

# “Waiting for a Train” in Canada

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With considerable help from Roy Forbes, Fred Isenor, Michael Kolonel, John Leeder, Giselle and Keith Smith, Frank Watson, and Ted Rowe

It was a good jam despite my guitar being outnumbered two to one by banjos. At one point I sang Jimmie Rodgers’s “Waiting for a Train” (a.k.a. “All Around the Water Tank”). I’d known this song for years, but had recently dusted it off after hearing Roy Forbes’s fine version.<sup>1</sup>

*Waiting for a Train (Jimmie Rodgers’s version)*

*All around the water tank, waiting for a train,  
A thousand miles away from home, sleeping in the rain;  
I walked up to a freight man to give him a line of talk,  
He said, “If you’ve got money, I’ll see that you don’t walk”;  
“I haven’t got a nickel, not a penny can I show”,  
“Get off, get off, you railroad bum,” and he slammed the boxcar door.*

*Well, they put me off in Texas, a state I dearly love,  
Wide open spaces around me, moon and stars above;  
Nobody seems to want me or lend me a helping hand,  
I’m on my way from Frisco, going back to Dixieland;  
My pocket book is empty and my heart is full of pain,  
I’m a thousand miles away from home, waiting for a train.*

I was intrigued when John Leeder said he had heard his father sing it in 3/4 time. All of the recorded versions I’d heard were in 4/4 time (e.g., Jimmie Rodgers’s version,<sup>2</sup> Jim Reeves, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Roy Forbes, John Denver, Dave Dawson and many others). Waltz time is quite infrequent with railway tunes, making a 3/4 time version rather interesting.

John Leeder’s dad, Gerry Leeder, who sang the song in 3/4 time, was a fine musician who, according to John:

... could play anything with strings, although his favourite was Hawaiian guitar. He had two rules: he never played for money, and he never played anywhere alcohol was available. For obvious reasons, he never had a career as a musician. He was a high school teacher and, in earlier days, a steamboat man, based in Northern Ontario. He played in church, at local variety shows and (dry!)

square dances, and in sessions whenever he found like-minded musicians. (Leeder 2013)

Whatever the source, Gerry knew “Waiting for a Train” in waltz time.



Figure 1: Gerald Leeder, purser, R.M.S. Segwun, circa 1940.

My curiosity piqued by this waltz-time version, I sent an email to Roy Forbes and Fred Isenor, two folks I knew would be able to say if there was a waltz time version out there in the world of recorded country music. Fred replied almost instantly: “Yes, Wilf Carter recorded it in 3/4 time on December 16, 1941 in New York with solo guitar.” (Isenor 2013) Fred also remarked that he, like Gerry Leeder, had initially heard it in 3/4 time. “The first time I heard it in 4/4 time I thought the singer was doing it wrong and then I got the original on an LP by Jimmie Rodgers. I remember local ‘cowboys’ singing it in 3/4 time as they would have only heard it by Wilf at that time before Jimmie Rodgers was reissued on LP and CD” (ibid.). Roy Forbes replied, “When I read your e-mails about the 3/4 time ‘Waiting For A Train’ I immediately thought of Wilf Carter and could almost hear it in my head. Glad to have Wilf confirmed” (Forbes 2013).<sup>3</sup>

As well as changing the timing, Carter added another verse that is unique to his recording:

*It's raining and it's hailing while I wait here alone,  
I'm thinking of the good old days when just a boy  
back home;  
But I ain't turning backwards, I'm going to wander  
on,  
I'm going to catch that southern freight and then,  
boys, I'll be gone.*

Both the 3/4 and 4/4 time versions have shown up in Newfoundland. Michael Kolonel indicated that he was not aware of any commercial recordings of the song (either version) by Newfoundland or Labrador artists, but that it was performed during live shows. He played with Jimmie Linegar, a well-known Newfoundland country singer, in the '60s: "We definitely played 'Waiting for a Train' for concerts but never for dances as it wasn't the right tempo for Newfoundland dancers. We used the Jimmie Rodgers version" (Kolonel 2013).<sup>4</sup>

The late Harry Smith, a long-time devotee of country music from Heart's Content, NL, performed the 3/4 time version. Ted Rowe recalls that "Waiting for a Train" was one of Harry's favourite and most requested songs (along with Slim Clarke's "Mountie's Prayer"). "He always referred to it as a Jimmie Rodgers song but my guess is he learned it from the Wilf Carter version" (Rowe 2013). This has been confirmed by Harry's son, Keith, who recalls that his father sang the "raining and hailing" verse that is unique to Wilf.

Harry was a big brawny lineman with Newfoundland Power whose passions were hunting, fishing and country music. His father was a railroader with the Newfoundland Railway before Confederation. Harry learned to play guitar in the early 1950s, performing at house parties and social gatherings, never professionally.

Presumably, Gerry Leeder, Fred Isenor, and Harry Smith had either heard the Wilf Carter version or learned the song from someone influenced by his recording. Or perhaps there is another 3/4 time version out there (see below). Back in the day when recordings were not as accessible as they are today, performers were just as likely to learn a song from another performer as they were from a recorded source. This could easily have led to the 3/4 version of "Waiting for a Train" spreading to and within various musical communities. And, of course, airplay that Carter's version got on the radio could have also had an effect. It is a testament to Wilf Carter's influence that his particular interpretation of "Waiting for a Train" appeared to become "the norm" in rural Ontario, Nova Scotia, Fred's stomping ground, and Newfoundland – and maybe other regions as well. Perhaps we should consider this the "Canadian" ver-

sion. At subsequent jams, John Leeder and I have done both versions with folks remarking that they have "remarkably different feels – almost like two different songs ..."



