

19 A medley of popular songs

RAILWAYS AND TRAINS are so deeply ingrained in the popular imagination that they feature in hundreds, possibly thousands of popular songs. Consequently, it is difficult to make a selection. The featured songs are not intended to represent the best songs, but most have interesting stories behind them; some are included because they are so well-known, such as the opening song 'The Locomotion', others because they are personal favourites, 'Click clack' by Captain Beefheart and Hugh Masekela's 'Coal train', for example. Individual songs are grouped under common themes, and partly to acknowledge the arbitrariness of the overall selection, some of these appear in lists - last trains, fast trains, slow trains, trains leaving and trains heading home. This section covers the two pop song classics 'Midnight train to Georgia' and 'Homeward bound' with an attempt to establish whether there is any truth in the much-repeated idea that Paul Simon wrote the latter on the platform of Widnes railway station.

In some songs, train references are confined to the lyrics and no attempt is made to convey the sounds of the railway. In other songs, train imitations are at the forefront, and a group of these come under the heading 'The sounds of the train in late 1960s and 1970s albums'. Featured artists include David Bowie, Tangerine Dream frontman Edgar Froese, and Kevin Ayers, all taking advantage of what were then recent advances in music technology.

There are three American artists in particular who have made a surprisingly large number of references to railroads in their songs. These include Tom Waits who is, in his own words, obsessed with train sounds, and Grateful Dead, whose repertoire includes at least 17 railroad songs, most famously their own version of 'Casey Jones'. This song is explored in more detail, in particular the notion that Casey Jones was high on cocaine when his train crashed. Bob

Dylan's first recording of a train song dates from 1962 when he included 'Freight train blues' on his debut album and his most recent is 'Duquesne whistle' from his 2012 album *Tempest*.

Three very well-known songs for children form another group: 'I'm a train', 'The runaway train' and 'Morningtown ride'. The chapter then moves on to train journeys from around the world, a disparate mix of places and styles ranging from Jamaica to South Africa, and the Cuban beat boxing of Vocal Sampling to the German electronica of Kraftwerk. The final chapter closes by exploring music from the twenty-first century, questioning whether anyone still writes popular songs about trains and, if they do, are any of them in one of the styles which currently predominate the charts.

This medley of popular of songs opens with two of the most famous popular songs about trains, one fast and one slow.

The Loco-Motion by Little Eva

'The Loco-Motion', composed by Gerry Goffin and Carole King, has been a hit several times. On its first release, sung by Little Eva, it became an international hit in 1962. It was next in the US charts in 1974 performed by the rock band Grand Funk Railroad, and finally it was a No. 1 hit in Australia for Kylie Minogue in 1988. Goffin and King were a husband and wife songwriting partnership who worked in the famous Brill Building – a New York 'hit factory' of the time. The pair had many well-crafted hits together and wished to capitalise on the dance craze of the early 1960s in which dances were pre-packaged with their own theme song, perhaps most famously in 'The Twist' by Chubby Checker. In the search for a singer they looked no further than their teenage domestic help, Eva Narcissus Boyd (1943-2003) aka Little Eva. Eva Boyd was not the inexperienced singer she is sometimes presented as; she had performed in the family gospel group and whilst studying in New York had worked as a session singer with the girl-group Cookies. Carole King was impressed by her strong, bright voice and used her in the recording with backing vocals from the Cookies and King herself on keyboards. Sustained drone notes on the saxophone in the song's opening help to evoke the sound of a steam whistle. The lyrics exhort the listener to take part in the latest dance craze, to do the locomotion, chugging like a railroad train. Given that up to this

point the locomotion dance did not exist, one had to be invented and Eva Boyd was given the task of creating a dance to fit the song with train-like movements. With its dense texture combining the double-tracked vocal of Little Eva, rhythmic layers of drums, hand claps, saxophone, vocals and female backing singers, the overall 'big' sound is not unlike Phil Spector's Wall of Sound.

Slow train by Flanders and Swann

Swathes of the rail network were closed as a result of the 1963 government report *The Reshaping of British Railways* under the chairmanship of Richard Beeching. The report was targeted at the removal of underused and unprofitable lines. Between 1965 and 1968, 2695 stations had closed and over 2000 miles of line were no longer used.¹ Small branch lines and rural stations were particularly badly hurt. The Beeching Cuts, as they are often referred to, are frequently criticized in terms of the consequent reduction of the number of rural train services and of the loss of the hundreds of small stations that had played an important role in community life. During the nineteenth century, steam trains had been perceived as the epitome of modernity, but this perception eventually faded and instead steam trains became a symbol of nostalgia 'coloured by a sense that something more fundamental than a transport service was lost when railways closed'.²

10 songs about fast and slow trains

SONG	ARTIST(S)	SONGWRITER
Fast freight	The Kingston Trio, Serendipity Singers, Ritchie Valens	Terry Gilkyson
Fast freight	Ritchie Valens	Ritchie Valens
Fast movin' train	Restless Heart	Dave Loggins
Fast train	Van Morrison, Solomon Burke	Van Morrison
Fast train through Arkansas	The Delmore Brothers, Wayne Raney	Alton and Rabon Delmore
I been to Georgia on a fast train	Billy Joe Shaver, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson	Billy Joe Shaver

Slow train	Flanders and Swann	Flanders and Swann
Slow train	Bob Dylan	Bob Dylan
Slow train to nowhere	John Mayall	John Mayall
Woody and Dutch on the slow train to Peking	Rickie Lee Jones	Rickie Lee Jones

Flanders and Swann's melancholic song 'Slow train', published in 1963, is a paean to the imminent closure of many small stations. An elegiac list of bucolic place names is intoned over a simple lilting piano accompaniment - Blandford Forum, Buttermere, Midsomer Norton and Tumbly Woodside. A gentle and atmospheric song, it ponders the unhurried delights of a slow train, a place to meet where the stations have 'whitewashed pebbles', the 'grass grows high' and the 'sleepers sleep', a place where you might find a 'cat on a seat'. At the same time the song features some of the elements, such as over-staffing with porters, that Beeching was keen to eliminate. It is a poignant, evocative song, a lament for the passing of a way of life.

