

# Sounds From the Street

## Benjamin Gates on Busking, Part 1 of 2

Transcribed by William Aitken

**Benjamin Gates (Guest):**You know, it's been great. I started busking... I wanna say... two years ago.

**[I Need a Dollar by Aloe Blacc starts playing]**

**BG:** And through busking, I have landed some pretty amazing opportunities, that I feel... You know, I'm extremely grateful that I have been given these opportunities.

**[Song continues to play]**

**Adam Kampe (Host):** This is Sounds from the Street, where we get to meet the men and women who define Street Sense, D.C.'s non-profit media center, dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host Adam Kampe. According to Marian Webster a "Busker" is one who entertains in public spaces for donations, and today's guest does just that, cellist Benjamin Gates. **(cello music plays)** If you live in D.C, you've probably heard Benjamin Gates, either at a local fundraiser, or, most likely, busking outside of one of the metro stations. Born and raised in the area, he self-identifies as a musician for the people, and he demonstrated that when he played the annual Street Sense gala, on October, 1<sup>st</sup> .

**BG:** And I saw the gallery, and the gallery was on asking homeless people what it was like to be homeless, and the image that you would have seen in this gallery are enough to break you down. It was... I can't explain how touching it was to me as an individual. And it's like... It makes me want to do everything that I can to make sure this isn't happening to someone on the street right now. And, I'm really hoping that, over the next couple of years, that picks up, because more people in the city definitely need to see, and experience, and be part of that. Even before the gala, I've known amazing people in Street Sense, like my good friend Chris, who is also in a band. He's around. He usually hangs around L'enfant. He goes to Georgetown as well. It was a fantastic event, and there have been so many fantastic events that have just come out of busking on the street. I feel like it's let me be in touch with the city, and, more so, be in touch with the potential clientele that I connect with. I'm a musician of the city. I consider myself to be a musician of the people and, that's what I do with my life. I create music. I play music and, I hope I'm on the path to doing so for the rest of my life.

**AK:** And when you say, "Musician of the people", what do you mean?

**BG:** I started coming out to the streets two years ago, playing music, and that's when I had my acoustic cello. Back when I used to come out originally, I never had an open case, because I was too nervous about everything. So, I kept my case closed, and I started performing music for people, and people would come up and give donations with the closed case, which I was grateful for. But, one of the big things I'd do... and even other musicians would do that I would sometimes bring with me, when I would go out and busk at these areas is.. We would take those donations and find a person more down on his luck than we were at the time, and we would turn over, not all of our proceeds, but a good portion of our proceeds over to that individual to make sure that he can, at least, get some food for that evening.

We tried to make sure, years ago, and we still do this today, when it comes to those specific area that we busk at. When I saw "we", I'm speaking of the other musician who come with me from time to time. When we go to those different areas, we make it a habit, that whenever we do collect, when we do decide that we're going to accept donations by having an open case, that we do find someone who's on the same block as we are, and we can make sure to accommodate them, so that they can get food or something for the evening. So, in one regard, that's how I believe that we are musicians for the people. Just in the more modern days, we've had to, kind of, hold back a little on the closed case, only because I've ended up getting my own place. (laughs) I'm havin' to pay rent, but overall, we do make sure, that when were out there, we still give something back to the community. Also, just getting involved with different programs, such as the Thurgood Marshall Center. They have a program known as, Concerned Young Black Men, in which we take youth of different ethnicities and take them around Washington D.C, and what this program does is it just brings them in and shows them different opportunities in the city, and different people to meet. They had a program, not that long ago. I wanna say, about a month ago. Where they allowed an officer to actually come in and speak to communities, because there's a lot of strife going on right now. So, just to see that an organization like that is in existence... I try to make sure that we can make partnerships with people like that around the city, because the youth is important.

**[A sad cello plays]**

**AK:** This idea of giving back or sharing some of your proceeds... Is it someone else who's busking that you think just needs a hand up, or someone who's panhandling or purely homeless.

**BG:** If it's a person panhandling... First of all, if it's in our line of vision, and we have an issue with it, and that's when we have to act. Whether the person is a panhandler... You know... If that's the case, we give the cash, and only you can decide what to do with it, but we're not going to take the option away from you. When it comes to other people out there who may not have a home to go back to, you obviously can tell. Then, yes, we'll make sure we can give the proceeds to them. One of the coolest things about busking is... I do take musicians that I've met from different venues and even from some of the past places I've been at, and I'll bring them with me, but, more importantly, I've met musicians on the street, who have either been panhandlers, buskers or the might be homeless and carrying their best friend of their back, and they've actually come over and have played with us, and you have a lot of phenomenal musicians in the city, who don't have a home. If it's cool, a few of them I know... One of them is named Billy. He stays out at the Foggy Bottom area, and he plays banjo, and you'll see him with his bike and his dog, and that's what he does. He travels the city. He loves to play the banjo, and he fishes. Then, you have another good guy... Tom, Tom Sullivan as a matter of fact. He's a guitar player out at Foggy Bottom, and he's always there every morning. He usually sets up with the vendors, and he's with them, helping them throughout the day. I would say this. I've met a lot of great people, out in Washington D.C, and I've met them on the street. Whether they've been panhandlers, homeless individuals... I feel that it's a great city. So, we want to definitely make sure that with those people, it's not a blind eye given to them, in any sort of way.

