



Tristan Silverman plays the guitar and sings for pedestrians alongside her dog, Tumbleweed, on Yonge Street in Toronto, Ont. “I did pretty good today,” she said after receiving a generous \$20 tip during her final song of the day. “That 20 really helped.”

Heart of the Street

PHOTOS+STORY BY CARLA ANTONIO

It was a cold, eerie feeling I had on the subway that day.

The awkward silence was deafening, the flickering fluorescent lights were unsettling, and the blank stares of the commuters were completely lifeless. It wasn't until I ascended the escalator at the Yonge-Bloor station, that my spirit was concurrently uplifted by the soaring sound of a piano.

There I found Dieufaite Charles, a.k.a. Jahfaa, a Haitian-born singer/songwriter, serenading the hurried commuters with his Yamaha keyboard and soulful voice.

I stepped back and watched as the numerous emotionless faces raced by, with the occasional moment of engagement between a passerby and Jahfaa's heart-felt performance.

Jahfaa is a full-time musician doing his best to earn a living at what he loves to do most.

The reality was evident – it's a tough gig.

“That's it for me,” he said. “Just music.”

The same can be said for acoustic guitar player and singer, Josh Garbe, whose powerfully projected vocals filled the entire Eglinton station with Blue Rodeo's, *Hasn't Hit Me Yet*, making him very easy to locate. Garbe stands against the bright orange tiled wall, strapped with a guitar, doing his best to make a living through music. Although, he would prefer to play venue shows, which he claims to be less “soul-sucking” than his subway station gigs.

“You get people like this walking pass you all the time, giving you dirty looks, saying mean things to you, and you're just trying to create good vibes,” said Garbe.

Despite the seemingly discontented passing com-

muters, a study conducted by the Toronto Transit Commission showed that 74 percent of customers favoured having subway music during the first run of the Subway Music Program, which began in 1979. Jahfaa and Garbe, like the 73 other TTC subway musicians, hold a special license that allows them to perform in designated spots that are marked by yellow dotted lines. They've been performing for the last two years with the permits they have obtained through a fairly complex and competitive process.

The TTC holds its Subway Musician Auditions once every three years and those selected are then offered a permit in exchange for a \$200 fee.

I suppose when considering the intricate process of getting in, it's no surprise that I encountered so many remarkably talented musicians during my subway-station hunt. However, being unaware at the time, my encounter with violinist David Rabinovich actually blew my mind.

I came across the older man, well-dressed in a beige sweater and matching fedora. He was packing up. However, when I approached him he was more than happy to continue playing.

“I have a repertoire of six hours of music at least,” he said with a thick Russian accent.

Rabinovich plays a stunning 150-year-old violin, that holds as much character as his mature face, and he plays it with pristine excellence. His rendition of *Ave Maria* nearly brought me to tears in the middle of the hectic and congested, ad-splattered subway station. His caliber of playing was of such high regard that I could have listened to him for hours.

Rabinovich, a Russian-born bee-keeper, violin teacher, and subway busker, believes it is important to

spread the arts throughout the more cultureless places in the community, like subway stations. Although he admits it's often frustrating to play on this “stage,” having played for over 60 years at the most reputable venues in Moscow. In the busking world, he must play what will engage the passing commuters, which isn't necessarily what he actually enjoys playing, and even then, it's tough to get their attention.

“Some of the children, they pull the parents,” he said.

“But the parents are like zombies and they pull the children away and I think, ‘why don't you stop for them?’ There's no obligation to pay. The obligation is for me to give fun. If I'm not doing that, then that's a problem.”

Perhaps in some cases the commuters genuinely don't have the time to stop and enjoy the music. Or maybe it's the general misconception people have about these buskers. Some mistake it for a form of panhandling while others argue that buskers are simply providing an art and staying put, leaving the choice to tip in the hands of the audience.

For this reason, busking can be an exceptional way for musicians to improve their skills, as they perform for what are likely the toughest crowds they will ever face.

Take Ben Roscoe for example, a busker I met outside of a fish store in Toronto's Kensington Market.

“I come out and busk more for practice than anything else,” he said.

Roscoe performed adaptations of classic blues ballads and folk songs, equipped with an acoustic guitar and harmonica and dressed to suit in a flat cap and fingerless gloves. I could tell he'd been busking for a

while. He was a pro at making eye contact and engaging the passing pedestrians.

Roscoe's first-ever busk was accidental. When he was eight years old he played violin in the Youth Symphony Orchestra of Orillia. He was in a park, showing a friend a new song he had learned, when a passerby threw a quarter in his case.

“I was like, ‘I just got paid to play music,’” he said in a surprised, childish tone.

Once he realized the potential money to be made, he went to the farmer's market to try and make some tips. Roscoe now works as a full-time arborist, but has been busking ever since. He says he found it was exceptionally useful when he travelled through Europe, as any barriers can always be broken with the universal language of music.

“My favourite thing when I'm travelling is that I don't need to know anybody. I get off a bus or a plane or wherever I am and I just go and play and I meet people and I make some money and something happens.”

Roscoe's theories made complete sense to me as I walked away, through the busy Sunday streets of Kensington market. I thought about what he must've looked like busking at eight years old and it reminded me of B.B. King's story, who also started as a child, busking on the streets of Mississippi for change.

After three days of exploring the busker community in the bustling metropolis of Toronto, there was one thing I knew for sure. The buskers are putting themselves out there and undoubtedly bringing a sense of the arts and expression to the communities. I think they deserve a round of applause. **For more images visit: <http://www.carlaantonio.com/stories/#/buskers/>**



Ben Roscoe performs a blues ballad in Kensington Market in Toronto. When asked what he likes about the gig he said, “I like everything about it. I just love playing music.”



Busking musician Haruka Nishide performs a rendition of *Daydream Believer* by The Monkees in the city. Nishide is busking in hopes of earning enough money to go back to his native Japan.



Violinist David Rabinovich is a Russian-born bee-keeper, violin teacher, and subway busker, who believes it is important to spread the arts throughout the more cultureless places in the community.