Trains leaving and trains coming home

Train journeys are often linked with notions of connection and isolation, proximity and distance, presence and absence, leaving and coming home. They can separate families and lovers and they can bring them back together again. Two hit songs from the 1960s put these feelings of loss on separation unequivocally. In 'Homeward bound' the absent lover Paul Simon puts it succinctly in that familiar line, 'I wish I was homeward bound', and in the lyrics of the Burt Bacharach song 'Trains and boats and planes', we are told that trains can take you away and bring you back home, giving the means of transportation the responsibility for the coming and going rather than the passengers who can only pray for the return of their loved ones.

10 songs about trains heading home

SONG	ARTIST(S)	SONGWRITER
First train home	Fleetwood Mac	Peter Green
Going home train	Lawrence Winters	Harold Rome
Home in a boxcar	Hoots & Hellmouth	Sean Hoots
Homebound train	Bon Jovi	Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora
Homeward bound	Paul Simon	Simon and Garfunkel
I'll be home on Christmas Day	Elvis Presley	Michael Jarrett
Last train home	Pat Metheny	Pat Metheny
Train fare home	Muddy Waters	Muddy Waters
Train home	Rich Moore & Mollie O'Brien, Chris Smither	Chris Smither, Patty Larkin
Train ride home	lofi.samurai	lofi.samurai

Homeward bound by Paul Simon

In an attempt to launch a solo career in England, the American singer-songwriter Paul Simon embarked on a short tour of English folk clubs in 1965. In this autobiographical lament he sings of his displaced lifestyle, living out of suitcases and getting on trains each day to travel to the next venue. Whilst in England he fell in love with a young woman, Kathleen (Kathy) Chitty, who took the ticket money on the door of the Hermit Folk Club in Brentwood, and this song is about her. 'Homeward bound' was released on the Simon and Garfunkel album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* in 1966. The style could be described as soft rock, somewhere between folk music and rock, with listenable melodies and vocal harmonies. The song opens with a short acoustic guitar solo moving into the first verse. It has a straightforward verse and chorus structure in which the verses tell of the singer's disillusionment with his lonely touring lifestyle and the lyrics of the chorus express his longing to be heading home to his love. Simon uses the lower register of his voice as he details his day-to-day life as a musician on the road and then in the chorus moves into a higher register when describing his yearning to be home. At the end of the final chorus, the words 'silently for me' are repeated, the instruments fall away and the song concludes with the acoustic guitar figure of the opening.

It is often reported that Paul Simon wrote 'Homeward bound' whilst waiting for a train on Widnes railway station platform.³⁴ Although a plaque was erected there in 1990 to mark the site, as far as can be established, this story is almost certainly untrue. What is fairly certain is that Simon was undertaking a tour of Northern folk clubs when he wrote the song and that he performed in Widnes on September 13, 1965.⁵ It is unclear what his destination was. Some reports say Manchester, others Liverpool and yet others London, so no clues can be found from railway routes and timetables.

What does Paul Simon have to say about it himself? In 2000 Lyn Goldsmith interviewed him for *The Times* and asked him whether he had written the song on Widnes station. His reply was "Well, no, not actually in the station, but around that time. While I was up that way".⁶ In his biography of Simon, Robert Hilburn writes that the singer was clear that the song 'grew out of the Northern England tour, even specifying on occasion the time he sat in a railway station in Widnes'. Hilburn, however, gives the final word to Geoff Speed who 'ran the Windsor folk club in Widnes'⁷ and 'drove Simon to the Widnes train station the day he was supposed to have written the song'.



Widnes Station (formerly Widnes North) - station building on south platform - May 1992

© Eddie Hewison.

“It has always been a sweet story, but there’s no way he could have written the song at the station,” Speed said. “The thing I remember most about the morning was that we got to the station just as the train pulled in, and Paul had to run to make it. He didn’t have time to sit down, much less write a song.”⁸

On the other hand, Speed is quoted as saying elsewhere

It is probable he wrote one verse in Liverpool and the chorus in Wigan, with the song being finished in Widnes. We heard him writing the tune when he was staying at our house and then we dropped him at the station. He probably finished the song on the platform.⁹

Given the lack of hard evidence to support the story, why does it still persist? Hilburn writes that it was encouraged by the local population whose town was more used to negative portrayals.

In Widnes the story was hard to kill... Welcoming any positive attention – the town was long the butt of jokes because of an awful smell caused by fumes from local chemical plants – townfolk took pride in and placed a plaque outside the train station.¹⁰

So bad was the smell in Widnes that the railway historian Simon Bradley writes that ‘Rails wore out faster...in places such as Widnes, where heavy industry made the very air chemically corrosive’.¹¹

The music critic Richard Morrison writing in *The Times* observes that it is ‘strange how often the most gripping literature, music and painting is created in grim circumstances’ and goes on to cite the Widnes station story.

Paul Simon allegedly composed one of his most celebrated songs ‘Homeward Bound’ while shivering on the platform of Widnes railway station – an unlikely conjunction of inspiration and circumstance now noted for posterity on a wall plaque. “If you’ve ever been to Widnes,” Simon said, “you’ll know why I was so desperate to be homeward bound”.¹²

And, I would argue, that it is this incongruous juxtaposition of grim Northern town and American pop classic which perpetuates what could well be an urban myth.