**AK:** I'm fascinated by busking. That's how, full discloser, you and I met. (Benjamin laughs) Outside the L'enfant metro, I had seen you a couple of times prior, and I wanted to know more about how, because it changes city to city in terms of regulations, and in New York and Boston, I know that you can busk

inside the metro. It's kind of nice because, you're protected from the elements, and the sound is different. You've got a whole different kind of echo.

**BG:** I can imagine that you hear good reverb. (laughs)

**AK:** Yeah, yeah, it's a little bit more intimate, because you're right next to a musician, whereas, if you're above ground, people are kind of passing. They're in motion. What is it like busking in D.C? Do you just show up to any place and busk?

**BG:** I don't think that you can show up to just any place and busk in Washington D.C, and, in all honesty, there are regulations to protect both musician and law enforcement. At this time, I'm not going to lie to you, I do need to become more educated on these laws, because there have been interactions where I'm finding out from law enforcers, that policies are changing, and I haven't gotten the time to do the individual research myself. So, I honestly wouldn't know. But, as busking as a whole, in Washington D.C, how have the environments been? Whenever I have busked at any metro station, I've never had a problem with metro transit. I've never had a problem with metropolitan, at these metro stations. Even when it comes to public areas, such as sidewalks and Gallery Place and things of that nature, I haven't had that many issues with them, there, but they've been known to actually show up, and they will ask if you have a permit to play at said place or what not. I believe they're telling people to go through **D.C cap now** to get a permit.

**AK:** And forgive me, this might be a little personal. Do you live strictly by busking? Is that how you primarily make your living?

**BG:** It kind of goes back and forth. The way I look at the busking, along with everything else that we do with it, it is a good opportunity to go out and advertise what I do with my instrument and a little bit of what I do via production. It's been... You know... It's been great. I started busking... I wanna say... two years ago, and through busking, I have landed some pretty amazing opportunities, that I feel... You know, I'm extremely grateful that I have been given these opportunities. The \_\_\_\_\_ foundation is definitely doing... You know... The Queen of Swedens event. That was a big deal for me. We did it this year as well, and that opportunity was given by busking, and I was busking not that far from the Swedish Embassy, when I had met **Makala Pratt**. She saw me and what I was doing, and she had actually brought me into do an audition and to introduce me to everybody. That was one of the biggest opportunities of my life that I'm always going to be grateful for. Even when I had met you, and you had introduced me, and you had told me about the Street Sense gala. You know, this is honest. I was just talking to somebody about the Street Sense gala, the other day, because I was like, "The impact that this can have over the years to come is amazing." Everything is wonderful, to be able to get the donations, to be able to handle my rent, to have enough, so that when I see someone who has a problem on the street, I can't give this person the world, but, at least I can give them enough so that they can go out and get something to eat, or maybe have two meals. I'm doing what I love, and I'm getting different opportunities, and it's all been a wonderful experience. So, I love busking. I love the events. I love the people that I've met, and more so, I would say this, I love the lesson and the enlightenment that I've gained from busking. **[Inspirational EDM starts playing]** Because, I'll tell you this, coming from an orchestral background... (fades away)

**AK:** (clears throat) Sorry to interrupt you Benjamin, but we're going to learn about that orchestral background in part two of this conversation. In this episode, Benjamin shared his perspective on the art of busking and the importance of community engagement. Next time, he's going to talk about arts education and the instrument that defines his musical life... the cello.

**BG:** When you hold an acoustic cello, and it's sitting against your sternum, and you're playing, you can feel all of the vibrations from the instrument against you, and that is, essentially, making me a part of the instrument.

**[ Inspiration EDM hits climax]**

**AK:** 'Till then, keep your ears open for Benjamin's cello. He's probably playing in a metro station near you, right now. Note, he may be wearing a horse mask, seriously. To hear more Sounds from the Street, check out <https://streetsense.org/audio> or find us on Soundcloud or the fantastic podcast app Stitcher. Soon, you'll be able to find us on iTunes. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter @streetsensedc .

Sounds from the Street theme song "I need a dollar. How to make it in America." Is performed by Aloe Blacc in the album "Good things", used curtesy of Stones Throw Records. The song was composed by Aloe Blacc, Leon Michels, and Nick Movshon, and Jeff Dynamite. Used by permission of Songs of Cobalt Music Publishing, EMI Blackwood Music Inc/Sony ATV. Expert of "Raindrops on ice" and other cello instrumentals by Benjamin Gates. Expert of "Upbeat" by Jon Luc Hefferman, from the album, "Production music", used curtesy of creative commons and Needledrop company and found on FMU's free music archive.

**BG:** I'm Benjamin Gates, and you're listening to Sounds from the Street.

**[EDM fades]**