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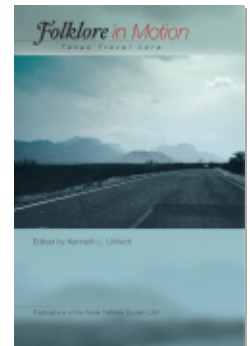
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RAIL REMEMBRANCES: THE TRAIN IN FOLK MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

by L. Patrick Hughes



If you've ever heard the whistle of a fast freight train beating out a beautiful tune,
If you've ever seen the cold on the railroad tracks shining in the silvery moon,
If you've ever felt a locomotive shake the ground then I know you don't need to be told,
Why I'm goin' down to the railroad tracks to watch them lonesome boxcars roll.

Butch Hancock, "Boxcars"

Without question, the coming of the railroads was one of the most revolutionarily transformative events in the history of the United States and the American people. Seen as a prerequisite to both the conquest of the Far West and the realization of the national goal of industrialization, privately owned and operated railroad companies received financial subsidization from government at all levels in the form of land grants, loans, and tax incentives. The faster, cheaper, and more reliable transportation the railroads represented resulted in the subjugation of the Native American, the settlement of the Great Plains, and the exploitation of the region's cornucopia of raw materials and natural resources. Gold and silver, bison and longhorns, grain and cotton flowed outward as settlers and manufactured goods from far beyond the horizon flooded in. Silver rails connected factories with consumers and the city with the countryside.

Demographically, America changed as well. Cities sprung into being from nothingness on sites that had served as construction camps. Towns bypassed by the lines shriveled up and disappeared as residents fled for locations that had won rail service. In the long run, the roads transformed frontier outposts such as Dallas and

Fort Worth into great inland transportation hubs and bustling metropolises. Capable of heretofore unheard-of speeds of twenty, thirty, and more miles an hour, the railroads in a figurative sense shrank the world. The physical isolation of Americans one from another became a thing of the past as the frontier vanished and a more modern age began.

The golden age of the railroads has, of course, long since passed. In the aftermath of World War II, millions of American travelers, taking advantage of the new interstate system of super-highways, abandoned trains for private automobiles. Jet airliners winging coast-to-coast at speeds bordering on the supersonic siphoned off most of the rest. Denied its profitable passenger base, the industry refocused, restructured, and resigned itself to the hauling of freight. Amtrak's meager offerings notwithstanding, those of a new century wishing to experience their grandfather's "magic carpet ride" must avail themselves of tourist attractions such as the Texas State Railroad, the Cumbres and Toltec, or the Durango and Silverton excursion trains. In the words of Texas tunesmith Steve Fromholtz, for most Americans "the train just don't stop here anymore."

While the railroads are today but a shadow of their former selves, no form of transportation has had a more profound and enduring impact upon folk memory and imagination as expressed in the songs of the people. Compositions featuring boats and planes are few and far between. Automobiles enjoyed a heyday in popular music when, in the early-to-mid sixties, postwar baby boomers simultaneously reached the age of dating and driving. The shelf life of tunes such as "Little Deuce Coupe," "409," and "Hey Little Cobra," however, proved exceedingly brief—atop the charts one day, unheard thereafter. Railroad songs, by contrast, have been one of the most enduring topics in the music of the people, most particularly in the fields of country, folk, and the blues.

Perhaps it was the sights and sounds of the gargantuan mechanical beast that first produced Americans' fascination with the "iron horse." Whether standing still or in motion, steam-powered locomotives belching smoke and cinders were an awe-

some sight to behold for young and old alike. The sounds were no less impressive. The chug of the exhaust, the clatter of the side-rods, the soothing clickity-clack of the wheels on the rail joints, and the blast of the lonesome whistle rolling for miles across the countryside all left an indelible imprint on the memory. While grown-ups, forced by society's norms to behave as adults, fought to hide their inner glee at the sight of a train, children faced no such encumbrance. Their unbridled pleasure manifested itself in numerous ways: counting passing freight cars at every grade crossing, inducing engineers to acknowledge their presence with a toot of the engine whistle, and placing coins on the rails to be flattened as thin as a sheet of paper. If the truth be told, parents enabled and took vicarious enjoyment in all such rituals. They also passed along to each succeeding generation their fascination with and love of trains in song.

