

Music: A Unifying Force

As told by Central Park's Talent. Will you stop and tip?

By Arelys Perez April 20, 2018



Gregory Benny - Photo Courtesy of Ruth Ann Vazquez

NEW YORK- There's one thing that helps people overcome hardships. Music. Whether it is moving out of broken homes, shelters, or even jail; music unites. For most street musicians performing isn't just their livelihood it's their life. Music acts as a ***unifying force*** not only to pay rent but to survive.

The heat is making its way back to the big apple with tourists flocking to the city's main attractions. According to "New York Journey", Central Park has over 25 million people visitors a year, making it the most popular park in the United States. Behind the elegant scenery with blossoming trees and scurrious squirrels are gifted artists, giving life to the otherwise ordinary park.

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Eyes glued to screens, fast-paced and always in a hurry. As New Yorkers, it can be easy to overlook and even avoid eye contact with street performers. Maybe you don't have the time or spare change. Most performers aren't even noticed let alone acknowledged. The artistry and stories behind these gifted musicians will make you think twice as you sprint by. The talent on the streets aren't just there for the money. Individual's raw talent inhibits the streets consistently begging to be noticed.

It's 8:00 am in Central Park. The early morning sun radiates on an unusually warm day. Gregory Benny, a 40-year-old Brooklyn native, carries all 225 pounds of his drum set. The drums were a gift from his late mother he received when he was a vibrant young boy. He slowly carries the drums to the wooden bench next to an art maker, the spot he has played at every day for 28 years. The worn down drums patiently sit, with pealing drumheads, withering paint and a snare bouncing hit after hit. His shirt is navy blue with a biblical passage, one he has followed since he was a young boy in church. In front of his drum set, alongside spare change, lays a small box with a blue heart.

For Benny, music is all he knows growing with music in the atmosphere. Benny received his drum set when he was five-years-old as a present from his late mother. "I had come back from a barbecue and my mother said: 'I have a surprise for you go in the backyard'. There were the drums set up. I loved it. All of my brothers played. We were 10 kids, five boys and five girls, the girls sang and the boys played. I never let go of the drum set until I got in trouble."

Benny spent eight years in prison leaving behind his children, parents and beloved drums. He speaks of the time without any pain but with depth saying, "when you get in trouble, you sit there and you're like 'dang I wish I never did it'. If I knew back then, what I know, I could've been a better person. Not only for me but for my kids."

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Gregory Benny and Utril Rhaburn - Photo Courtesy of Ruth Ann Vazquez

Benny had hit rock bottom and asked himself: “alright lord, what do I do?” Music led him to turn a new leaf leaving his violent past behind. “I came to the park and set up in front of the bench and I made \$2,500 in one day and I said ‘oh no I’m gonna do every day!’ No more robbing, no more beating people in the head and taking theirs, Imma earn it my way. Sometimes you gotta learn to earn” Benny proclaimed.

Benny now plays with Utril Rhaburn, a saxophone player he met 6 months ago. They quickly connected through music combining the contrasting but complementary sounds of the drums and saxophone. Both men left their turbulent pasts and unified through their music.

Rhaburn faced a handful of near-death experiences which eventually led to an ignited passion of the saxophone. “Growing up getting into car crashes and all these other different things I feel like it’s a part of life. Once you’re here to see another day that means your purpose isn’t fulfilled yet. You have to keep chasing what it is you’re here for.”

“You can’t go to jail for beating drum heads but you can go to jail for beating human heads.”

Music acted as a unifying force in Benny’s life helping him find his way back to humanity and to Rhaburn. He was able to step away from his past life and from being on the wrong side of the law. Through music he came back to good society.

Benny concludes, “Drumming helped me stay focused it helped me grow through my music and make me stronger get me positive no negativity can come into a positive shrine. You can’t go to jail for beating drum heads but you can go to jail for beating human heads. Don’t plan on stopping, not till god lay me to rest.”

Music brought Benny closer with his religion. He grew up in church with his preacher father helping him form a love for gospel music.

“He always looked up when he played letting me know he was looking to the hills.”

The last time Benny saw his father was before going to jail.

“I came home from jail to my mother and father passed away.”



Carlos Koris - Photo Courtesy of Ruth Ann Vazquez

Under a short bridge, a guitar playing Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love" fills the aging architecture. The music echoes slowly bouncing from wall to wall. An elderly couple slow dances, a mother weeps and holds her son close to her and a man named Carlos Koris strums his guitar. He wears a simple gray hat, a grey polyester jacket and withered brown shoes.

Koris is an immigrant from Chile who came to New York with a dream 25 years ago. Music has been therapy for him with classical music making him feel closer to home. Koris united with his roots through playing music often seeing himself in the young children dancing as he plays. He has been performing in Central Park for four years and translates his passion for music into dance by teaching a salsa nearby.

