



Westbound Train

Text and photos by Lisa Gregoire

Riding back west with the “Roots on the Rails” tour



In the summer of 1970, a 12-coach train painted with day-glo hippie flowers carried Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, The Band, Ian and Sylvia Tyson, Buddy Guy and other folk-rock and blues icons from Toronto to Calgary in a booze- and drug-fuelled party on wheels. The Dead’s Jerry Garcia called the Festival Express the best five days in rock ‘n’ roll, because musicians jammed together unfettered by agents, media and fans, between the scheduled concerts in Toronto, Winnipeg and Calgary. “The train ride itself was the high point of the trip,” recalls guitarist Amos Garrett, of Black Diamond, who was on the train as part of the Tysons’ band, Great Speckled Bird. “I have very dim memories of the shows.” He describes how Joplin charmed the train’s engineer into stopping somewhere in the middle of Saskatchewan to replenish a dwindling beer supply. There was no station, Garrett says. Passenger trains hadn’t stopped there for years, especially not ones painted psychedelic colours. A troupe of tie-dyed musicians, led by Joplin, jumped off the train, marched down the main street and into the liquor store. Once they had bought all they could carry, they headed back to the train, past a group of local teenagers. “The kids were stunned,” Garrett says. “They knew who we were.” On July 4, after the tour promoters had tallied more than \$500,000 in losses, the bands performed at Calgary’s McMahon Stadium. It was the last concert of the tour, and one of the last for Joplin. She died three months later at the age of 27.

This past spring, Charlie Hunter, a Vermont artist and music manager, put together a railway music tour with more than an echo of the Festival Express. For the tour, which he called “Roots on the Rails,” Hunter rented three sleeper cars, a dome car and a dining car (which he decked out for performances) on VIA Rail’s vintage “Canadian” passenger train. He booked more than a dozen musicians and, unlike the Festival Express, invited fans to take part—for

\$2,000 each. Beginning on March 11, Fred Eaglesmith and his Flathead Noodlers, songwriter and mandolin maestro Willie P. Bennett, the irrepressible one-man music machine Washboard Hank, Canadian folk icon Ian Tamblyn, Victoria’s alt-country maiden Carolyn Mark, Winnipeg’s bluegrass D. Rangers and others played music for four days, from Toronto to Vancouver, to about five dozen well-heeled, mid-career folkies from Canada and the United States.

Tom Fodey of the D. Rangers, who plays a charming homemade stand-up bass called a muck-bucket, thought wistfully of the Festival Express before boarding the Roots train in Winnipeg. Fodey’s older brother Jim had hitchhiked to Calgary to see the final concert. Everyone knew about the musical train, he says. It had become a legend on the prairie. I joined the tour in Winnipeg too, curious about the century-old trinity of trains, music and people. I could think of no better classroom than a roots-music train trip through western Canada.

Days on the train were filled with gourmet meals; music workshops; long, smoky conversations about melodies and mountains; formal performances; and midnight jams, which, when lubricated with whisky, rolled along on a seemingly endless track of old standards and new offerings. Songs by Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Pee Wee King, Townes Van Zandt, Jimmie Rodgers, Anne Murray, Stompin’ Tom Connors and countless others swelled and receded until, bleary-eyed, the weary minstrels would pack away their instruments and surf down narrow, rocking halls to bed. Each morning, after hangovers were tamed with beer and tomato juice, we enjoyed a fresh Canadian panorama, courtesy of three diesel-electric locomotives. Under the wheels, 4,467 kilometres of track gradually slipped behind us. “This is Canada,” says Tom Funasaka, a guest from Calgary travelling with three others. “You work in an office all day and

Peterborough folk novice Serena Ryder, 20, pleases the crowd with a few oldies from Hank Williams and George Gershwin.

you forget what the country looks like. We're corporate people from Calgary. We work in the oil patch. It's a way to take it out of your mind."

MODERN COUNTRY MUSIC is rife with cliché and hackneyed images. The "new country" of artists like Shania Twain is produced to suit a sexy, radio-friendly format. Her latest album, *Up*, is available in three different mixes—pop, country and "world"—to broaden its market. Musicians and fans on the Roots train didn't talk much about Twain or any of the other "new country" stars. "Country music has bad connotations," says George Wolf, a bureaucrat and Roots on the Rails guest from Long Island. "We don't want to be associated with Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. I'm not trying to be purist, but what they pawn off as country music is crap. The reality of country music is that it's what the nation brings. It's cowboy history. There are no cowboys riding into the sunset anymore, but we love the cowboy myth and we love it told through people like Jimmie Rodgers, the singing brakeman."

