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'I'm back': Beaten street musician can play again

By MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE Staff Reporter

Disabled busker Devlin Kerry not only relies on an inventive guitar-strumming device to make music for spare change, it also turns out the spinning gizmo is a conversation piece.



The street performer sees the battery-operated mechanism as a godsend. To an observer, it's an intriguing way to assist a self-taught guitarist who can't strum or fingerpick anymore.

To Mr. Kerry, it means much more.

"I'm back," he said Friday outside the Halifax library on Spring Garden Road.

Mr. Kerry was almost killed in a beating in Halifax in 2004. The unseen attackers who jumped him were never caught.

Now 48 and living on a disability pension, Mr. Kerry has a brain injury as a result of the mugging — he also spent 10 days in a coma — and has lost the use of his right arm and leg.

But that doesn't mean he can't sit in his electric wheelchair and play a six-string acoustic guitar.

The way the strumming device works is, by any measure, entirely logical and functional. A small wooden wheel with three guitar picks inserted in it, spaced apart and facing the strings, is fastened to his guitar and spins clockwise at a speed controlled by Mr. Kerry.



Devlin Kerry plays his guitar on Spring Garden Road in Halifax on Friday. (Peter Parsons / Staff)

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While the wheel is turning and guitar picks are contacting the strings, he uses his left hand to form chords on the neck of his instrument. Mr. Kerry said he has been practising with the wheel all winter but has only recently resumed busking.

Mr. Kerry of Halifax said several people who have put money in his wheelchair container have stopped to ask about the strumming aid. A demonstration, which included a few bars of the Band's The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down, showed a reporter the thing works like a charm.

The custom-designed mechanism was invented by Jean-Louis Gratton, a 31-year-old engineer. Mr. Kerry said he saw it used on a local TV show in 2005 while in hospital recovering from his injuries, and the two men got together to talk about building another one.

Asked if Mr. Gratton is a friend, Mr. Kerry replied, smiling: "He is now."

Mr. Gratton volunteers for the Halifax chapter of the Tetra Society of North America, an organization that recruits engineers and technicians to create special devices for people with disabilities. He said he has improved the strumming wheel since a prototype was developed.

"Originally, the picks were 90 degrees," Mr. Gratton said of the angle the guitar picks were positioned. "But it doesn't really give you very good sound. It tends to bite the strings a lot. Now, they're roughly 45 degrees."

Mr. Kerry said he intends to be out busking pretty much every day, as long as it doesn't rain. He and Mr. Gratton said water will likely damage the strumming mechanism on the guitar.

Though a victim of chilling violence, a crime for which the perpetrators have escaped punishment, Mr. Kerry is not bitter. He acknowledged he'd love to see the attackers arrested and prosecuted but is philosophical about his ordeal.

"I don't care," Mr. Kerry told The Chronicle Herald, saying he's just glad Mr. Gratton's gizmo has helped resurrect his busking. "I really don't. I have to live the rest of my life."

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“My grandfather once told me that there were two kinds of people: Those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was much less competition. ”

Indira Gandhi

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