

A Preliminary Comparison of American and Canadian Railway Song Traditions

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If you ask most Canadians about their favourite railway song, many will scratch their heads and say, “Do we have any?” A few might mention Gordon Lightfoot’s “Canadian Railroad Trilogy,” while others may dredge up old standards like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Slim pickings, it seems. This appears to be even more true when set beside the extensive canon of railroad songs from the United States, many of which have become standards, not only down south, but here too: 500 Miles, City of New Orleans, Wreck of the Old 97, John Henry, Wabash Cannonball, Freight Train and so on. So the question becomes whether this apparent difference between Canada and the United States represents a “real” difference between our two cultures or whether there is something else going on. The position I will take here is that there is an equally rich trove of railway songs in Canada, and that differences, if there are any, relate to Canada’s perpetual shyness, or what some call our cultural inferiority complex, about promoting ourselves. Put differently, I will argue and, I hope demonstrate, that there is a rich tradition of song making about the Canadian railroad. However, it has not attained same the degree of public awareness as in America.

What follows is very preliminary, representing the beginning of a longer term project. I solicit any suggestions, references, contacts—whatever—that might help.

There is one difference between ourselves and the U.S. that warrants comment before proceeding. Since the 19th century, the preferred term in the United States has been “railroad,” while in Britain, it is “railway.” (Cohen, 1981, p. 4). My discussions with railroad people, both workers and “fanners,” has confirmed that the term “railroad” is seen as a flag to signal American influence and “railway” has become the preferred term in Canada. Merely a semantic difference, I suppose, but a significant marker of difference nonetheless.

Historically, there is also another difference that warrants mention. One of the major reasons why Sir John A. MacDonald promoted the Canadian Pacific Railway as strongly as he did, circa 1880, was to combat American expansionism. Whether this

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involved arguing for an all-Canadian route over the top of Lake Superior, or to woo British Columbia into the union, the Canadian railway was a product of fear that we would be absorbed by the U.S. Here's some rhetoric of the time that suggests this fear was not unfounded:

That the U.S. are bound finally to absorb all the world and the rest of mankind, every well-regulated American mind is prepared to admit. When the fever is on our people do not seem to know when and where to stop, but to keep on swallowing, so long as there is anything in reach. (*Daily Alta California*, Feb 3, 1969)

It would seem that the development of railways in both countries was driven by differing motivations: expansionism in the U.S., protectionism in Canada. It is unclear, but nonetheless an interesting question, whether these particular differences have any discernable impact on song making in each country.

Before proceeding, I should also note that the idea of a railway song is not a simple as we might think. To be sure, there are unquestioned exemplars: e.g., The CPR Line, The Rocket, The Fireman's Lament, Wreck of the Evening Mail. But what about songs that mention railways only peripherally? For example, should songs celebrating the exploits of Bill Miner be considered railway songs, simply because he chose to rob trains? Or should hobo songs be included because, at the time, the railway was the only free mode of transportation? In this paper I have chosen to follow Norm Cohen, the dean of American railroad song research, and take a rather liberal view of this, accepting songs whose mention of the railway is "more than just casual" (Cohen, 1981, p. 40).

Finally, I should be clear that I am not going to suggest that I've discovered a vibrant tradition of song making and performance within the occupational group of railway workers. I'm not proposing the discovery of a lumber camp shanty in the caboose; rich with songs, throbbing with excitement about each performance. The nature of railway work precludes this possibility, as does the fact that the few studies of railway workers their tastes in songs are no different from any other group with the same social background (see Cohen, 1981, p. 41). Rather, what I'm dealing with here are songs with significant railway content, without making any claims about their consensus or popularity within the railroad worker occupational group. In a sense, I've been forced to retreat to an item-oriented approach to railway songs in Canada—categorizing them mostly on their content. I recognize this is a controversial choice within the folklore and ethnomusicological communities, but, in light of the research available, feel I have no other choice. I do believe, however, that what follows does speak to an anglo tradition of song making that has adopted the railway as a major motif.

Forgetting for the moment our fine-grained distinctions between traditional and commercial, and simply looking at the canon of songs that deal with the Canadian railway, we find a surprising number. I've recently begun assembling these and have well over a hundred in hand. This compliments the website www.railwaysongs.ca that

provides an organic list of many of these. The songs I have in hand are impressive, not only in number, but also in the breadth of railway themes they treat.