Canadian country music doesn't fit comfortably into the traditional Nashville sound. Inspired by a variety of ethnic beats and instruments, it leans more toward folk music. Two Alberta musicians, Ian Tyson and k.d. lang, are good examples of the Canadian country music anomaly, says Wesley Berg, who's taught Canadian music at the University of Alberta for more than three decades. Tyson was once part of a folk duo, with his then-wife Sylvia, but

he eventually made a full transition to country about two decades ago. "Ian Tyson lives the life, but it appeals to a small audience. It points to a simpler life where emotions are strong and deep," says Berg. "Cowboys nowadays ride quads and helicopters. They don't ride horses anymore. Even Ian Tyson is evoking this mythic, once-upon-a-lifetime lifestyle." When k.d. lang was asked what made country music here unique, Berg says, she explained it was the Scottish, Métis, Ukrainian, Irish and other cultures that introduced new rhythms and singing styles and created a made-in-Canada country music unlike the songs emerging from Texas and Tennessee. While she liked to tell reporters she was Patsy Cline reincarnated, lang never considered herself just a country singer. Like Anne Murray, Tommy Hunter, Hank Snow, Murray McLachlan and other Canadian stars, her musical influences ran the gamut.

Musicians on the Roots train shared that diversity of influence, but when it came time to play they drew mostly from the established country music canon. During late-night jam sessions, almost everyone knew the old songs, or learned them after a few choruses. From the younger musicians, in their 20s, to the elders, in their 60s, they shared an unspoken common language of rhythms, chords and harmonies. Carolyn Mark, a cowgirl by way of British Columbia, says it was the singing that drew her from pop music to country when she was a teenager. "Sure a lot the songs sound the same, melody-wise," she says. "The lyrics and vocals are the main thing. It's all about the singing."

Country music is democratic. It requires little more than acoustic instruments, four chords, a decent voice and some words about love, pain, struggle or travel. As Wolf says during an impromptu jam, "There's something about what you don't play. Make it simple. It's what people like. But it doesn't make the music any less profound."

LADEN WITH PEOPLE, coal, logs and wheat—and later, fuel and manufactured goods—the train has sewn its way over, around and through Canada for nearly 120 years. With so many lines now abandoned and rail travel shrinking under the speed and economy of airplanes and tractor-trailers, it's difficult to appreciate the early impact of rail. The first steam engines, thundering into Moose Jaw and Calgary with a screech and a rush of wind, embodied the industrial revolution, and in just a few decades they brought thousands of immigrants to what is now Alberta, changing forever the land of the Blood, the Peigan, the Stoney, the Cree and the Dene. The journey from Montreal to the west coast, which had previously taken months of hard slogging, turned into an easy six-day ride. Almost overnight, Canada's grandeur and diversity were revealed through a train's window. "It must have seemed miraculous," says University of Alberta historian Rod Macleod. "It was unbelievable to travel these distances in this speed and relative comfort." Or in the words of Washboard Hank: "The train was the fastest thing going. It was considered like a spaceship."

The CPR, which received \$25-million and 25 million acres of land from Sir John A. Macdonald—a deal mired in political controversy and native resentment—completed the enormous project in under five years, no small thanks to thousands of low-paid labourers who worked under dangerous and exhausting conditions. Anxious to populate areas along that corridor with captive customers, the CPR gave away much of its surplus land and sold the rest cheap to settlers. At one point, the CPR had its own "colonization department" and a transatlantic fleet to transport European families to "sunny southern Alberta." When surveyors told the company that areas east and south of Calgary were unfit for human habitation, the CPR built an elaborate irrigation system, nourished by a dam on the Bow River at Bassano, at the time North America's biggest irrigation project. By 1915, the CPR had built more than 6,500 kilometres of irrigation canals in Alberta and experimental farms for testing grains and livestock. Once large amounts of produce could be transported quickly and efficiently, subsistence farming rapidly transformed into full-scale agriculture. In 1891, colonists in what is now Alberta numbered fewer than 15,000. By 1911, there were nearly 375,000, and 10 years later, 588,000. "It shaped the nature of the country, linking it east and west," says University of Calgary historian Doug Francis. "Without that rail, the possibility of settling the West and bringing in immigrants could not have been possible."



Left to right: Fred Eaglesmith and the Flathead Noodlers; Washboard Hank; Jaxon Haldone of the D. Rangers encouraging Roger Marin of the Flathead Noodlers.

