

Seeing Stevie by Tram

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Canadian Graffiti

Man, did I lust for a car like schoolmate Peter Hill's! Peter had a union job at a hospital, so could afford goodies like a full-race camshaft for his GTO. As time went by, my attention shifted to foreign jobs like the Datsun 240Z, Porsche 914, Triumph TR7/8 and Fiat X/19.

My dad sold cars for Reg Midgley, the local American Motors dealer, and for awhile he drove around in, yes, a *Pacer*. This bubble car, made famous on *Wayne's World*, today has a certain kitsch value.

Cars obsessed me, and I inhaled every issue of *Car & Driver* and *Road & Track* and even bought a '66 Chevelle ragtop for 500 clams, intending to make it into a rocket like Peter's. But other interests happened, one of them being music. Girls, itchy feet, a realization that education might actually matter etc.

My first inkling that all was not right in Carland was in the summer of '74, delivering car parts for Empress Pontiac. There were two delivery vehicles: a big GMC van and a weird little purple station wagon called an Astre. The van was solid, delightful to drive. The Astre: C-R-A-P, making all kinds of groans like a B horror movie. Some interior parts appeared to have been installed by a 5-year-old with a jar of paste.

More Flies in the Ointment: Greyhound

The job market in Victoria was bleak in the lates '70s as the shipyards and forest industry were shutting down. Alberta was booming, so it was off to Edmonchuk, so-called because of its large Ukrainian population. You can't go far in Alberta's capital without tripping over a pyrogy joint.

For three days, my job was a platform loader for the big bus company. This involved loading luggage but mostly packages on and off the famous vehicles with the sleek doggies on the side. Packages were a big source of profit. Sometimes Greyhound ran buses without any passengers, and the whole bus would be stuffed with boxes, often pulling a trailer with even more.

The actual work of being a platform loader wasn't bad. Another union operation in those days, it paid



OK. But Edmonton is cold, so the bus loading area was covered. Where did the diesel fumes go? Good question, grasshopper, into the lungs of the poor suckers working there is where. Toiling for the Hound was probably like a two-pack-a-day habit. Since jobs were everywhere then, why put up with it?

Edmonton was the first city in North America to build an all-new tram line for decades. I rode on it a few times, most memorably on a jam-packed train to see Fleetwood Mac at Northlands Colliseum on their *Tusk* tour. *Rumours* is reputed to have sold 45 million copies. Excellent show, Stevie Nicks swirling around in a cloud of scarves was something from *Arabian Nights*.

Zippy Trains

Having never been even to Saskatchewan, I felt like a hayseed ignoramous. The summer of '81, saw me as a shipper for Safeway, filling trailers with dairy products. This milk palace (officially Lucerne Foods Milk Plant) hummed: it supplied every Safeway store in Alberta, western Saskatchewan and the Peace River district of BC. You could swim lengths in the two stainless-steel tubs where cottage cheese was made. One worked one's hynie off, but it offered good wages, all the OT you wanted and then some.

I had a crush on a pretty business student named Joanne, who was also saving to travel. Being a capitalist she was rather, no, let's be accurate and make that "insanely" competitive: "What, you've only saved \$3,000. (Thought bubble: LO-SER). I'm up to five already!" I got a ticket to Schiphol airport in Amsterdam, plus a \$400 Eurailpass, good for two months.



Above, look at the size of this Edmonton train! Just the thing for concerts, sports events and rush hours (Martin Parsons).



European trains, oh baby! Fast, clean, running all the time. Stand in a huge train station full of shops and people, look at the big constantly-changing schedule. Hmm, go to Frankfurt, maybe Paris, Berlin, Milan?

The original “plan”, such as it was, hadn’t been to go to Páree, but the realistic thought came to mind, “When exactly will your next shot at this come up, cowboy?” So there was a westward veer in the itinerary, finding me in Lyon, looking at this long orange-and-grey beast called a TGV.



Is Usain Bolt quick? Nope. A cheetah? Nope.