Legendary trains of fact and fiction represent a major subset of the larger genre. Examples are numerous: Steve Goodman's "The City of New Orleans," Ervin T. Rouse's "Orange Blossom Special," and Huddie Ledbetter's "Rock Island Line" are but three. None, however, is rooted deeper in public memory than "Wabash Cannonball." An imaginary train running "from the great Atlantic Ocean to the wide Pacific shore," it had been a staple of rural musicians' repertoire for a full four decades before being copyrighted by A. P. Carter in the latter twenties. It was, however, Roy Acuff's 1936 recording that transformed the song into an American standard. So popular was the Vocalion release that the Wabash system sought to capitalize on the hit recording, renaming its Detroit-to-St. Louis express "The Cannonball." Rail executives must have thanked their lucky stars decade after decade each time Acuff called upon WSM's Grand Ole Opry audience to "listen to the jingle, the rumble, and the roar" of the mythical train.

Composers and musicians from the beginning found rail tragedies a veritable goldmine of new material. Early train travel was risky, with derailments and collisions all too common occurrences. For engineers, firemen, brakemen, and other employees, the danger was ever-present and death a very real possibility.

Leycester Hughes of San Antonio was but one of countless fatalities. The grandfather I never knew perished when two International and Great Northern trains met head-on six miles north of Jewett, Texas, in 1930.

In death, other railroaders found immortality in song. Blamed not for the foolhardiness that most often led them prematurely to their maker, engineers trying to “bring ’er in on time” are almost always lionized. Such was the case with Casey Jones in 1900. Inheriting an Illinois Central locomotive out of Memphis running two hours behind schedule, he’d made up all but two minutes before crashing into a stalled freight outside Vaughn, Mississippi. He lives on, however, in “The Ballad of Casey Jones,” performed through the years by artists as varied as Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers on the one hand and the Grateful Dead on the other.

Perhaps Jones shares cab duties on the glory train with Joseph Broady. Commemorated in “Wreck of the Old 97,” Broady was piloting a late-running mail train out of Monroe, Virginia, in September 1903 when tragedy struck:

He was goin’ down the grade making 90 miles an hour,
When his whistle broke into a scream,
They found him in the wreck with his hand on the throttle,
Scalded to death by the steam.

Had it not been for David George’s ballad and recorded performances by Vernon Dalhart, Mac Wiseman, Johnny Cash, and others across the decades, perhaps Broady would have been yet another statistic. The song and, more importantly, its resonance with Americans of the twentieth century ensured that his leap off a curved trestle that September day would remain an enduring part of folk memory.

Fueled by wanderlust, a certain breed of American had roamed the nation since its very inception. The advent of the train, however, allowed such individuals the ability to travel further, faster, and more widely than ever before. Some simply enjoyed the lifestyle. Others took to the rails only when economic circumstances left

them no alternative. The freight-hopping hobo in search of work and sustenance was never more prevalent than in the thirties at the depths of the Great Depression. It comes as no surprise then that he is a major theme of the era's musical record. Harry McClintock's "Big Rock Candy Mountain," Woody Guthrie's "East Texas Red," and Waldo O'Neal's "Hobo Bill's Last Ride" are but three examples. Jimmie Rodgers, the "Singing Brakeman" from Meridian, Mississippi, left perhaps the most evocative remembrance of the stranded hobo's plight in "Waitin' for a Train." In those years of want and despair, countless numbers of Texans had personally witnessed those such as Rogers' itinerant alongside railroad tracks "a thousand miles away from home, sleepin' in the rain."

In a day and time when trains were ever-present and all-important, they served as powerful symbols for all of life's major events. As such, they proliferate in the music of the people. At times, the next train out of town represented escape from trouble, most often love gone bad. The trip for some was mournful, an act of despair. Clarence Ashly's scorned lover in "Dark Holler," for instance, saw "a freight train farther on down the line" as his only relief from the pain of rejection and a lifetime of loneliness. Those of whom Hank Snow wrote and sang in compositions such as "I'm Movin' On" and "The Golden Rocket" evidenced a more resilient attitude in matters of the heart. Their means of conveyance—the symbol of their freedom—nonetheless remained the same: "that big eight wheeler rollin' down the track." Hank's expression of joy at liberation literally explodes from lyrics such as these:

Hear that lonesome whistle blow
 That's your clue and by now you know
 That I got another true love a-waitin' in Tennessee
 This midnight special's a-burnin' the rail
 So woman don't try to follow my trail
 This Golden Rocket's gonna roll my blues away.

