

# Walt Whitman Rides the Trains

Steve Zeitlin



Steve Zeitlin

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Steve Zeitlin's commentaries appear regularly on the radio show, *Artbeat*, heard on National Public Radio, as well as in the *New York Folklore Newsletter*. This piece was originally broadcast on WNYC's *Morning Edition*.

I have seen you all, New Yorkers, a hundred at a time on crowded subways, fifty at a time on the buses, in twos making out on the platforms, or hopping over the turnstile to avoid a fare. Yes, riding the trains, I periodically find myself peering at New York through Walt Whitman's eyes, with his undying sense of the city as erotic urban pageant. In his inimitable style, I devise my paltry imitations — I have seen your drag queens promenading in the Halloween parade, immigrant cabbies at the wheel. I have squeezed between garlic eaters on the train, smelled the cuisines of seven continents sweated through New York pores. I feel as if I've seen you all, if only a reflection in a Bloomingdale's shopwindow, face in the tenement window, millionaire ducking into a limousine with tinted glass.

Though our eyes dart furtively from one face to another, we take each other in. I calculated the math on the subway. I figure you get a reasonable glance at four hundred people a day. If you multiply that times five working days, that's 2,000 per week. At 50 weeks per year, that's 100,000 New Yorkers, not even counting those you may see on the weekends. If you work and live in the City for 50 years, and get around a bit, that's 5 million. So, even accounting for those you may have seen more than once, it's fair to assume that a significant portion of the six million are imprinted somewhere in our brains!

And to see all these people, all you need is a token — that shiny symbol of New York, endangered in the wake of the Metrocard. If the token goes, what will become of the experience of feeling through your pocket or purse for the coin with the hole in the middle? Fingers feeling coin, coin, coin, token. It may cost a dime, a quarter or a dollar fifty, but its value never changes. It's always just enough for a subway ride. One person suggested that the token is the City's coinage, valid currency in the kingdom of New York. Token of our esteem for the multitudes who ride the trains.

Last week, on a jam packed subway car, I imagined an old man with white beard careening on to the car, swinging around the pole. Joyously, he recited,

*"When million-footed Manhattan unpent descends to her pavements...  
When Broadway is entirely given up to foot-passengers and foot-standers, when the mass is densest...  
when eyes gaze riveted tens of thousands at a time..."*

My God, I'd know that voice anywhere — it was Walt Whitman — It must have been on the number 7 line, the so-called "Asian Express" heading out to Queens. He was reciting his "Broadway Pageant", written over a hundred years ago:

*"then at last the Orient comes...  
Sultry with perfume, with ample and flowing garments,  
With sunburnt visage, with intense souls and glittering eyes..."*

Today, we need Walt Whitman's eyes for our New York! We need his vision to take us beyond the suspicion, the furtive looks; to feel a passion for the great breathing, lumbering collective, and through that passion, to care for city-dwellers one by one. Whitman died in 1892, a few years before the trains transformed New York. In "Song of Myself" he writes,

*"I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.  
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless."*

He, too, has seen the whole six million. He waits for us, urging us to see the City through his eyes, beyond distrust and fear to the beautiful and sensual pageant of the once and future megalopolis/small town. We're all on the same subway car. Look for us under your boot-soles. We ride the trains.