Japan supposedly built the first bullet train in ‘64, but in fact America had done it decades earlier when the Chicago North Shore ran Electroliners in 1941. (This is not a slur on the many technological leaps and impeccable safety record of the shinkansen). The sleek Gallic unit before me, 40 years post-Electroliner, had only been running for a few weeks. There was just a small surcharge on top of the railpass to ride, so what the heck.

Pinch me, I’m sitting on a cloud with a harp. When you’ve grown up riding on diesel buses, you think the constant roar and vibration is normal, but this puppy was smooooth and quiet. Slick Euro interior styling, and the only reason you knew you were blasting at some insane speed was the catenary poles zipping by in a blur.

A Year in French Mega-City #2

Montreal Quebec had gripped my fantasies for awhile, partly fuelled by the novels of Mordecai Richler, set in the city’s ethnic neighborhoods. Ste. Catherines Street was a horizontal anthill, with tens of thousands of people packing the sidewalks. (Mind you, this *was* a North American city, and part of the atmosphere on a steamy summer night was the cruising muscle cars with music blaring). For the first time, I saw that modern life wasn’t automatically about driving to work, driving to the mall, squabbling about parking. Many people on Montreal island used the big subway system or the crude General Motors buses that fed it. The big revelation, though, was that a person could live just fine without a driver’s license. Wasn’t a DL necessary to life, like the carbon cycle or photosynthesis?

My idea had been to get a job washing dishes in a French restaurant, maybe meet a cute little franco-phone waitress etc. The reality: washing a tsunami of dishes and pots, mopping the floors, taking out the trash till 4 am. It was a real French joint all right, but as the token anglo there, to the staff here was this walking resource to keep up with the subtleties of English slang. On the positive side, the manager was a very nice guy, and you did get one excellent meal per shift. But by moving back to Edmonton for the summer, my wages tripled from four bucks an hour to twelve.

Six Years in Ottawa

The idea of living in Ottawa came to me on a skating trip up from Montreal to the nation’s capital. On a cold sunny day, masses of humanity thronged the famous Rideau Canal ice rink. The piano music of Hagood Hardy was piped in, and people of all ages lived the good life.

While this city offered a huge number of federally-subsidized amenities, the public transport system was



Above, a Montreal General Motors transit bus. For decades primitive, noisy, smoke-belching machines like these dominated transit in North America, and diesel still runs the show, mostly. GM had bribed and schemed its way into a monopoly, but did they do themselves any good? Below R, one of the propaganda films the company produced.



a Chevy Vega/Pontiac Astre-scale fiasco. The city had bought into the idea of “bus rapid transit”. The biggest BRT station was St.-Laurent, in the east end. Hell on Earth, with hundreds of noisy, fume-belching buses rumbling through all day. If you’re looking for a nice little restaurant or coffee shop in Ottawa, skip this den of despair.

The Pretenders played Ottawa. Their singer Chrissie Hynde wrote *My City Was Gone*, a song with a terrific bass line that’s a lament for Hynde’s hometown of Akron Ohio and farmland lost to freeways and malls.

The Paving of Vancouver Island

By 1992, I was back in Victoria, and the provincial government, heavy on car dealers, announced plans for a massive freeway system. I decided to get involved and do something. How hard the battle would be became clear in a conversation with a guy from the Sierra Club. He thought the freeway was a great idea: “bypass all those jerkwater towns”. Oh yeah, you’re a real environmentalist, bub.

I soon learned about what’s still called the “General Motors Transportation Conspiracy” (this name is extremely inaccurate since GM was just the biggest company involved). The world is full of nutbar conspiracies that exist only in people’s demented imaginations, but then somebody played a 1987 60 Minutes segment called *Clang Clang Clang Went the Trolley*. 60 Minutes, pretty authoritative, *non*?

Delving into this story left me unsatisfied. Every tidbit I discovered just left me with ten more questions. The plan had been to do a masters in urban planning, but here was stuff that was barely on the fringes of the public’s knowledge. This paved over, smoggy world we live in is an environmental dystopia created by bullying greedheads.