

By Amy Blaney

Nicole strummed lightly on her guitar, feeling out the cords with her fingertips. Her husky deep voice sung a melody before it slowly filled the room. Nicole had invited me into her home, where I sat patiently on a blanket-covered couch in front of a warm open fire.

Nicole Bleu has been busking in Galway for 12 years and is now the leader of the Galway Busking community. Many know her just by sight and sound. The thick black frames of her glasses and rustic perm give her a unique appearance. Busking is her life and her main source of income.

Nicole loves the intimacy of it, the democracy, the complete equality of busking and the human exchange when someone throws a smile and a bit of change.

She describes busking as a “spiritual exchange that exists outside commodification, outside the buying, selling and pushing of the modern age”.

In January, after years of debate, Galway City Council introduced strict regulations on the city’s buskers. Nicole tells me the bylaws are having a devastating effect on the busking community, and a lot of people still don’t know what they entail. The most pressing concern for many is the issue of amplification. The bylaws prevent any kind of amplification or backing track before 6pm.

“On the surface, this sounds fine, but some people need amps to be heard, like anyone with softer voices or with electric instruments. After 6pm, there are only a few viable spots and busking is only allowed until 10pm legally.

“That leaves four hours over three or four good spots to be split amongst 30 odd buskers with two-hour slots each. Everyone needs to make a living”, says Nicole.

“People like me will be out of a job. I used to busk with no amp, and I lost my voice. Not because of other buskers, but because of trying to be heard above the din of the city, the traffic, and the music blaring outside shops and pubs.

“My voice is my income. All we’ll have left during the day will be those who can shout above the city noises and loud instruments like banjos, bagpipes, brass, and accordions”, says Nicole.

An upside-down hat or guitar case lying flat at the feet of a performer is the synonymous image of a busker. Some full, some empty, they eagerly perform to make a living. As the city walks by, flinging spare change into a case, the clinking of coins mounts to a day’s work. Busking is not a 9-5 job with a set wage. Instead, it is unpredictable and lies in favour of the people.

Nicole pays taxes, she is officially self-employed as a sole trader but says the bylaws have significantly reduced her ability to work. “I usually busk up to six hours a day, with breaks. I have made €300 in that amount of time, and I have made as little as €3,” says Nicole.

To Nicole and her community, the most frightening bylaw, and the one most open to abuse is the bylaw that says, no busker shall do, say, or sing anything that could cause alarm, distress or offense to anyone.

“That’s really bothersome because they do not define what those things might be. Anyone could claim to be alarmed, distressed or offended over literally anything. I’ve had people say they will claim to be offended just to get rid of buskers they don’t like”, says Nicole.

Before the bylaws came into effect, dancers, magicians, circle acts and musicians lined the cobblestone street to entertain pedestrians. It was a frequent occurrence for shoppers, passer-byes, families, and locals to gather and admire the talent. Sometimes only for a few seconds, the lively music would distract and draw in a crowd.

This has come to an abrupt end. As it stands, the bylaws say a street performer must immediately cease a performance in circumstances where a crowd has gathered thereby stopping the movement of pedestrians.

Nicole says this law has been detrimental to the community and has been criticised as vague.

“It doesn’t say stop for how long, it doesn’t define what a crowd is and unfortunately, I think the vagueness of that law leaves it open to wide abuse by people who want to get the buskers off the street”, says Nicole.

Aneta Dortova is a traditional dancer from the Czech Republic. The backdrop of colourful pubs and the sounds of her heels tapping on the cobblestones provide the perfect backdrop for her long fiery red hair.

She has danced in Galway for four years, and since the bylaws have been introduced, she has become a focus of attention. Through no fault of her own, crowds gather around Aneta to watch and admire her traditional dance.

“Because the bylaws are so vague, I don’t know what will happen. I might gather a crowd of 10 people, and I could be fined for that. If you gather a crowd you have to stop the performance, which is nonsense,” she says.

Galway City Council has been criticised for destroying the city’s vibrant culture and following the lead of other major European cities that have placed restrictions on their buskers.

“Galway will be like other European cities with no busking”, says Aneta.

“I have friends who used to busk in Prague, which used to have a very vibrant busking scene, and they stopped it all. They brought in the same laws and now there’s nothing, just silence”, she added.

Dusty is a Canadian cellist from Victoria, British Columbia, who moved to Galway in 2018. He says he moved to Galway for the vibrant busking scene, and because there was no law against amps.

He says, “in Victoria, a similar law was brought in and it has killed the busking scene. All the buskers have either moved away or stopped playing on the streets”.

Now that this law has been implemented, he says, “it’s really sad, and I will probably move on this year, to somewhere where that law doesn’t exist”.

In a fight to stop the introduction of the bylaws, the community held four 12 hours protests called “big busks”, followed by smaller ones and started a petition which gathered over 10,000 signatures.

On the 14th December, the community organised a large protest through the city which they called the “Wake Walk”, described as a funeral march for the state of street-culture in Galway. Nevertheless, Galway City Council went forward and implemented the bylaws on January 2nd. The community insists they will continue to fight for their freedom of expression in Galway City.

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