

Downtown Miami Hosts a Moveable Fest

Written by Adam Schachner -- BT Contributor
December 2013

All aboard the Metromover. Next stop, buskers!



Miami's free Metromover, the electric rail system that covers a 4.4-mile loop of downtown, is a charming way to get around, but each time I've hopped one, I've felt that something was missing -- really, all I need to make my ride perfect is a gypsy jazz guitarist playing like Django Reinhardt. Is that so much to ask?

Apparently, I'm not alone in my wish for some entertainment along the way.

On Friday, December 13, Miami's first Buskerfest (buskers being street performers) will feature musical performances at each of the eight inner-loop Metromover station stops. With the Metromover cars taking less than three minutes between stops, there's a lot of opportunity to visit each station.

In addition, people will be able to linger here and there, and enjoy neighborhood businesses, dining spots, and watering holes.

Buskerfest begins at 5:00 p.m., with local bands performing 45-minute sets at the various stops. Visitors will receive "passports" that contain a map and schedule information. (There'll also be a mobile app, with the same information, for those with smartphones.) At each station they can collect passport "stamps"; those with the most stamps will be entered for raffle prizes from

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downtown restaurants and businesses at the evening's closing, which takes place at Bayfront Park.

Performances will reportedly represent a cross-section of Miami's undiscovered and emerging talent. The map and schedule will launch one week before the event, according to organizers. Playing off the busker tradition of impromptu performance, they're keeping a tight lid on who's playing where in order to encourage festivalgoers to be surprised by what they find.

Performers will be competing in their own "battle of the bands" as audiences vote on their favorite groups. The top three groups will receive free studio time or discounts on instruments and instrument repairs.

At 9:00 p.m., when Buskerfest moves to Bayfront Park, the evening will culminate in a performance by the Spam Allstars at the Tina Hills Pavilion. The Allstars' self-stylized (and signature) electronic *descarga* mixes jazz spontaneity with Latin groove in a manner that defies description: You'll know when you hear it because you can't help dancing.

The event is the brainchild of Whereby.Us, which describes itself as an "open community group that brainstorms, designs, and executes small projects that make our ridiculous wonderful city a better place to live and play." Organizers obtained grant money and support from Awesome Foundation, the Downtown Development Authority, Downtown Miami Partnership Inc., I.D. Art, Emerge Miami, and the New World Symphony. (Miami's is just one of many busker festivals that take place around the world; the website Busker Central showcases these events throughout the year.)

An art competition led up to Miami's BuskerFest, with calls for area visual artists and designers to craft a logo and publicity poster; the work of winner Fabio Perez and runner-up Eric Karbeling can be seen at Buskerfest website, buskerfestmiami.com.

Miami has had its share of music festivals, but there's something special about the philosophy that inspired Buskerfest. Built around free public transit and the vision of a walkable downtown, the event is a nod to Miami's city center and a call to fill its sparse nighttime streets.

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Justin Triegeer, one of Buskerfest's organizers and New World Symphony multimedia program designer, sees the festival as a way to showcase the downtown's nighttime potential through artistic offerings and the businesses and organizations that make it up. "How do we get downtown active after dark?" he asks.

Triegeer's organizational inspiration stems from his experience living in a downtown high-rise. There's a disconnect that comes from inhabiting close quarters yet sharing limited contact, he says, and it can be stifling. "It's bizarre that you can have 1200 people in a building, but only a handful know each other. There needs to be some energy coming from the community to pull professionals and creatives back to Miami, rather than shuffling them off to more vibrant cities."

The ambition behind Buskerfest also illuminates the belief that downtown is on its way to something special. The population is increasing, the draw to live there is intensifying -- now it needs the special touches to make people want to *be* there.

"The event is an opportunity to engage the many young professionals who work and live in the area, or come to the area for entertainment," says Sonja Bogensperger of the Downtown Development Authority. The DDA chose Buskerfest as one of seven grant recipients that are sponsoring projects to inject activity into downtown's cultural affairs.

There's a need, she adds, to "focus on the use of public transportation, local arts, and culture, and appeal to the key population demographics of downtown Miami."

Amid the renaissance of isolated neighborhoods, such as Wynwood, the challenge is to make downtown Miami a destination of its own accord. There are pockets of activity in our city center, but its fragmented layout inhibits movement between attractions. The beauty in Buskerfest is that it encourages meandering, drawing attention to Miami's easy transit as well as to its music.

"The reason for hosting the performances at Metromover sites was to facilitate traveling around quickly for access to diverse performers," Triegeer says, "and to make it easy to explore businesses close to the stops. The organizers enjoy public transit -- we appreciate what it allows people in urban areas to do, and we wanted to use this event to introduce people who are unfamiliar with [public transit] and celebrate the regular use of facilities."

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Andrew "DJ Le Spam" Yeomanson of the Spam Allstars recalls that his first paid gig was on the corner of NE 2nd Avenue and 1st Street, in 1995. "We got hired to play on the corner across from the Wolfson," he says.

His appreciation for gigging downtown reflects the cultural mixtures in his music. "As you move around Miami, the demographics tend to shift and change," he adds. "Downtown you've got the homeless guy and the real estate tycoon. It's important that we experience each other. That's what Miami is about. I really like downtown for that reason."

At its heart, Buskerfest is an homage to downtown as a space exemplifying Miami's character. The sense that our city center verges on a cultural boom should remind us that it has always hosted creative icons. In many ways, Buskerfest won't just innovate downtown attractions -- it will bring some home.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com