10 songs about trains leaving

SONG	ARTIST(S)	SONGWRITER
Desperados waiting for a train	Nanci Griffith, Tom Rush, Martin Simpson, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash	Guy Clark
Don't miss that train	Sister Wynona Carr	Sister Wynona Carr
Just missed the train	Kelly Clarkson, Carly Hennessy, Trine Rein	Danielle Brisebois, Scott Cutler
Midnight Train to Georgia	Gladys Knight and the Pips	Jim Weatherley
Stop that train	Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Jerry Garcia Band, Party Animals	Peter Tosh
Stop that train	Spanish Town Skabeats, The Workingmen featuring Sly & Robbie	Prince Buster
Waitin' for the train to come in	Maria Muldaur, Peggy Lee, Louis Prima	Sunny Skylar, Martin Block
Waiting for a train	Jimmie Rodgers, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Billy Bragg	Jimmie Rodgers
Waiting for the '103'	Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks	Dan Hicks
Wave the flag and stop the train	The Move	Roy Wood

Midnight Train to Georgia by Gladys Knight and the Pips

In 1973, Gladys Knight and the Pips topped the US charts with a song with a recurring line about a train leaving, bound for Georgia. Much has been written in previous chapters about the mass migration from the land in the Southern States to cities further north in search of a better standard of living. This train, however, is travelling in the opposite direction, reflecting the lives of many migrants who found that displacement to cities such as Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles had left them with a nostalgic desire to return to a life down home. Composed by Jim Weatherley, the lyrics are written from the perspective of a woman whose lover had come to Los Angeles dreaming of stardom, but it had proved too much: he became disillusioned and was leaving on the midnight train to Georgia.¹³ It is a heartfelt soul song with the distinctive sound of Tamla Motown - strings, horn section and drums - although Gladys Knight no longer recorded with Tamla at this point.

Stop that train by Bob Marley / Peter Tosh¹⁴

As we have seen in previous chapters, some trains held the promise of escape from hardship. In his lyrics to the Bob Marley song 'Stop that train', Peter Tosh draws heavily on this theme of escape so often found in blues and gospel songs. It is a song of hopelessness and loneliness, 'People are scattered, misdirected'; some are 'living successfully, but most...are struggling and starving'. The song has all the musical hallmarks of Jamaican reggae. As Kwame Dawes puts it in his analysis of lyrics in Bob Marley's songs, this 'lamentation' is 'contradicted by the danceability of the song'.¹⁵

The earlier ska song 'Stop that train', recorded by the Spanish Town Skabeats in 1965, has a simpler message; a woman whose boyfriend is leaving cries "stop that train" because she wants to join him on board.

Another common theme is that of the last train. Sometimes the train has a specific destination, such as London or Clarksville or, as in Arlo Guthrie's song 'Last train', it is headed for glory. At other times the last train is a specific type, often a steam train, and there are also several examples where the 'last train' is unspecified; rather, it acts as a metaphor.

20 songs about last trains

SONG	ARTIST(S)
I took the last train	David Gates
Last chance train	Bon Jovi
Last of the steam-powered trains	The Kinks
Last steam engine train	Leo Kottke
Last train	Yes
Last train	Primal Scream
Last train	Arlo Guthrie
Last train	Allen Toussaint
Last train	The Backsliders
Last train	Dead Moon
Last train	Graham Central Station
Last train	Jerry Reed
Last train	Captain Sensible
Last train	Travis
Last train home	John Mayer
Last train home	Blink-182
Last train home	Lostprophets
Last train to Awesometown	Parry Gripp
Last train to Clarksville	The Monkees
Last train to London	Electric Light Orchestra

Last train to Clarksville by The Monkees

The Monkees were an American band that was put together in 1966 for a television series of the same name. 'Last train to Clarksville' was the band's debut single which, to everyone's surprise, topped the American charts. A catchy Beatles-inspired pop song, it was written by Tommy Boyce and Bob Hart and recorded by session musicians. Hart wished to capture some of the Beatles' feel and sound, so, for example, the 'Oh, no, no, no' line was a response to the Beatles' 'yeah, yeah, yeah' lyrics. The lyrics tell of a man calling his girlfriend, urging her to meet him at the Clarksville railway station before he leaves. 'Last train to Clarksville' was written at the height of the Vietnam war; hence some have speculated that it may have been an anti-war song,

particularly because of the words of the final verse where the singer wonders if he will ever be coming home, perhaps a soldier leaving for war. There has been some debate as to which Clarksville the song refers to, given that there are several places with that name in the US. The theory has been put forward that it is Clarksville, Tennessee, where there was an air base, the home of the 101st Airborne Division which was then serving in Vietnam. This idea would tie in with the potential anti-war theme, but it has been denied by the lyricist Bob Hart, who said the place name came from tweaking Clarkdale, Arizona, which he passed through often on his summer holidays.

Last train by Captain Sensible

The opening lyrics of Captain Sensible's 1995 song 'Last train' refer to Dr Beeching chopping up the branches. The Damned's co-founder ex-punk Captain Sensible is a keen train enthusiast and has had a Class 47 diesel locomotive, 47810, named after him by Cotswold Rail. In a 2009 interview he revealed that "The Damned use touring to pursue our train obsessions' and visit 'as many steam preserved lines as possible' when out on the road."¹⁶

Last of the steam-powered trains by the Kinks

In 1968 the last steam-driven passenger train was withdrawn from the British railway. Later that year the Kinks released their song 'Last of the steam-powered trains' on their album *Village Green Preservation Society*, a collection of vignettes of pastoral English life. The song is a lament for the passing of steam, at the same time acting as a metaphor for the past and how to deal with it. The singer compares himself with the 'good old fashioned steam-powered trains', the 'last of the blood and sweat brigade' and the 'good old renegades'. The Kinks song, written by their singer Ray Davies, was inspired by Howlin' Wolf's Chicago blues classic 'Smokestack lightnin'', which is in itself a train song, 'smokestack lightning' referring to the sparks that fly out of a locomotive's smokestack. The two songs are indeed very similar, both making much use of the Howling Wolf riff heard throughout 'Smokestack lightnin'' and both with very simple harmony and intermittent blasts of harmonica.

