



Kapuskas i the last ride

An afternoon of last minute protests in railway stations across Canada could not stop the federal government from suspending 50 per cent of its Via Rail passenger service January 15.

Last October, the Conservatives decided that paying \$650 million a year in subsidies to a Crown corporation, used by only three per cent of the population, was not cost-effective. Then Federal Transportation Minister Benoit Bouchard introduced a plan that axed 18 of Via's 38 passenger routes, laid-off 2,761 workers, dropped the most popular transcontinental route, The Canadian, and increased ticket prices.

Bouchard's plan received little support from anyone outside the Conservative party. New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna accused him of ripping up "the glue that holds Canada together." Bouchard also came under fire from each of the provinces' transportation ministers. Since the announcement of his plan, there have been numerous protests across Canada by the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers, and Transport 2000 Canada (a pro-train lobby group). And, early January saw an unsuccessful battle in Federal Court where two parties urged the cuts to be stopped on both constitutional and environmental grounds.

But it's not just the politicians and union lawyers who are fighting over the trains by pushing papers in Toronto and making speeches in Ottawa. Recently, many Canadian grass-roots folk/rock bands, feeling the strong connection between folk songs and trains, have become "messengers" for the Via cause. The musicians are promoting the "Save the Rails" campaign through several benefit concerts, not only in big Canadian cities but in the smaller towns most affected by the loss of the Via Rail service. *Excalibur's Heather Sangster* took part in a November "Ties That Bind Tour," from Toronto to Kapuskasing with Ontario bands The Grievous Angels, High Lonesome, U.I.C., The Cajun Ramblers, StephenSteve and members of The Rheostatics and the Skydiggers. Sangster offers excerpts from a diary she kept while on the trip.



Richard Chapman.

November 24, Toronto to North Bay

The four-day tour started off between the marble walls of Union Station. About 50 people wearing heavy jackets and boots (does this mean it's cold in Kapuskasing?) carrying sleeping bags and backpacks gathered around seven or eight musicians playing guitars, harmonica, fiddle, accordion, mandolin and yes, the washboard. They're doing a handclapping, footstomping version of Stompin' Tom's "Gumboot Clogaroo." Richard Chapman, The Grievous Angels' manager and organizer of the tour, stands to the side of the musicians, counting heads and sorting baggage while tapping his feet to the music.

I certainly don't feel like I'm in downtown Toronto right now. Surrounded by all these guitar cases, boots and cowboy hats and an amazing amount of hair, I feel as if I'm off to ride the rails with a group of hobo musicians and their friends,

sneaking onto the train. But, as "Bob from CBC" walks by with his tape recorder and note pad, I'm reminded of the importance of the event. This might be the last train trip I take for a very long time.

Seventy-five of us carry our own bags onto the train; they used to load for you until cutbacks stopped the practice. I settle into a pretty cosy car with three others — a musician helping with "the sound," (a musician term, I'm told) along with a Via rail clerk and his friend, touring to show their support. The clerk is most interesting. He's going to lose his job because of Bouchard's cutbacks and he's pretty bitter. As we pull out of the station, he makes a remark suggesting the Conservatives are not the only ones with mixed up priorities. He tells me of how the foundations from the old part of the station haven't been torn up yet. He assumes that Via is preserving the property around Union Station and selling it to the city at a premium price. He comments, "They care about their real estate but not their railroad ties." It's interesting, because over the last two months, Via has been seen as the victim of the government. I wonder if there is anything Via could do and, if so, are they doing it?

The train leaves Toronto, passing by the CN tower and the suburban monster homes and then the water towers and smaller homes of Aurora and Wasaga. We pass an abandoned, boarded up train station. I can hear hissing and booing and a "Thank you Tories" from other cars. People are walking from car to car, getting acquainted. They've stripped off their lumberjackets to reveal all kinds of anti-Mulroney clothing and buttons; "Mulroney's Last Spike," "Save Temagami," "End Free Trade."

Outside, the buildings are getting smaller, the trees are getting taller and the ground is getting whiter. You can see farther now. I think, that just maybe, the sky is clearer too. Ontario doesn't look too bad.

