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The New York City Subway Motorman's Rant

BY STEVE ZEITLIN



Photo courtesy of Torin Reid

Introduction

Every New Yorker who has ridden the subways for any length of time eventually cracks. The announcements are incomprehensible, the trains get stuck for seemingly no reason. On a particular day in 2003, even the air conditioner didn't work in the car, and, yes, I cracked. I stormed out of the F train, which was stuck at West 4th Street, ran over to the motorman's window and was about to give him a piece of my mind. When I saw the motorman and he saw me, we both burst out laughing.

Here's why. A few years earlier, in June and July, 2001, just a few months before 9/11, the Smithsonian Institution presciently decided to feature the folk culture of New York City as part of its annual Festival of American Folklife. It was a golden moment, just before everything changed for New York a few months later. The sprawling Smithsonian festival highlighted Wall Street traders, New York City street games, Broadway crafts, the water towers, and a bagel maker (who complained that the water in DC wasn't good enough for his bagels, so curator Nancy Groce arranged for a water truck to ship our delicious New York City water down to the capital). City Lore was charged with bringing subway workers to the mall. I had met Torin Reid, a subway motorman, at the memorial that we held for a beloved unboused gentleman whom we had both befriended—Tony Butler.

In a series of storytelling sessions, Torin regaled festival visitors with tales from his trade as a motorman, many of them about exasperated passengers. On that sweltering day two years later in 2003, he was the driver of the stuck F Train, when he saw me outside the train car window raging, and we both cracked up.

We became friends, and Torin went on to become an author. In his second book, The New York City Subways' Motorman's Rant, he rants about the transit system and offers some expert advice on how to improve your subway experience.

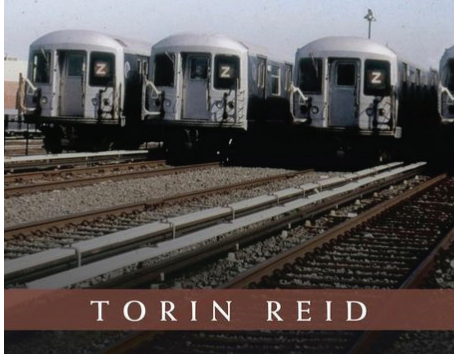
"I have to f*** with the trains!" bellowed this man on his cell phone while riding a northbound N train toward the 8th Street Avenue Station. I remember this conversation very clearly because he was sitting across from me in the subway car. Of course, I was in my full transit uniform. And it was clear that this man wanted me to know about his problems. Perhaps it was his wife or girlfriend who was on the other end of this conversation. The man continued on the phone with "I'm sorry, baby, I don't know when I will get there." Then he repeated, "I have to f*** with the trains! They don't know which way they are going...."

My response to him is LEARN THE SUBWAYS. In fact, this advice is so good,

I am at a loss to explain why no one else has said this before.... There are those, for instance, who on purpose or involuntarily leave their vomit, urination, defecation, and other bodily fluids within the body of the subway car. It is up to you to visually inspect the seat and the area before you sit down. At this point, I will tell you that it is a great idea to have a pack of tissues, or some alcohol or Handiwipes with you when you are riding the subway. The goal here is not to perform the cleaner's job, but it is to make your own little space a little safer for yourself.... This is good advice! So, with this essay, I will take you on a partly fictional ride from work to home that I have adapted from what I witnessed several years ago.

Now, let's take a New York City Subway map, and at least mentally, hang it temporarily, on a wall. Don't use the map on your phone for this. Any old wall will do. The map won't be there for long. Next, let's take a dart. We will throw this dart at the subway map. Bingo! It lands in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn, near the F line. So, for the purposes of this essay, your home station will be Avenue N on the F line. Like most

The NEW YORK CITY SUBWAYS' MOTORMANS' RANT





Folklorist Steve Zeitlin met Torin Reid at the memorial for Tony Butler, the unhoused soul, sometimes described as the “Subway Buddha.” Photo by Steve Zeitlin.

people in a radius of 50 miles around New York City, your work will be in Manhattan. Another toss of that dart, this time aimed at that borough, lands you in your workplace. This time the dart lands near 23rd street and 8th Avenue. So now, you have a 9 to 5 job in Chelsea. Every working day, you’ll get up in the morning to take the F train from Avenue N to West 4th Street. Once there, you’ll go up two flights of stairs to the 8th Avenue line (A, C, and E trains) and you will take a C or E local train two stops to 23rd Street and 8th Avenue. Of course, at the end of the workday, you’ll do the same thing in reverse.

So one day, you are doing that reverse run, on your way home. You have taken a C train—that train came first—from 23rd Street and 8th Avenue to West 4th Street. You have come down the stairs where the B, D, and F trains arrive. But as you turn towards the F line side of the platform, you see that the crowd there is significantly larger than usual. This is not good. Those people who are at the edge of the platform are taking turns peering into the darkness of

the tunnel, looking for that F train. Where is it? The heat and general mugginess on the platform is starting to get to you. And now, the other people on the platform are also starting to get pissed off. Hell, two F trains should have come and gone by now. There was an announcement of some sort, but this was drowned out by an arriving train. In any case, that train was not the one you needed. Nobody is saying anything. It’s like it’s some kind of big secret that the Brooklyn-bound F train is missing.

But—and that is a big “but”—if you know the subways—like the devil, and myself have told you that you should have known the subways—you could have used any of those B and D trains running on the other side of the platform to get you around the problem at West 4th Street.

If you had just turned around and boarded one of those D trains, you could have taken that D train all the way to Bay Parkway in Brooklyn ... and [simply] walked to the triangle at 60th Station and Avenue N ... you will have learned to “zag” when life in New York gives you a “zig.”

Excerpted from 'The New York City Subways' Motorman's Rant by Torin Reid (Torin Reid author torinreid.com). Now it's time to buy the book. ▼



Steve Zeitlin (steve@citylore.org) is the Founding Director of City Lore. He is the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016). His latest book is *JEWels: Teasing Out the Poetry in Jewish Humor and Storytelling* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023). Photo by Amanda Dargan.

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