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Past Forward: What Good Is Amtrak?

By Maya Lau March 1, 2013

In this weekend's Voyages Issue, Nathaniel Rich writes about taking a long-distance train — Amtrak's Sunset Limited — and the characters you meet when you spend 47 hours on the rails going from New Orleans to Los Angeles.

Rich isn't the only writer for the magazine to have ridden the Sunset Limited — in 2002, John Tierney recounted his experience on the same line and even described himself as a lifelong “foamer,” one who nearly foams at the mouth in the presence of trains.

But in “Amtrak Must Die,” Tierney's ultimate destination wasn't an account of a train journey — it was an argument for why Amtrak no longer makes sense economically or environmentally. And the Sunset Limited, according to Tierney, had been identified by a transportation expert as “the worst train of all.” He continued:

Still, don't trains deserve a subsidy because of all the social and environmental benefits they provide? Don't they ease congestion, save energy and reduce pollution? Not enough to notice. Americans use cars, planes and buses for 99.8 percent of the miles they travel between cities, so the remaining 0.2 percent scarcely matters. Analysts at the Cato Institute calculate that even if Amtrak's trains disappeared from the relatively popular Northeast Corridor lines, there would be no need for extra flights (the air shuttles would simply use bigger planes), and each lane of the New Jersey Turnpike would have to accommodate at most 47 additional cars per hour — just 2 percent of the lane's capacity.

For most Americans, trains are either unavailable or too inconvenient and expensive compared with planes or buses. Cutting the Sunset Limited might actually result in fewer trucks on the roads because it would be easier to ship freight by rail if Amtrak weren't given priority on the Union Pacific's tracks. What environmental or economic sense does it make to give 170 passengers on the Sunset Limited priority over a freight train that's keeping 500 trucks off the road?

Amtrak may be doomed. But it doesn't mean that the social spectacle of train travel — the personalities encountered, the intimate interactions — aren't worth the ride. In one of Tierney's best scenes, a woman in the lounge car of the Sunset Limited loudly accuses her ex-husband of sleeping with her sister. As other passengers gaze in horror, the ex-husband responds, "You slept with her first!"

Later, it is revealed that the man and the woman had never met before that moment. Their entire argument was a spontaneous act of theater performed for the benefit of other passengers. It was just "one of those things you do on a train," the woman told Tierney.