Someone in the next car has picked up a guitar and, accompanied by a guy drumming on a suitcase, is singing more Stompin' Tom songs about picking tobacco, ketchup, potatoes and snowmobiles. Someone in the hall is talking about tree planting. The waiters don't seem to mind that there are about 10 people with large instruments crammed into the vestibule outside the washroom playing — what else — hurtin' and wailin' train songs.

We've made a few stops to pick up passengers. It's easy to get to know these new travellers, as the somewhat cramped quarters of the train create an environment for conversation. They are mostly retirees and families travelling north to visit their kin for the weekend. They are not looking forward to January's cuts.

We've reached our first stop, the North Bay station, where we are greeted by about 20 local politicians and representatives of the rural postal union. They're happy to see us, happy that 75 people from Toronto felt it necessary to travel to North Bay to offer their support. We go to the Empire Hotel where the first "Hootenanny" will take place. The small town attitude is abundant in North Bay, as the hotel treats us to an amazing meal.

The music of the first hootenanny was rich in traditionally innovative Canadian folk, country and blues songs. Heck, there was even "Hillbilly jazz" as one listener described it. (See North Bay natives and *Excal* sports personalities Pam Serkowney and Pamela Jarvis' review). But what more importantly expressed the cultural pride and political feelings in North Bay that night were the local speakers that took to the stage in between sets. From the executive president of the Ontario Federation of Labour, Bob Stevens, to an ex-Via rail employee and university student, the feeling was that Canada cannot idly sit by and let the government take away the rails. The train is the most energy efficient, cost efficient and environmentally friendly mode of transportation in Canada and it would be foolish to lose it. "The train united the country and now the government will splinter the country. People will be isolated." A plea for action to go beyond

that evening's concert was made to all members of the North Bay community.

After an enthusiastic yet exhausting evening, we spent the night sleeping on the train as we travelled to Cochrane. Okay, I support Via, but I'll be honest, I did not enjoy sleeping across two coach chairs. However, as everyone has written or sung, the clack of the tracks does lull you to sleep.



November 25, Cochrane

Cochrane: the only town I know where you can buy homemade pickles and sausage from a dusty jar sitting on top of a cigarette display.

I woke up as the train pulled into the station. The countryside was completely white except for the occasional truck tire track (say that ten times fast) and skidoo tracks. My back hurt, but probably not as much as the High Lonesome violinist's back; he slept in the luggage rack all night.

As I try to open my eyes, I overhear a porter talking about the cutbacks. He calls the government "foolish people" because the train is so useful. "It gets kids to the hospitals and cancer patients to the hospital in Toronto." He shakes his head and then shakes the passenger's hand and walks back to his seat.

A school bus is at the station to take us to the Cochrane Scout's Hall (a small town Canadian staple) where we will sleep that night. We file into the hall; no one is in particularly good health, even though one of the Steves of StephenSteve handed out chewable vitamin C (500 mg) on the train. However, Chuck Angus, a founding member of The Grievous Angels, makes a beeline for the piano tucked at the back of the hall, drops his bag, sits down and plays. A few other musicians gather around with their guitars and fiddles and started singing a song about Kansas City. This is the kind of neverending energy, spirit and love for music that led these people on this tour in the first place. Someone squeals at the discovery of a shower as the man who has driven us on the bus (Bob Elanger) boasts in a heavy French accent, "Cochrane has more hot water than all of Europe." Those who are not around the piano pull out their soap and towels.

We spend the day walking along the four or five main streets of Cochrane, trying out its greasy spoons. It seems that no one can get enough eggs while on this tour; everywhere we go, we eat eggs. We tell a few people about this evening's hootenanny at another small town Canadian staple, the Legion. I'm not sure if this town knows what's coming.

We enter the Legion. It looks like someone's rec room. We are told to be quiet because the men are having a big darts tournament in the next room while the blue-haired ladies play "rummy." The place is covered in Xmas decorations and photos of war heroes. The dart tournament ends and the hootenanny begins.

In between sets, Cochrane offers its speakers. Cochrane Mayor David Hughes is angry. He says Cochrane was not even consulted when the decision to cut back was made and he wants to tell the government of Canada that people decide the pol-