The sounds of the train in late 1960s and 1970s albums

For some artists, the late 1960s and the 1970s were a period of experimentation in pop music. Technology had opened up more advanced recording techniques: stereo sounds were being exploited more widely and electronic instruments, samplers and synthesisers, had been introduced. It was also the heyday of psychedelia when the ‘mind-expanding’ hallucinogenic properties of drugs were expressed in music.

Stop this train (again doing it) by Kevin Ayers

‘Stop this train’ (1969) is a track on *Joy of a Toy*, the debut solo album of Kevin Ayers (1944-2013) a founding member of the underground band Soft Machine. The album features two of Ayers’ erstwhile Soft Machine colleagues, Robert Wyatt (drums) and Mike Ratledge (organ), along with the composer David Bedford on piano and Mellotron. Bedford was also responsible for the song’s instrumentation and arrangement. The haunting lyrics of ‘Stop this train’ tell of a nightmare journey by a ‘train to anywhere’, where it ‘don’t stop for anyone’ and it is impossible to get off. Piano and guitar open the song emulating the sound of a train gaining momentum. As the tempo increases, so does the speed of the recording, taking us into the realms of psychedelia. Bedford was a musical polymath and a leader in the field of music education, specialising in work which did not use musical notation. During this period *musique concrete* techniques, distorting taped sounds by editing techniques such as reversal and speed changing, were used by Bedford and others in schools. The speeded-up tape effect of ‘Stop this train’ then blends into a more normalised strumming guitar and drums pattern. Once the train is on its way, the drum rhythm stays the same for the full six minutes of the track, adding to the relentless nature of the journey. The nine verses of the song are interrupted twice by instrumental interludes overlaid with train whistle sounds from Mellotron and guitar. In the second half of the song there is passage of swirling duetting between Ratledge and Bedford, intensified by stereo effects, gradually getting wilder until the music sounds almost out of control and fades out.

Station to Station by David Bowie

David Bowie's 1976 album *Station to Station* opens with over a minute of the sound of a train approaching, rebounding from speaker to speaker. The train sound effects on 'Station to Station' were produced by the guitarist Earl Slick using flangers, feedback and delay effects.¹⁷ The sound is panned across the stereo speakers before it fades out, almost as though it is disappearing into a tunnel.¹⁸ The somewhat obscure lyrics of 'Station to Station' introduce the next of Bowie's ever-changing images, the sinister persona, the Thin White Duke. No further reference is made to trains or railway stations in the lyrics of the song. According to Nicholas Pegg, a leading authority on the life and work of Bowie, the title instead refers to the Stations of the Cross.¹⁹ Pegg also holds that Bowie was influenced by German electronica bands. The first track of the album *Epsilon in Malaysian Pale* (1975) by Edgar Froese (frontman of Tangerine Dream) opens with the sounds of a travelling train overlaid by jungle noises. The train sounds were produced using an analogue synthesiser, Mellotron and flute. *Epsilon in Malaysian Pale* was a likely influence on Bowie as was another German electronic band, Kraftwerk. Kraftwerk's pioneering album *Autobahn* (1974) begins with the sound of a car panning across the stereo speakers.²⁰ In 1977 Kraftwerk returned the compliment on their album *Trans-Europe Express* where they make reference to Bowie and *Station to Station* (see page 273-4).²¹

Click clack by Captain Beefheart

The music of Captain Beefheart (1941-2010) and his Magic Band combines elements of the blues with experimental rock and free jazz, and the lyrics are opaque with a Dadaist weirdness, both poetic and nonsensical. Beefheart's music is incomprehensible to some and a work of genius to others; many musicians, including Tom Waits, Nick Cave, Oasis, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, have cited him as an influence. Don Van Vliet was born in Glendale, California, where he discovered the blues with his childhood friend Frank Zappa. Together they came up with the name Captain Beefheart, and Van Vliet formed a blues band, the Magic Band, in the mid-1960s. Over the years the Magic Band has had shifting personnel with

some highly accomplished musicians, notably the drummer Drumbo (John French) and guitarist Zoot Horn Rollo (Bill Harkleroad). Many fans regard the band's masterpiece to be the 1969 album *Trout Mask Replica*, which was produced by Frank Zappa. Beefheart retired from the music business in 1982 and became reclusive, returning to his home near the Mojave Desert in southern California, where he reverted to his real name and pursued a successful career as an abstract artist.

In the onomatopoeically titled song 'Click clack' (1972), Captain Beefheart sings of his girl who is going to New Orleans to get herself 'lost and found'. There are two trains and two railroad tracks, one going and one coming back. 'Click clack' makes much use of repeated train-derived rhythms piled up on top of each other in layers. This is a rhythmic device used in many other train songs, but Beefheart's approach is different. At first hearing the interlocking rhythms may appear to be random but they are not improvised and have a logical foundation. The song opens with a three-note figure on the bass and piano, but when the drums motor in with the first locomotive pattern it is evident that the downbeat is not where it first appears to be. Rhythmic patterns appear for a few bars and then change, sometimes the time signature changes too, starting with three in a bar and then four, and shifting the metre throughout. These train rhythms are overlaid with steam whistle sounds, slide patterns on the guitar and harmonica runs weaving in and out. 'Click clack' moves along at a ferocious pace until it reaches the final words where the train leaves and the girl makes her farewell as she waves her handkerchief.

Bellerin' Plain by Captain Beefheart

'Bellerin' Plain' (1970) uses a similarly complex rhythmic technique with layers of interlocking repeated patterns. The song opens with the words 'Parapliers²² the willow dipped', a phrase which was later used as the title for an exhibition of Van Vliet's abstract art. The lyrics are suffused with railroad imagery (tracks and smokestacks, the 'fireman 'n the brakeman', the cowcatcher and the engineer), and with phrases such as roots 'gnarled like rakers' and 'steel flash scream', the words are reminiscent of the surreal poetry of Lewis Carroll. In 'Bellerin' Plain', much use is made of the marimba, an instrument similar to the xylophone and rarely found in pop music. Halfway

through the song there are passages where the marimba duets with the guitar, locked in fugal counterpoint. The song ends with a wild soprano saxophone solo played by the Captain himself.