Koris grins as he recalls receiving his first guitar as a present, "When I was 13 years old I picked up a guitar. It was a gift from my family. I enjoy the process of learning classical music. I studied with a teacher in Chile and came to New York to study music."

As a young boy, he didn't think about his long-term future plans, he was simply present and in the moment. He recollects, "That's the key, be in the moment and be responsible for what you are doing. If you are studying music you have to practice practice practice and then something will come out of it."

Playing on the streets is anything from lavish and most musicians aspire for much more. For Koris, music is not a job but a gift. "It's hard if you only focus on money and you don't focus on quality." He glances down at his guitar and adds, "If you focus on being good at what you do

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you'll survive. It depends on what kind of life you wanna have. If you're too materialistic music is not gonna suit your lifestyle."

"Live life simple because that makes life easier."

Koris' passion for music has given him wisdom and unified him with his culture. He advises, "Whatever you do, you have to enjoy what you are doing and then do it with a passion. Whether it's writing or computers just anything as long as it makes your life better. And live life simple because that makes life easier.



Marcin Wisniewski and Dwayne Beach - Photo Courtesy of Ruth Ann Vazquez

Past the bridge by a tall grey fountain are two musicians: a violinist and a guitar player. They both wear black, one masks his eyes with sunglasses and they both wear contagious smiles. They notice my eyes glued to them and quickly change their song. They play an upbeat and fast-paced melody, one that makes you feel like you should finish that book you started writing and work on just about anything. Their bodies move up and down with each note, their eyes look everywhere and their smiles continue to radiate. It's hard to interrupt them as they leave the audience begging for more performing song after song.

Guitarist Marcin Wisniewski and violinist Dwayne Beach, have been gracing Central Park with their ambiance for 3 years. For them, music has brought them together in hopes of shining their bright lights onto visitors. The duo laughs and reminisces about playing together for close to 10 years. They met at music school and now perform at the park for quick cash.

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Beach and Wisniewski have mastered the streets quickly adapting their music to their surroundings in order to gage a crowd. “We try to look for cues of what people are into. If somebody is looking at you while you’re playing then you’re doing something right. We change our music based on shirts, how someone is dressed like and who they’re with” articulates Wisniewski.

Both men started playing at age 12. ‘I was like ‘I wanna play Metallica’ so that was my thing. I was at somebody’s house and they inspired me to play. They had a guitar and they were gonna throw it out and I was like ‘I’ll take it’. I stuck with it and kept playing” Wisniewski recalls.

For Beach, it was a different story remembering, “I started playing at 12 and I hated it with a passion because I sucked.” He laughs and adds, “I was like ‘oh man what do I do with this thing?’ But in college, I was like ‘oh I’m pretty darn good, let me see where this goes’ and I finished with a master’s degree in performance and I’m very satisfied with that.”

Music school is certainly not every parent’s dream for their child as it is not a ‘safe’ or ‘conventional’ job. Beach contemplated entering business or law and then completely ditched the idea and followed his dream. “It’s that weird placement musicians go through, it’s the struggle of their families and within themselves to figure out what direction to go in.” He pauses and continues, “The blessing behind it is that if you go into a teaching realm, we have this unusual talent that we can name our own prices for. That’s a cool thing.”

Musicians often struggle with whether to pursue music academically with fears that they would then be put into a box. Wisniewski recollects, “Music school helped me a lot but in a way, it also put me in a box. It puts you in this mindset that this is what music is, this is how music is created, and this is how music functions etc. But in reality, it’s not all like that because everybody views music in a different way and they have different aspirations of what to do with that music.”

Are music schools an investment or constricting? Does it unify an artist or create a wedge? Wisniewski ponders, “I have a love-hate kinda thing with music school because I did kinda enjoy but it also made me hate music at times. So it’s really weird because I was taking lessons and



Dwayne Beach - Photo Courtesy of Ruth Ann Vazquez

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working on all this difficult music that was antiquated and basically useless.” He felt frustrated with some of the material learned, “I spent 4,000 hours of my life learning the music of bak, which I love but like, who wants to hear bak in this park?”

“We’re at the rock bottom so there’s no more place to go but forward.”

Even though both students have master degrees in performing they still struggle to make ends meet. The duo stays optimistic knowing that music has brought them together for a purpose.

Beach expresses, “I think there’s only upwards. We’re at the rock bottom so there’s no more place to go but forward so I could hope we could perform at some huge arenas, some big concert venues throughout, internationally, nationally, whoever, there are no limits. It’s all about business.”

While life has many pitfalls the one thing that has the capability to untie individuals is music. Musicians take their hopeless devotion of their craft to the streets to grow, flourish and create unparalleled ambiances. Music has helped individuals move away from toxic upbringings and towards good society.

Young or old, musicians in New York City will, without fail, find a way to be heard and create their own stages wherever they play.

Music unifies, money doesn’t. And also, don’t forget to tip.

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