Homesteaders brought with them guitars, fiddles, accordions, mandolins, harmonicas and generations of jigs and reels. In the 1920s, American country and gospel music started trickling north over the airwaves, dovetailing with the multicultural melodies mingling in a young Alberta. American roots music, with its simple stories of grace and vice, trains, rodeos, sod houses and honky-tonks, appealed to the farmers, ranchers and railwaymen who were carving communities out of a dusty Canadian West. Alberta's pioneers were far flung and spoke different languages but they

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gathered to help each other during harvest and times of crisis. They congregated in kitchens, churches and town halls to tell stories and sing songs.

Music was a source of entertainment for Alberta's early settlers, but it also served to record significant events. In Alberta, for example, country songs were written about the Frank slide, the Depression, ranching on the Bow River and Calgary Stampede chuckwagon masters. "The saying used to go, 'something hasn't happened if a song hasn't been written about it,'" says Berg. "In the older times, that's how things were remembered. Songs provided the narratives."

The train brought some of the nation's most popular country stars of the 1930s, 40s and 50s to Alberta—people like the father of Canadian country, Wilf Carter; travelling balladeer Stu Phillips; and "Canada's cowboy troubadour," Stu Davis. They came for the stunning, rough countryside and the cowboy lifestyle, the remnants of which endure today in country music.

FOR WASHBOARD HANK, so-named for the homemade washboard to which he has attached bells, licence plates, horns and other noisemakers, trains are compelling because they take us away. Hank rode freight trains from Ontario to Calgary 25 years ago. He made his home on the banks of the Bow River several times as a young rogue, busking in the city for pocket change. "I've always loved trains. I just like the countryside that trains go through and the whole sense of not really knowing where you are and how long you'll be there and where you're headed," he says. "I used to love laying in those cars and watching the stars. For me, it was a major confidence builder. I figured, I'd ridden freight trains, I could never be stuck anywhere."

The reason so many songs have been written about trains is obvious, Hank says—they were full of might and magic, representing freedom even for the poor. Canadian musicians have written scores of train songs, including classics such as Stompin' Tom's "Algoma Central #69,"

Murray McLauchlan's "Never Did Like That Train" and Gordon Lightfoot's "Canadian Railroad Trilogy," with its evocative first verse: "There was a time in this fair land when the railroad did not run / When the wild majestic mountains stood alone against the sun / Long before the white man and long before the wheel / When the green dark forest was too silent to be real."

Hank's latest album includes "Train Yard," a lament for the passing of the railway. "The railroad is what made this land a nation," he sings. "It's our Constitution bound in wood and steel / We don't need big words put down on paper / We just need a link that's strong and real." Fred Eaglesmith, who, like Hank, rode the rails west as a teenager, has written at least a dozen train songs and continues to write them today. He uses trains in his lyrics to illustrate a variety of emotions, from love to tenacity, escape, nostalgia and grief. "Trains connect people where they wouldn't be connected," he says. "It barrels though everything. You can't stop it. It's kind of out of control a little bit."

THE VIA RAIL DINING CAR, usually reserved for genteel travellers, is now a Roots on the Rails saloon, and 50 of us are squeezed in like smoked oysters in a can, fingers wrapped around beer bottles, heads bobbing. Along one side of the car, seven musicians are elbow to elbow, playing guitars, mandolins, banjos, fiddles and that crazy muck-bucket made from scrap wood, clothesline rope and a big plastic bucket. They lurch and sway with the train's intermittent motion, bumping each other and laughing like playful children. Willie P. Bennett coaxes members of the D. Rangers and the Flathead Noodlers into one of his classics, "Blackie and the Rodeo King," as the prairies race by in a nighttime blur. Occasionally, the flashing red of railway crossings and the lights at the outskirts of trackside towns reveal trees, hills, farms and factories. And there, in the middle of Canada, hurtling west toward Alberta, something extraordinary happens. As Bennett's story of anguish and salvation unfolds within the train's rock-a-bye rumbling, a revelation washes over me like the spirit washed over Hank Williams when he wrote "I Saw the Light." Suddenly, and finally, country music makes sense.

"There's a very fundamental rhythm of the train, the clickety-clack," Bennett says later, during a quiet moment in the glass-roofed dome car, with the stars above us. He's criss-crossed Canada in trains, he says, lulling himself and others to sleep with muted tones from a harmonica. "The wheels of the tracks do sing. It's just one note but it's there."

As we rolled west, people turned their watches back and we travelled back in time—before Country Music Television, before electric guitars and headset microphones, before the Trans-Canada Highway—to when trains and music delivered folks from their unremarkable lives and carried them home at the same time.

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