore money and status, as a necessary and integral part of the experience of Edinburgh. This perhaps also explains the distinct lack of women bagpipers: I spent a total of four full days in Edinburgh looking for, talking to and observing buskers, and never saw a single woman piper. As Mike said to me, 'well, for one thing I don't think they're as hardy, they cannae stand out for as long. And you've got the fact that some folk dinnae like women doing certain things, like funerals,

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[5] My emphasis

[6] Indeed, every single piper I talked to used the phrase 'proud to be Scottish' at some point! When I realised this after talking to a couple of them, I made an effort to ask less leading questions, but the pattern still continued.

or bagpipes. It just isnae a tradition.'

Furthermore, the bagpipers seemed to respond to their audiences in a way that the 'normal' buskers didn't, in terms of repertoire. As Mason argues, performance 'involves observed behaviour; it is directly interactive, so that one structures one's behaviour not merely with *awareness* of the other, but in response to the other's presence, gaze and actions' (Mason 1996: 302). Both Katy and Jamie, a guitarist, said that they played exactly what they felt like, or even whatever they felt needed some practice, in effect using the street as a practice room or sounding stage. Indeed, Jamie held quite a defiant attitude, saying 'fuck them, I'll play what I like. That's why I do this, so I don't have a guy telling me what to do every day.' By contrast, bagpipers were highly aware of their audience, perhaps because they felt more keenly that the audience was actually listening to them. As Neil said, 'after all, it's a performance and you have to be aware of who's who on the street and try to play to them.' Most of the pipers said that they mainly played well-known, traditional Scottish airs and jigs, since that is what is 'expected', with Ian commenting that it 'fits in with the city, you know, you're giving them a song to go with, like, the Scott monument and the castle and what they're seeing'[7]. This again highlights how many pipers seem to view themselves as integral pieces of the city, guiding people around it and enriching their experience of place.

Selling by stoicism

However, as previously mentioned, the bagpipers appeared to also employ a kind of distance from their audience, or 'stoic' manner. Despite their strong sense of performance and awareness of their audience, part of the pipers' 'selling' is the need to appear not to be selling at all. Mike told me, 'you have to be like a statue… I dinnae think the people going by recognise one of us fae the other, to them you're just always going to be there. So you have tae kind of do like that's the case.' Indeed, Bywater refutes Victor Turner's argument that buskers exist in a 'perpetual liminality', instead arguing that this idea is 'simply a construct of the audience of passers-by while the performer is actually "onstage"' (Bywater 2007: 102). One thing I observed was that the majority of tourists who stopped to listen also stood beside the piper as they played for a photo,

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[7] Nevertheless, sometimes the 'traditional' bagpipers did subvert rather than fulfill their audience's expectations as part of their selling. For instance, Mike told me that 'I actually like playing foreign national anthems because that's the biggest pull – the tourists love that.' David also said that if a child went by he might play a nursery rhyme, or a pop song for some teenagers to 'catch their attention.' Ian also told me he often toured Australia and Europe: people gave generously because of the unexpectedness of a bagpiper in their country.

68

before putting money into their case. They would pose with the unmoving, 'stoic' piper as if they were any other statue or landmark in the city. Indeed, Tommy seemed to enjoy telling me anecdotes about unusual things that had happened to him:

> 'one time like a thief that was getting chased from the mall down there, he had two bottles of whiskey in his hand you know, and the next thing you know he's come up to me and he's left the two bottles in my case and then he's run away! And then there was another time it was a big hen party and they were doing like a kissing competition to see how many kisses they could get, and I was one of them ken, and I wasn't complaining.'

It seems that people in the city frequently use the pipers as a prop—or a scapegoat!—in their daily interactions, taking both their presence and their lack of reaction for granted and incorporating this into their use of city space. Furthermore, the pipers realise this and deliberately perpetuate this image to their advantage, making them seem even more integral and necessary to the city, as part of their representation and selling.

To take a slightly different slant, while discussing where he liked to play, John said that 'traditional' places like the Royal Mile or next to the National Galleries were preferable. However, the 'prime spot' was the one between Waverley Station and Princes Street, because it was on the route tourists entered the city for the first time and left it for good. As Butler Brown points out, 'musicians must… claim attention long enough for passers-by to become an audience… they must also specially manufacture the space and time of performance out of contested space and time – they must contest ownership of the street'(Butler Brown 2007: 7). John said, 'it can make you feel a bit like a keeper of the city, like you're guarding it and you can catch them when they're coming in or going out and then that's what they remember.' Ian, too, said 'a lot of the tourists ask us questions like we've got all the answers, like they think we're policemen or like guardians and I just tell them away to the tourist office!' Thus the bagpipers' view and presentation of themselves as special figures in the city, around whom people 'flow', is reconstituted and reproduced by how those people approach them.

'Free spirits'

Despite the high level of attention paid to presentation and how they were viewed by their audience, the pipers also appeared to hold themselves in a certain regard, as 'lone musicians' (David) in an often indifferent city. Besides the 'unwritten codes' and ways of working the piping

community had developed, they seemed to revile outside intervention and imposition on their lives. As Mike told me, 'it's completely informal. People have said, "oh, you should get the council to arrange this," and we're thinking NO! We don't want the council to arrange anything! The last thing we want is organisation and bureaucracy. We're musicians after all, we're free spirits.'

Conclusion

Writing up the project, the main problem I encountered was not, as I expected, retaining the integrity of the voices I'd heard: indeed, they seemed to guide me helpfully in the right direction. Rather, I found it difficult to find the balance between scope and focus. Most hard was cutting out what I'd heard about the strong role of family and community links in shaping the buskers' sense of performativity and community; as well as the encounters I had where subversion of expectation, and the claiming of alternative city spaces, played a much more important part.

One of the most interesting elements of the project for me was the way in which the pipers were able to maintain their sense of integrity as musicians or 'outsiders' (Ian), while also using that status and distance to attract audiences. As Butler Brown argues, 'musicians in many societies seems to possess social liminality – unusual cultural sanction to cross ordinarily strict boundaries… ritual facilitators… musicians are permitted to cross status boundaries… creating a liminal space for the temporary performance of subversive ideas' (Butler Brown 2007: 6). While they presented and saw themselves as an embodiment of the city, and associated themselves with tradition and expectation, they also saw themselves as occupying 'lost' space like their 'green room' and as creating an alternative 'network' of music over the city plan. As Mason puts it, 'if social space itself is a field of contention, then social performance becomes a means of urging that contention, of expressing difference, asserting ownership and displaying relationship' (Mason 1996: 307). In this way they view and present themselves as both essential installments in the city, and as free spirits.

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