The themes that emerge in this list are:

Categories of Canadian railway songs

Most frequent:

- About specific trains (e.g., Newfoundland Express, Kettle Valley Line)
- About specific events (e.g., The Coquihalla Slide, Train Wreck at Almonte)
- Nostalgia (e.g., E&N Won't Run Here Any More, Our Island's Lament, Painting Over the NAR)
- About specific places (e.g., Myra's Majesty, Sixteen Miles to Seven Lakes)
- Building the railway (e.g., CPR Line, Demon Fire Carriage Road)
- Hobos (e.g., Hobo's Song to the Mounties, Canadian Hobo's Lullaby)
- Railway men (e.g., Section men, The Fireman's Lament)
- About specific individuals (e.g., Bill Miner's Jailbreak, The Padre)

Least frequent:

This scheme is not definitive in any sense of the word, but does give us glimpse of the main aspects of the railway that have attracted Canadian writers' attention. Hardly an impoverished tradition, I'd say.

Indeed, the more I look, the more songs I find, leaving me with the suspicion that there's an unending trove of songs out there, just waiting to be documented. An example of this is the Kettle Valley Line, a now-defunct railway that ran through the interior heart of British Columbia from Midway to Hope. I was looking into a song entitled "The Kettle Valley Line" written by Ean Hay and recorded by Stan Triggs. Without a whole lot of work I found five more songs dealing explicitly with that line, and another ten related to it. Part of this was due the presence of a revival group called the Kettle Valley Brakemen, but I found one of these songs in Calgary and am presently tracking down several more about which I've heard rumours. In other words, the seeming lack of Canadian railway songs appears to be a matter of perception, based, perhaps, on a lack of research, rather than any cultural difference between ourselves and the United States. Everything I've encountered so far tells me there is a lively tradition of railway song making out there—not represented in the mainstream, but thriving in small pubs, clubs, kitchens and self-recorded CDs.

Very few of these songs are "traditional" in, if you will, the traditional sense. Exceptions include a majority of the "Building the railway" songs (e.g., CPR Line, Drill ye Tarriers, Railroad Boy) and several others (e.g., The Newfoundland Express). The vast majority are composed, authors known, and developed for performance to an audience unknown to the performer.

This is especially true of railway songs found in country music, which, as far as I know, have not been systematically surveyed. It's my impression that a fine-grained look at Canadian country music will add substantially to the size of this collection. Hank Snow issued three albums with railway themes. One or two of the songs on these have Canadian content (e.g., "Canadian Pacific"). The remainder, however, are American. Wilf Carter, despite his interest in hobos, did not address the railway very much in his overall repertoire. Stompin' Tom Connors, Stevadore Steve and Gordon Lightfoot have penned a fair number of relevant songs and, more recently, Patricia Conroy, Prairie Oyster and Fred Eaglesmith have done the same. Equally important, I believe, are the legions of lesser-known country music artists, beginning in '30s, who may have taken on the railway from a Canadian perspective: e.g., Edison Williams, Slim Rogers, Stu Phillips, Alberta Slim, and many, many more. I hope to explore these over the next while, expecting to find a goodly number of relevant songs. Any hints, suggestions or recommendations about how I might proceed would be most welcome.

Looking at the list of songs I have in hand reveals that the railway has, indeed, captured the imagination of Canadian anglo song writers. As we might expect, the iron horse has become an important icon in the minds of these folks and in the works they produce.

When Barry Luft and I released our album "Songs of the Iron Trail," which contains a mix of traditional and newer railway material, several reviewers were quick to point out that many of the songs had their origins south of the border. For example, Emily Freidman noted: "However, the debt that Canadian railroad song makers owe to Americans of the same ilk is evident in the derivative material based on American folk music" (*CFTS*, 1984, *10*(2), p. 31). In a recent review of the CD re-release of this album, *Sing Out* also drew attention to the songs that were "Canadian variants of well known songs," using the term "parody" to describe one of the tunes (*Sing Out!*, 2007, *51*(3), p. 164). This presence of parody is not restricted to the traditional material. We also find it in some of the composed songs. For example, "Sea to Shining Sea," a tribute to the navvies who built the railway, by the Kettle Valley Brakemen, uses the tune of "Rolling Down to Old Maui."

*From sea to shining sea, we build
From sea to shining sea
A railway grand, across this land
We build from sea to sea*

Parody, then, appears to be an important characteristic of these songs. Interestingly, railway songs are not alone here, with similar observations having been made regarding songs about mining, college life, political protest, and a wide range of military contexts. In the reviews I've mentioned, and in many conversations, I have gotten the distinct impression that this derivative and parodic aspect of railway songs is seen as somehow detracting from the importance and authenticity of the Canadian material, rendering it inferior. I beg to differ.