Some artists stand out as being particularly fond of featuring trains in their songs. These include Bob Dylan, Tom Waits and the Grateful Dead.

Train references in the songs of Tom Waits, the Grateful Dead and Bob Dylan

Trains are found everywhere in the music of Tom Waits, not just in the lyrics, where they often linked to escape, homecoming or nostalgia, but also in their locomotive sounds in songs such as 'Clang boom steam'. In their Tom Waits blog, Sam Whiles and Tom Kwei list 28 songs where trains feature. These include four songs which have the word 'train' in the title – 'Gospel Train', 'Downtown train' (covered by Rod Stewart and others), 'Train song' and 'Down there by the train'.²³ In a 1992 interview, Tom Waits said, 'I've got a lot of trains on tape. Real chugs that are like a rhythmic chug... And the ting ting as the bell's coming up.'²⁴ He talks about his Chamberlain 2000 synthesiser 'It's got a variety of trains; it's a sound that I've become obsessed with, getting an orchestra to sound like a train... I have a guy in Los Angeles who collected not only the sound of the Stinson band organ... but he also has pitched four octaves of train whistles so that I can play the train whistle organ, which sounds like a calliope'.²⁵

Ken Rattenne in his essay 'The railroad as metaphor' lists 17 Grateful Dead songs containing railroad references, pointing out that the list is not conclusive and does not include all their cover songs. Amongst the songs listed are 'Caution (do not stop on the tracks)', 'Terrapin station', 'Tons of steel', 'New potato caboose', 'Jack Straw', and their most well-known railway song, 'Casey Jones', written by band member Jerry Garcia in 1969 (for more information about the legendary hero Casey Jones and the original song see pages 210-213). The opening words of the Grateful dead version of the legend claim that Jones was speeding along, driving a train when 'high on cocaine'.²⁶ Jones' use of cocaine is more likely than it at first might appear. Research has shown that the first epidemic of cocaine use in America occurred during the late 19th century when there were no laws restricting its sale or consumption and it was

freely available in drug stores, saloons, and even grocery stores.²⁷ Until 1900 Coca-Cola contained small quantities of cocaine and in 1993 *The Journal of Clinical Pharmacology* reported that 'Bartenders often added punch to their drinks by adding a pinch of cocaine to whiskey' and that 'Some employers in the construction and mining industries even distributed cocaine to their workers to keep them going at a "high pitch".²⁸ Other references to cocaine are made in the chorus of 'Casey Jones', which includes the punning line 'Watch your speed'; however, at its moderate pace the song is rather a stately train journey for a hard rock band.

The lyrics to 'Casey Jones' were written by Grateful Dead band member Robert Hunter who co-wrote Bob Dylan's song 'Duquesne whistle', the opening track on his 2012 album *Tempest*. 'Duquesne whistle' is a catchy song with an old-time shuffle feel. It chugs along with a repeated whistle motif and train rhythms played on guitars (steel, electric and acoustic) and piano. But the jaunty music is juxtaposed with apocalyptic visions in its lyrics, where the blowing of the Duquesne train whistle is going to sweep the world away and blow the sky apart. Dylan's first recording of a train song was in 1962 when he included 'Freight train blues', replete with train whistle imitations, on his debut album *Bob Dylan*. The first version of 'Freight train blues' had been written nearly 30 years earlier by John Lair and recorded by Roy Acuff (see page 227). Dylan copyrighted his arrangement in 1978, but the two versions have much in common.²⁹ The 1965 song 'I'll keep it with mine' has a couple of lines about trains. 'Train A-Travelling' is a 1968 protest song where the train is used to symbolize the politics of society with its 'firebox of hatred' and 'furnace full of tears'. References to trains in other Dylan songs are less substantial. 'Slow train', a track on Dylan's 1979 album *Slow Train Coming*, which followed his conversion to Christianity, has few references to trains other than the repeated line telling us that a slow train is coming round the bend. Similarly, despite its enigmatic title, 'It takes a lot to laugh it takes a train to cry' includes only a couple of references to trains.

Three train songs for children

I'm a train by Albert Hammond

Albert Hammond and Mike Hazlewood wrote 'I'm a train' in the 1960s and Hammond's 1974 recording was the first to hit the charts. With its strumming guitars, clicking fingers and heavy use of percussion, it is strong on train imitations. It is a jolly song with straightforward lines such as 'Look at me' and 'I'm a train', but this cheeriness belies the underlying sadness of the lyrics when we are invited to look at the train for the 'very last time' and we learn where the train is heading for – the breaker's yard. The words may appear simple, but at the same time they are onomatopoeic tongue twisters, particularly in the repeated phrase 'I'm a chukka train'.

'I'm a train' lends itself to arrangement, and two of the most successful arrangements have been performed by the New Seekers and the Kings Singers. The original song uses simple chord progressions, but Peter Knight's a cappella arrangement for the King's Singers is rich in chromatic harmony coupled with intricate overlapping rhythms. There is much play on the words 'chooka chooka' 'unpitched and unvoiced' in the opening, perhaps an early example of beat boxing.

The runaway train as sung by Vernon Dalhart

'The runaway train' was written nearly 100 years ago by Robert E Massey, Harry Warren and Carson Robison and was first recorded in 1925 by the American country singer Vernon Dalhart accompanied by engine sounds, bells and whistles. The lyrics recount that the runaway accident happened in 1889 on the 'old Chicago line' when the 'rails were froze' and the air brakes of the No. 9 train wouldn't hold. During the 1880s, railroad accidents killed hundreds of crew members and passengers in the US. Brake failure was a common cause (see pages 231-232). In common with many other train disaster songs, the parts played by the crew are the focus of the lyrics; 'The runaway train' describes the actions of the engineer, the fireman, the porter, and the conductor in separate verses, as they try in vain to save the train. The most familiar lines are found in the chorus when the train comes down the track with 'whistle wide' and 'throttle back' and the repeated words 'she blew'. The song became popular in the UK

when it was recorded by Michael Holliday in 1956 and a few years later by the television puppet pigs, Pinky and Perky.

