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## A New Sound for Downtown

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Matthew TeRonde has been a street musician since the early 1980s, when he was in college at the University of Montana. He used to play to make enough tips to pay for an evening out with his wife. Now the full-time laboratory technician enjoys playing in public because it's more relaxed and spontaneous. *Photo Submitted*

After an accident nearly severed Bill Melton's thumb and threatened his music career last August, the fifth-generation musician is strumming again, only this time he's looking to play on the streets of Des Moines.

"I just got enough mobility to play now and I feel like there's this big void in my life. [Music] is important to me, a great gift that I need to share, and I want to share it as much as I can," said Melton, who plays five instruments and is part of Home Grown Tomatoes, a band that regularly plays at the Downtown Farmers Market. "Busking is a new venue and opportunity to do that."

Melton is one of a handful of artists to register with the city of Des Moines to be able to busk - perform on public property such as streets and skywalk bridges - after the city council made last August's temporary ordinance permanent at its Dec. 4 meeting. Although businesses and artists initially seem supportive of the ordinance, which aspires to make Des Moines more "urban," a few hurdles may stand in the way of busking taking off.

Ten to 12 musicians applied for permits during a trial run last fall, said Steve Gunson, deputy director of the Des Moines Community Development Department, who also is the staff support for the Des Moines Music Commission. Eight have signed up this year and he expects the pace to pick up as the weather warms up enough for musicians to play outside. So far, he said, he has not heard any complaints from the police department or the city clerk's office.

"I think [busking] just adds some color and vibrancy and obviously entertainment value to the streets of Des Moines and business centers like the Beaverdale and Drake neighborhoods," he said.

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### Define

busker (BUS-kur), n.: A person who entertains or performs in public places.

Des Moines is not the only city recognizing the value of having street performers.

Stephen Baird, founder and executive director of Community Arts Advocates, a Boston-based non-profit organization that strives to support buskers and other artists by working on relationships between artists and their communities, said many cities are recognizing a need for street performers. Detroit, for example, is hiring street performers as part of a community development project, and San Diego has spent a quarter-million dollars on its street-performing program, he said.

"Laws get overly restrictive and take the life right out of downtown," Baird said, referring to ordinances that prohibit busking. "Then all of a sudden, [city officials] are saying, 'Why is no one coming?'"

The complaints Baird hears usually relate to noise levels and when performances take place. He also said some retail stores may complain that street performers cause customers to gravitate outdoors rather than come into their stores, but in the long run, Baird said, busking continues to bring people back to an area. A study of Nathaniel Hall, a well-known hub for street performers in Boston, found that buskers were the No. 1 reason residents came to the area.

"If you allow street performers and vendors and really make it an urban experience, it becomes a community identity where a lot of community decisions are made," he said. "People meet each other in the streets. You want that mixture."

So far, Des Moines businesses seem receptive to busking as part of a larger goal to create a more urban setting downtown.

Mike Draper, owner of Smash in the East Village and chair of the East Village retail promotions committee, said the committee has someone in charge of recruiting musicians to play on the district's street corners starting this spring. He believes the sound will attract more attention to the retail district, including from people who stay at the Embassy Suites on the River and may not know the East Village is nearby.

"It's just another thing to set the neighborhood apart from suburban shopping centers," he said.

Mike Utley, general manager of Court Avenue Restaurant & Brewing Co. and chair of the Court Avenue Association, agrees that busking will distinguish downtown Des Moines from other areas of the city, but believes it will affect the atmosphere of downtown more than attracting people to the area.

"I think when people are downtown," he said, "it will be a unique and enjoyable experience for them. ... It will make it different and give it a more urban feel, which I think is what everybody has been shooting for and working towards for the past number of years."

He added that some businesses are concerned about the hours musicians can play and the noise level, but the music commission was good about listening to issues and putting some restrictions in the ordinance, such as not allowing musicians to use sound amplifying equipment without obtaining a permit and restricting them to the hours between 9 a.m. and 11 p.m.

Although most businesses have been receptive to the new ordinance, Ben Washburn, president of the Downtown Neighborhood Association and sales manager for American Abstract & Title Co., said the concept is still too new to know its impact. But he expects it will help downtown feel more connected, making the walk from place to place more enjoyable.

Artists also are interested in how the initiative will take off.

Matthew TeRonde, a 30-year musician currently living in Madrid, Iowa, and working for Midland

Bioproducts Corp. in Boone, already has had experience busking in other cities and plays at farmers markets around Central Iowa. "I just love playing on the street because it's so loose and informal," he said.

TeRonde, who plays folk-type music with the guitar and harmonica, expects he will play on weekend evenings around the Court Avenue and Fourth Street intersection and along the Principal Riverwalk when the weather warms.

But as much as TeRonde is excited about the new ordinance, he worries that some street musicians might try to use busking as a way to make money and become aggressive in soliciting tips from people passing by. He compares busking to fishing, saying that sometimes you can make around \$100 in two hours or can play for four hours and make only \$5.

"Musicians have to police themselves," he said. "They have to understand why the city of Des Moines is allowing us to do this. It is allowing us to add ambience down there and we have to behave ourselves."

Mark Movic, who recently retired from Principal Financial Group Inc. and whose bluegrass band, Ortonville Circus, played at the corner of Fourth Street and Court Avenue and outside the Temple for Performing Arts last year, said his band finds busking is good practice rather than a source for money.

"We're not really out there necessarily for the exposure and certainly not out there for the money," he said. "There's not a lot of that."

Melton, who works full time for NationJob Inc., a Des Moines-based employment resource company on the Internet, agrees. When living in Colorado, he received phenomenal tips while playing in public, he said, but people in Des Moines seem more leery about supporting street artists.

"[People in Des Moines] need to appreciate what that performer is doing," Melton said. "It's not easy. Even the average player playing basic guitar, it takes a lot of practice and courage."

Another challenge buskers may face, according to Melton and Movic, is knowing where they can play. TeRonde said he hopes police are respectful of buskers who may be playing in the wrong areas as the initiative takes off and he also hopes musicians will be respectful of businesses they're playing in front of by talking with the owners beforehand.

One thing Melton and TeRonde are not concerned about, however, is the mixing of experienced and less experienced artists. "I just think overall it's a very positive step for Des Moines," Melton said, "and will encourage a lot of younger ones just getting started.

"Busking is just a very small first step, but it could have a tidal-wave effect. It's educating people on live music."

TeRonde agrees, recalling how he has watched Des Moines transform from a "cow town" with no class in the late 1970s, when he first moved here, to a more vibrant city.

"Over the past decade, the city has done so much to bring some culture back to the heart of the city. I'm really optimistic. I think having some street musicians there will really add some cool ambience to the downtown. It's another step for a long line of good changes in Des Moines."