Freedom for some quite often appeared unattainable for others. To unfortunates such as Huddie Ledbetter, incarcerated at the

Central State Prison Farm outside Sugar Land, Texas, in the early twenties, the passing train represented everything they'd lost and might never regain. Leadbelly's nightly prayers for freedom found musical expression in the oft-recorded masterpiece titled the "Midnight Special." Hank Williams' inmate in "(I Heard That) Lonesome Whistle" knew the wait would be a long one: "I'll be locked here in this cell till my body's just a shell and my hair turns whiter than snow." For many Americans, however, the third verse of Johnny Cash's classic "Folsom Prison Blues" is the ultimate rendering of a prisoner's agony at the sight or sound of a train:

I bet there's rich folks eatin' in some fancy dining car
 They're prob'ly drinkin' coffee and smoking big cigars
 Well I know I had it comin', I know I can't be free
 But those people keep a'movin' and that's what
 tortures me.

A devotee of trains, "The Man in Black" utilized the metaphor in an entirely different manner in "Hey Porter." Written as his Air Force tour in Germany drew to a close in 1954, Cash recalled years later the song's genesis: "I used a train as a vehicle in my mind to take me back home and counting off the miles and minutes till I could get home. . . . My excitement about coming back to Dixie was just about as alive as it appears in the song." It is a lyrical exultation that succeeds beyond measure:

Hey Porter, Hey Porter, would you tell me the time?
 How much longer will it be till we cross that Mason-
 Dixon line?
 When we hit Dixie would you tell the engineer to slow it
 down?
 Or better still just stop the train 'cause I wanna look
 around.

Composers across the years have also found in the train a symbol for life and death, good and evil, salvation and damnation. The

Carter Family, for instance, warned sinners in the 1930s to get their business right because “there’s a little black train a’comin’ [and] it may be here tonight.” As Josh Turner’s hit release of “Long Black Train” in 2005 makes clear, the idiom has lost none of its effectiveness. Turner warns listeners to hew to the straight and narrow in the following manner:

I said cling to the father and his holy name
 And don’t go riding on that long black train
 Yeah, watch out brother for that long black train
 That Devil’s driving that long black train.

Conversely, a long-time favorite of believers is titled “Mountain Railway.” Dating from the 1890s, it reminds the faithful that:

Life is like a mountain railway, with an engineer that’s
 brave,
 We must make the run successful, from the cradle to the
 grave,
 Heed the curves, the fills, the tunnels, never falter, never
 quail,
 Keep your hand upon the throttle and your eye upon the
 rail.

Alas, the golden age of trains has long since passed into history. Passenger depots of old stand abandoned and forlorn in communities of all sizes across Texas and the nation. They represent, along with the occasional steam locomotive permanently displayed in some city park, deteriorating reminders of times past. Our forebearers’ “magic carpet ride” nonetheless remains not only alive but vibrant in folk memory and imagination if our music is any indicator. Having touched our lives in so many different ways, songwriters and performers utilize the image of the train to invoke joy and sorrow, good and evil, freedom and its loss, as well as life and death. The train of song, unrestrained by the laws of physics, regularly carries us back through time and space to treasured moments

with loved ones long since gone. Through lyrics such as those of Fred Moore in “What a Ways We’ve Come,” it even has the ability to carry individuals like me back to moments we missed but wish we could have shared:

When I was a wee lad my granddad would take me out on
the C & O;
When a locomotive on a fast freight exploded by he’d hold
me up and yell: “Boy, there she goes!”
Big wheels turning, side rods churning, the noise always
made me cry;
I’d hold Granddaddy tight ’til the train went out of sight
and he’d take me in his lap and dry my eyes.

Wabash Cannonball (P. Carter)

From the great Atlantic Ocean to the wide Pacific shore
 From the queen of flowing mountains to the southern belt by
 the shore

She's mighty tall and handsome and known quite well by all
 She's the combination on the Wabash Cannonball.

She came down from Birmingham one cold December day
 As she rolled into the station, you could hear all the people say
 "There's a girl from Tennessee, she's long and she's tall
 She came down from Birmingham on the Wabash Cannonball."

Chorus:

Listen to the jingle, the rumble and the roar
 As she glides along the woodland through the hills
 and by the shore
 Hear the mighty rush of the engine; hear the lone
 some hobo's squall
 We're traveling through the jungles on the Wabash
 Cannonball.

Our eastern states are dandy, so the people always say
 From New York to Saint Louis and Chicago by the way
 From the hills of Minnesota where the rippling waters fall
 No changes can be taken on the Wabash Cannonball.

Here's to Daddy Claxton, may his name forever stand
 And always be remembered 'round the courts of Alabam'
 His earthly race is over, and the curtains 'round him fall
 We'll carry him home to victory on the Wabash Cannonball.

(Repeat Chorus)



Jan Epton Seale