Morningtown ride by The Seekers

Written by Malvina Reynolds and a hit when recorded by The Seekers in 1967, 'Morningtown ride' uses a train journey as a metaphor for sleeping. We hear the train whistle blowing as it sets out on its way, 'rocking rolling riding' on its night time journey to the sunshine of Morningtown. Judith Durham, the lead singer of this Australian folk-oriented group, is noted for her purity of tone and the sentiments of the song, essentially a lullaby, are well-suited to her mellifluous voice. The simplicity of the melodic line has led to its popularity for singing in schools.

Train journeys from around the world

Many of the songs in this chapter are set in the USA or the UK, but in this section a disparate selection of songs covers other parts of the world - Morocco, Jamaica, Germany, Cuba, Canada and South Africa. It opens with a celebration of the hippie trail to Marrakesh, moving on to a Jamaican reggae song about the spiritual journey to heaven, then a trip across Germany with the synthesised sounds of Kraftwerk, beatboxing in Cuba, the first transcontinental route across Canada and finally a heart-breaking jazz number, a tribute to the thousands of conscripted migrant labourers who were forced to work in the gold mines of South Africa.

Morocco

Marrakesh Express by Crosby, Stills and Nash

Railways in Morocco were introduced by the French Protectorate in the 1920s, and in 1923 the first railway station was constructed in Marrakesh. By the 1960s, Marrakesh was fast becoming a popular stop-off point on the Moroccan hippie trail. Graham Nash's inspiration for the song was his 1966 venture along the route that took him by train from Casablanca to Marrakesh.

Three years later he left his Manchester band The Hollies to join David Crosby and Stephen Stills in what was to become one of the first American supergroups, some would argue the voice of the Woodstock generation, anti-Vietnam, anti-social injustice, pro-hashish and spiritual enlightenment. The lyrics to 'Marrakesh Express' suggest an alternative lifestyle which looks beyond Western capitalism, having to get away 'to see what we could find', and 'sweeping cobwebs' from the mind. The song is catchy and upbeat, most of its vaguely Eastern feel comes from the lyrics. Nash describes what he could see: ducks, pigs and chickens, an 'animal carpet wall-to-wall' and 'charming cobras in the square'; exotic colourful clothing; along with a whiff of psychedelia, 'blowing smoke rings from the corners of my mouth'.

Jamaica

Roots train by Junior Murvin

'Roots train' is the opening track on Junior Murvin's 1977 debut reggae album *Police & Thieves*, which was produced in Jamaica by Lee 'Scratch' Perry. Opening with a train whistle sound, clickety-clack train rhythms on the drum kit introduce reggae roots 'train number one'. Following in the line of many spirituals and gospel music songs, it is essentially a song about spiritual salvation. It uses the railroad trip as a metaphor for the path through life where if you want to get on board then 'you gotta be righteous' and clean in 'thought, word and deed' to guarantee your place in heaven, a land where 'everything is great'.

Germany

Trans-Europe Express by Kraftwerk

'Trans-Europe Express' is the title track of the German band Kraftwerk's 1977 album of the same name. Making innovative use of early synthesiser technology to capture the sounds of a train, Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider evoke a railway journey by means of a relentless rhythm. The lyrics use a repeated refrain of 'Trans-Europe Express' interpolated with place-name announcements – Paris, Vienna, Dusseldorf – as they go from 'station to

station'. 'Station to station' is a deliberate reference to Bowie's album. Hütter and Schneider had met David Bowie prior to the recording, and this meeting is also referenced in the song's lyrics.

Cuba

El Tren by Vocal Sampling

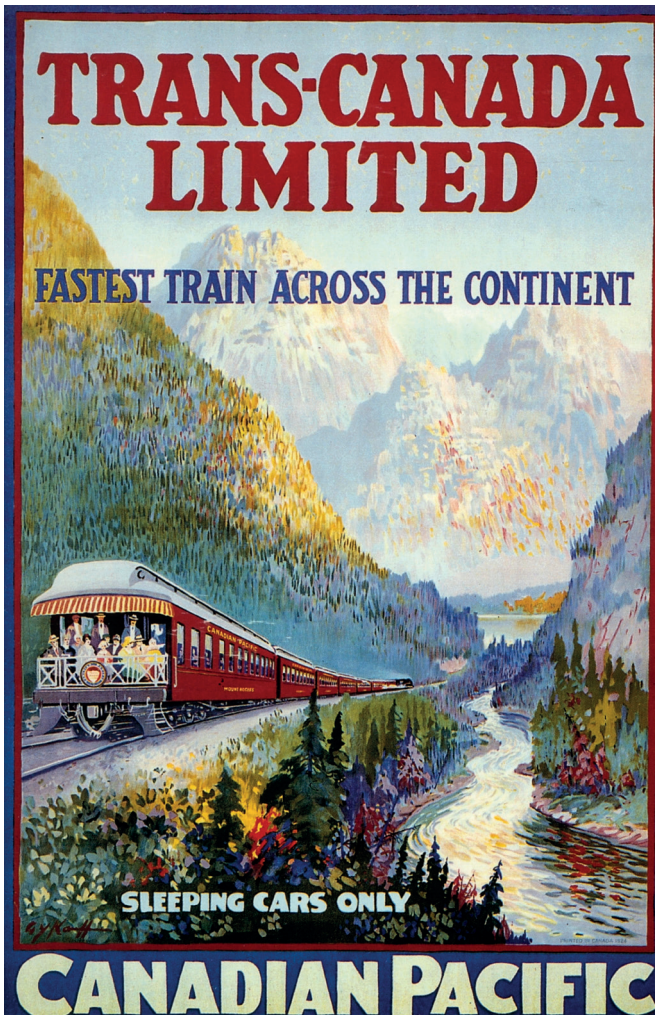
In this 1997 recording of Rafael Cueto's song, the six members of the Cuban *a cappella* vocal group Vocal Sampling accompany their singing by imitating instrumental sounds, such as flute, trumpet, and percussion using only their voices and hands. They are masters of the art of beatboxing, imitating the sounds of percussion instruments using their mouths, lips, tongues and voices. The song, sung in Spanish, is in a traditional Cuban style. The words tell of a fateful train journey; the passengers are welcomed aboard, the journey begins, but then the power begins to fail, the train has run out of fuel and the power is failing. The song is overlaid throughout by vocal imitations of trains, sirens, clicking rails and hissing steam.