First, a look at the Oxford English Dictionary seems to confirm our American friend's observations. Parody is defined as a composition that ridicules by imitation, a travesty, a feeble imitation. If a good part of the Canadian railway song canon is parodic in this sense, then it seems reasonable to treat it with disdain. But there is more to it than this.

Peter Narvaez (1977) has offered insight into this perception of parody as inferior. He suggests three factors underlying this value judgment:

1. The search for the holy grail of uncontaminated, pure materials, so much part of old school folklore studies, renders parodic materials, which are by definition contaminated, less than worthy;
2. What Dundes calls the devolutionary view of folklore, namely that materials deteriorate over successive oral transmissions, has led many to consider that newer material is inferior. Parodies, based as they are on older songs, are, therefore, corruptions or copies;
3. Parody is akin to plagiarism, which in a word-dominated world like the academy, is perhaps the gravest sin of all. By this view, products of the parodic imitative process cannot be of value.

By Narvaez, this has led to an implicit value judgment that condemns parody and its imitative kin. He goes on to say that this condemnation is totally inappropriate when the subject of study is oral/aural communication. For example, he indicates that the imposition of literary biases on oral communication systems renders the notion of plagiarism senseless.

Edith Fowke challenged Narvaez's conclusions in a rejoinder entitled "But parodies are accepted!" She suggested he had overstated his case about the negative view of parody and went on to outline numerous songs in Canadian anglo tradition that were "offshoots" of other songs (e.g., "The Unfortunate Rake" and its spawn, a cycle of songs built around "Hard, Hard Times"). She concluded: "All these and many other parodies appear in folk-song collections with no indication that they are regarded as inferior specimens."

My own view is that both Narvaez and Fowke are right—parodies are devalued and seen as derivative, and yet a large amount of traditional music, being parodic, is not devalued and derivative. A conundrum to be sure. The resolution of this apparent impasse is to look at the act of song making. Anyone writing/composing from within a specific tradition has a limited iconography/vocabulary/grammar within in which to work—be it milk white steeds, "Come all ye...", or the specific lingo of occupational groups. To fail to stay within these limitations is to step outside of the tradition. I suggest we should consider specific tunes as part of this system of in-group symbols. After all, they are familiar and bring a sense of knowing to the listener. This would be no different from milk white steeds or come-all-ye's. The parody, defined as "borrowing"

extant tunes, then, is an integral and critical piece of evidence for the existence of a musical tradition—not something to be poo-poo-ed or buried in the “notes about the songs” section at the back of a book. Anyone who deprecates a song tradition for its parodic quality does not understand the nature of tradition and is imposing inappropriate values. I believe parody is to be celebrated as revealing a lively and vital tradition. And, it follows that the parodic character of some of the songs in my emerging collection is testimony to the existence of a vibrant tradition of song making centered on the Canadian railroad experience.

The best example of parody in the Canadian railway context involves a cycle of songs based upon “The Wabash Cannonball.” This song began its life as “The Great Rock Island Route” published in the U.S. in 1882. In 1904, it appeared under its usual name, copyrighted by William Kindt. In this early version it was about a mythical train that ran everywhere in the U.S., seven hundred cars long, running on ties made of entire redwood trees. Indeed, the Wabash Cannonball went so fast that even after it was brought to a stop, it was still going sixty-five miles an hour.... The song was then adapted and became associated with the American hobo. The first recorded versions of “The Wabash Cannonball,” with its hobo clothes now being standard issue, were in 1929 (e.g., The Carter Family, among others). However, the 1936 recording by Roy Acuff became the best known, said to have sold over one million copies in 1942 (Cohen, 1981, p. 377). Acuff re-recorded it in 1947, omitting the chorus.

With such popularity, it is not surprising that the tune was soon borrowed. Woody Guthrie’s 1947 “The Farmer-Labor Train” did exactly this.

In Canada, the tune was adapted to a number of parodies. Peter Narvaez (1977) documents one from Newfoundland entitled “The Boat from Kingwell.” Here’s the first verse:

*Come listen boys I'll tell you a story if I may
About the boat from Kingwell, she's all around the bay,
Owned and crewed by Otto Peach who does a damn fine job
He never got a compass but he still gets through the fog.*

Interestingly, railroad-related parodies began to appear in Newfoundland even before Guthrie’s Farm-Labor song. Narvaez reports a Newfoundland version entitled “The Tramway Cannonball” which tells of the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company’s private train. But more popular was a parody entitled “The Newfoundland Express,” criticizing the legendary “Newfie Bullet,” the train that ran across the Island. A version was collected by Helen Creighton from Private William Gaudet in 1943. This song was popular with Canadian and American soldiers stationed in Newfoundland during the Second World War, many of whom were happy to poke fun at the “locals.” Actress Joan Blondell was said to have sung this song after a trip on the “Bullet” that did not meet her expectations for comfort and elegance. Here are several verses:

*We left St. John's on Monday, the day was bleeding cold
The engineer was roaring drunk as some of us was told,
He said, "If you're not anxious to answer her request
We'll get there sometime next month on the Newfoundland Express."*

*Oh see that lonely soldier with his bayonet by his side,
He's going back to Canada to wed his promised bride,
He's fought his share of battles, but now he's done his best,
And now he takes his chances on the Newfoundland Express.*

*Next month it will be winter with snow upon the ground,
We're waiting for the postman to bring some mail around,
He says "Now boys I'm sorry, but I have done my best,
But the mail is on a snow drift on the Newfoundland Express."*

*One day a soldier decided to heaven he would go,
And he tied himself to the railroad track when he heard the whistle blow,
He must have been there a long time for he starved to death I guess
Waiting on the railroad track for the Newfoundland Express.*

Clearly this was not a flattering portrayal of the beloved "Bullet." So, not to be outdone, the "locals" composed an "Answer to the Newfoundland Express," of which I've located four versions. The best know of these was on a Edison Williams recording (Audat 477-9006). The tone of this "Answer" is clear in the 2nd verse:

*Before you set foot on our shores everything was nice and clean,
You could go into a diner and have a decent meal.
Since you started traveling, everything is in a mess,
It's hardly safe to ride now on the Newfoundland Express.*

In the 4th verse, the song turns to more pressing concerns as a young Newfoundland lady finds herself in distress. However, she handles herself in a most appropriate way:

*A pretty lady passenger was sitting there close by,
She spies an American soldier with a twinkle in his eye.
He walked up beside her and asked her for a kiss,
Lifted her hand and knocked him cold on the Newfoundland Express.*

This "great debate in song," was no doubt performed more than once in the rickety cars of that famous narrow gauge railway. It was resolved in the last verse:

*Now to conclude and finish, I hope you don't get sore,
I didn't mean to insult you like you did to us before.
Before this war is over, if I don't miss my guess,
You'll wish that you were back again on the Newfoundland Express.*

This song cycle was clearly heard off island. A version entitled “The PEI Express,” selectively adapts verses from both the original song and the answer.

The most recent Wabash Cannonball parody I’ve found comes from the other side of the country. “The Kootenay Cannonball” deals with a mixed freight/passenger train that ran between Cranbrook and Golden, British Columbia. It was written by Mel Hynes, a singer from Spillimacheen, BC, a small town on the line.

This song is different in many ways from the eastern versions, but maintains the tongue-in-cheek humour that characterizes this family of Canadian railway songs.

*It runs along the river, the Columbia is its name
From Cranbrook into Golden, and then goes back again
I rode on lots of railroads but there’s none among them all
That’s half as bad or rough as the Kootenay Cannonball*

*There’s a half a mile of box cars with a coach tied on the rear
It’s like an awful nightmare with the Devil as engineer
It rattles down the Valley, if you don’t lie down you’ll fall
There’s many a brave man beaten by the Kootenay Cannonball*

*You bump against the ceiling and then upon the floor
There isn’t any spot on you that doesn’t get quite sore
Cream will turn to butter or splash upon the wall
And eggs become an omelette on the Kootenay Cannonball*

*Men have bragged and told us of deeds of bravery
Of battles or of blizzards or storms upon the sea
The cowboy rides his bronco, old Strawberry Roan and all
But I have beaten all of them on the Kootenay Cannonball*

It’s remarkable to find one tune straddling the entire country. Some have argued that, because this is an American tune, it diminishes the Canadian versions. As I’ve said earlier, I believe the borrowing of this tune says more about a creative and vital song making community than it does about some inappropriate notion of aesthetics.

In summary, then, I hope I’ve been able to persuade you of the presence of a viable canon of anglo songs about the Canadian railway. The numbers of songs, the breadth of themes, and the presence of parody all speak to a vital and lively tradition. While few these have migrated into mainstream consciousness, there seems little doubt that there is a rich trove of songs “out there” and, equally importantly, I expect there are many more waiting to be heard. Whether the differences in entering the mainstream between the United States and Canada relate to the expansionist/protectionist contrast mentioned earlier is a matter for future work. For now, the important point is to get the

research done and see what is “waiting out there.” I solicit any feedback and comments you might have about this emerging project.....