Canada

Canadian railroad trilogy by Gordon Lightfoot

Singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot was commissioned to write this song by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to celebrate the Canadian Centennial in 1967. Strictly speaking it is not a song describing a journey; rather it focuses on the building of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway which was completed in 1886. However, the 'iron road runnin' from the sea to the sea does take us through the 'wild majestic mountains' the dark forests, the Rockies and the 'wide prairies' painting a picture of the varied geography of that vast country. With its simple repeated chord progressions, strumming guitars (12-string, acoustic and bass) and harmonica, 'Canadian railroad trilogy' could best be described as folk-pop. Strumming guitars set the railroad chugging along with the speed picking up as the song gets underway. Fast-paced sections at the opening and close of the song are set around a poignant slow middle section describing the isolation and hardship of the navvies.

Canada's first transcontinental railway line is 2700 miles long running from Ontario to the Pacific Ocean and it covers much difficult terrain. Traversing two mountain ranges, the Rockies and the Selkirks, it involved extensive blasting through hard rock. Around 15,000 manual labourers were employed as navvies, half of them Chinese.³⁰ Lightfoot's lyrics describe their long days of back-breaking work in the 'bright blazing sun', ending with the words 'many are the dead men/too silent to be real.' In all at least 800 men died. At the same time as chronicling the hardships, Lightfoot recognises the optimism of that period of Canada's history when people 'came from all around', setting up new industries and looking to the future.



Canadian Pacific poster
Granger Historical
Picture Archive / Alamy
Stock Photo

South Africa

Coal train (*Stimela*) by Hugh Masekela

The South African jazz musician Hugh Masekela (1939 – 2018) was brought up in the mining town of Witbank in the Eastern Transvaal, a town with a population which included many migrant workers from Mozambique. For most of the twentieth century the gold-mining industry of South Africa relied on black migrant labour. The gold mines were some distance from thickly populated areas that could supply the vast low-waged workforce needed to make deep-level gold mining a profitable proposition. This meant that 'rural recruits were obliged to shuttle to and fro ...on nine-month labour contracts'.³¹ Between 1911 and 1930 an annual average of about 700,000 were railed to the mines. The train facilities were basic, and the treatment the migrant passengers received 'reflected the abuse, disinterest and intolerance that affected all African passengers'.³² The historian Charles van Onselen provides a grim account of the trains that transported migrant workers from Mozambique to and from the Rand mines – journeys that he describes as 'mobile incarceration'. As late as the 1920s some workers still had to travel part of the 20 hour journey in open coal trucks during the cold winter with little food or water.³³ The Congolese author Fiston Mwanza Mujila wrote that trains 'had a whole other symbolism than in Europe. They symbolized the taming of African nature, deportation, forced labor, exploitation, the transport of minerals, looting etc.'³⁴

When Masekela was at school he was famously given his first trumpet by Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, a champion of anti-apartheid and the chaplain at Masekela's school. As well as playing trumpet and flugelhorn, Masekela was a powerful singer and songwriter with a strong political voice. He became an active anti-apartheid supporter, which eventually led to his exile from South Africa.³⁵

He recorded several versions of this powerful song. It opens with repeated beats on the cow bell, a simple but effective way of evoking the sound of a moving train. This leads to a spoken introduction in which Masekela lists areas of Africa that the conscripted labourers had been transported from to work in the 'golden mineral mines of Johannesburg'. He describes the cruel conditions in which they worked, the 'stinking, funky, filthy, flea-ridden barracks' where they lived and how they were cut off from their families who may have been 'forcibly removed' or 'wantonly murdered' in their absence. To the migrant workers the

'Choo-choo', as Masekela sarcastically refers to the coal train, is not an object of affection; rather they 'curse it'. The spoken section ends with a dramatic 'Whoaa' reminiscent of a steam train whistle, and the cow bell leads into Masekela's horn solos (either flugelhorn or trumpet on different recordings). 'Coal train' is a soulful song 'blistering and mournful, infused with the energies of resistant people', as Sharae Deckard puts it 'Hugh Masekela wields trumpet and words like weapons, introducing a deeply political consciousness of class struggle and social justice into his fusion of AfroBeat and jazz funk'.³⁶

Into the twenty-first century

In 2001 Pennsylvanian singer-songwriters, Artese 'N Toad, released the album *They Don't Write Songs About Trains Anymore*. The acoustic Americana songs are all centred on train themes, stories about railroad events and people, with plenty of historical detail. The album proved to be popular, partly because it was given away with model train sets made by MTH Electric Trains, and its popularity led to a follow-up album. The album *Traineater* by the Brooklyn-based rock band Book of Knots mourns the decline of heavy industry in the 'Rust Belt' and its title song, 'Traineater', is about 'Old No. 6, a locomotive on its way to be scrapped. It also includes a version of 'The ballad of John Henry'. Similarly the English progressive rock band Big Big Train have released two albums including songs with historical train themes: *The Underfall Yard* and *English Electric Vol. 2* where 'East coast racer' tells the story of the record breaking run by *Mallard* over 80 years ago.

All of the above are songs of nostalgia for a bygone age, performed in a musical style which is no longer at the forefront of contemporary popular music. So is it true that they don't write songs about trains anymore? Are there any twenty-first-century pop songs celebrating current rail travel, and are any of them in one of the styles which currently predominate the charts, namely electronic dance music, ambient and hip-hop, which have seen an unrivalled rise in popularity worldwide? Certainly they are few and far between in comparison with the output of train songs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

However, at least one pop song has been written to celebrate a landmark in the development of the railways during this century. In 2003, the Central

Japan Railway Company commissioned Rei Nakanishi and Kyōhei Tsutsumi to write a song to celebrate the opening of a new area of Tokyo's Shinagawa Station created to accommodate the Shinkansen (bullet trains). The song 'Ambitious Japan', performed by the band Tokio, was used as part of a huge campaign and the Bullets' 300 and 700-series trains were emblazoned with its title; it soon reached No. 1 in the Japanese charts. The trains may have been cutting edge, but the musical style was the type of pure pop which has been around for decades.

There are some references to trains by American rock bands in the early 2000s. In their song 'Clark Gable', indie band The Postal Service open with a familiar theme when they sing that they are waiting for a train in the London Underground. Julian Casablancas, the lead singer of rock band The Strokes, compares himself to a train 'moving too fast' in 'Automatic stop' and in the sinister chorus of 'Enfilade', hard-core rock band At The Drive In scream of being a sacrifice on a railroad track, tied and gagged with a freight train coming. A search for railway songs in a more contemporary idiom reveals that trains have not totally lost their appeal. In 'Girl on a train' (2016), Harlem rapper Skizzy Mars tells of falling in love with a pretty stranger on the 'L with some headphones on'. In the same year hip-hop duo Macklemore and Ryan Lewis rap from the perspective of a disconnected traveller who uses the train as a means of escape. In this song the train is used in the now familiar metaphor of a journey passing through life; as we hear in the chorus 'Otra ciudad, otra vida' (Another train, another life). There are no lyrics in the lo-fi ambient instrumental 'Train ride home' (2018) by lofi.samurai, but the title represents another common theme found in train songs.

Perhaps the heyday of the train song has passed, but railways are still able to illuminate the wider aspects of life: acting as a metaphor or representing a means of escape; taking you away and bringing you back home; connecting places and people. They can be a place of reverie, of frustration or romance, and their evocative sounds and irresistible rhythms continue to inspire countless pieces of music.

Endnotes

- 1 T R Gourvish. *British Railways 1948-73. A Business History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 437.
- 2 Charles Loft. *Government, the Railways and the Modernization of Britain: Beeching's Last Trains*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).
- 3 In 1965 Widnes station was named Widnes North station.
- 4 *The Guardian*, 1 August, 1990.
- 5 Spencer Leigh. *Simon & Garfunkel. Together Alone*. (Carmarthen: McNidder and Grace, 2016).
- 6 *The Times*, 7 October, 2000.
- 7 Elsewhere the Windsor folk club is referred to as the Howff folk club which was housed in the Windsor Rooms in Widnes.
- 8 Robert Hilburn. *Paul Simon. The Life*. (London, Simon and Schuster UK (2018)): 79-80.
- 9 *The Guardian*, 25 April, 2001.
- 10 Hilburn, *Paul Simon*, 79-80.
- 11 Simon Bradley. *The Railways: Nation, Network and People* (London: Profile Books, 2015): 274
- 12 *The Times*, 21 October, 2009.
- 13 According to the CBC, there would not have been a midnight train to Georgia in 1973, nor for that matter a through train. The best route would be via New Orleans with the train leaving Los Angeles at 9.00 pm to make an overnight connection. However, Weatherley's song started its life as the 'Midnight Plane to Houston' referencing a comment made in a telephone conversation with his friend Farrah Fawcett. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/the180/the-problem-with-this-song-midnight-train-to-georgia>
- 14 There is more than one recording of this song with either Bob Marley or Peter Tosh as the vocalist.
- 15 Kwame Dawes. *Bob Marley. Lyrical Genius*. (London: Bobcat Books, 2002).
- 16 <https://thequietus.com/articles/03195-the-damned-s-captain-sensible-on-why-he-likes-trains>
- 17 A flanger works by mixing the original sound with a very slightly delayed version, whereas delay effects create echoing sounds.
- 18 Peter Doggett. *The Man Who Sold the World: David Bowie and the 1970s*. (London: Vintage, 2012).
- 19 Nicholas Pegg. *The Complete David Bowie*. (London: Titan Books, 2016).
- 20 Panning is the technique of shifting a sound within the stereo field so that it appears to move from one speaker to another.
- 21 Pegg. *The Complete David Bowie*, 2016.
- 22 A dictionary definition of the word 'parapliers' has not been found.

- 23 <https://tomwaitspodcast.wordpress.com/2016/03/09/i-lived-my-life-on-dreams-and-trainsmoke-tom-waits-trains/>
- 24 <https://jimjarmusch.tripod.com/snc93.html>
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 <http://www.rattenne.com/essay/dedtrain.html>
- 27 Gopal Das. 'Cocaine Abuse in North America: A Milestone in History'. *The Journal of Clinical Pharmacology* 33(4) (1993):296-310 .
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 For more information and the lyrics to 'Freight train blues' see pages 227 and 270.
- 30 Christian Wolmar. *A Short History of Trains*. (London: Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 2019): 125-127
- 31 'Gordon Pirie. 'Brutish bombelas. Trains for migrant gold miners in South Africa c. 1900-25' *Journal of Transport History* 18 no. 1 (1997): 31-44.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Charles van Onselen. *The Night Trains: Moving Mozambican Miners to and from South Africa, circa 1902-1955*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 34 As cited in Kathy Mansfield. *Noel's story: A man of Zimbabwe*. (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2020).
- 35 Robin Denselow *When the music's over. The story of political pop*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1989): 48-9.
- 36 S. Deckard and S Shapiro (eds.). *World literature, Neoliberalism and the Culture of Discontent*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 246.