**Figure 2: A younger Harry Smith.**

In the video of Jimmie Rodgers singing "Waiting for a Train" he refers to it as "an old song". This seems to hint that he may not have written it or that it could have been based on an older song.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the original song is credited to him. The sheet music shows "words and music by Jimmie Rodgers copyright 1929", so it would appear that he either wrote it or bought it. The book *Country Music Sources* also credits Jimmie Rodgers but shows the date as 1928. Norm Cohen, in *Long Steel Rail*, seems to relate the song to "Wild and Reckless Hobo". Fred Isenor indicated: "I played the only version I have by the Blue Sky Boys on their Capitol LP and, other than the line 'thousand miles away from home', I don't see much similarity. Possibly there's more than one song with the same title". (2013). John Leeder added, "I have 'Wild and Western Hobo' by the New Lost City Ramblers, and remembered it as being a Carter Family song. I found the lyrics on-line (faster than digging through my LPs); it has the lines:

*My pocket book is empty, and my heart is full of pain,  
I'm a thousand miles away from home ...*

This would appear to make it at least a partial ancestor of 'Waiting for a Train' " (2013).

The plot got even thicker when John picked up a CD at a recent concert. It was titled *The Old Man Below: The Dust Busters with John Cohen* (Smithsonian Folkways, SFW CD40206, 2012). The Dust Busters are three young New Yorkers who play old-time music (very well!), and Cohen had joined them for the recording. John indicated: "I was listening to a track called 'Waltz of Roses' when I realized that the

lyrics were ‘All Around the Water Tank’, with a few discrepancies (e.g., they bring in a few lines of ‘Danville Girl’ in a second verse). It’s of course in waltz time” (Leeder 2013). The liner notes for that track are by Dust Buster member Walker Shepard:

The first time I heard this song was from the playing of Prince Albert Hunt [Oren 45375 (1929)] rather than the better-known Jimmie Rodgers’s [sic] version, “Waiting for a Train”. “Waltz of Roses” seems to be a unique arrangement of Hunt’s own creation, taking the intro from the well-known “Cowboy Waltz”, which was later recorded by Woody Guthrie on fiddle. (2012)

John continued: “The tune for the song portion is not ‘Cowboy Waltz’, but close to the tune I know” (2013). Hunt’s “Waltz of Roses” and Rodgers’s “Waiting for a Train” appear to have emerged at about the same time (ca 1929). They have similar lyrics, but the former is in 3/4 time, the latter in 4/4. So the Hunt version indicates that there was a 3/4 version “out there” around the time Rodgers recorded and published his in 4/4 time. Perhaps this is the source of Carter’s recording.

Whatever the source, the song has become a well-known and loved standard in many circles. For example, Roy Forbes indicated: “As for my own history with the song, my Uncle Dudley sang it when I was a little guy, growing up in the Dawson Creek, BC area. We kids would all join in with him. We always called it ‘All Around The Water Tank’. The first recording I recall hearing was the Jim Reeves version from around 1956 – a nice, brisk honky-tonker with a hot solo from Chet Atkins.” Roy notes that the song has had traction over a long period: “I recently discovered a version/adaptation by Fats Domino. Ever heard ‘Helping Hand’? As I recall, it dates from around 1955” (2013).

For me, a particularly interesting aspect of finding the 3/4 time version is that less than 10% of the 1300 or so Canadian railway songs I’ve been able to collect are in waltz time (see <http://www.irontrail.ca/list.html>). I expect the same would hold true of US railroad songs. This led me to begin to think that most railway music has been written to mimic the actual sounds of locomotives and clicking train wheels, which are either 2/4 or 4/4 time. While this is obvious with classics such as “The Orange Blossom Special”, there appears to be a subtle influence in a lot of railway music to try and recreate the feel of the rails with the rhythm of the song as well as with the lyrics. This makes a transformation of a railway song that was in 4/4 time into 3/4, as Carter appears to have done, particularly interesting. What would prompt him to make such a change in the face of the

strong push toward 4/4 time? One thought is that Carter may have been influenced by cowboy music traditions which show much greater proportions of waltz time (perhaps to mimic certain gaits of horses...). Maybe he was trying to put his own personal stamp on the song, or could it have been an effort to avoid a copyright conflict? As well, he could have heard the Hunt version. Whatever the reason, Carter’s 3/4 time version did have considerable influence north of the border. Finding it in oral circulation in these regions is clear testimony to Wilf’s pervasive influence in parts of Canada and gives a brief snapshot of the Canadian country music world in the ’40s and ’50s.

*Author’s note:* This paper is a “work in progress” needing more field and library work to have any sense of being “finished”. If you have any further information or recollections about “Waiting for a Train”, either the 3/4 or the 4/4 version, please let me know. Thanks: [tbrogers@ucalgary.ca](mailto:tbrogers@ucalgary.ca)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/artist/roy-forbes/id412734488>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbzc77Tz6PA>.

<sup>3</sup> Wilf Carter’s waltz time version can be heard at: <http://archive.org/details/WilfCarter-aka-montanaSlim-251-260>.

<sup>4</sup> There’s a video of Linegar performing at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0J6FkWBq98Y>.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Forbes indicated that describing a song as “old” could also reflect the sentimental strain that pervades much of country music. He suggests that artists and marketers may intentionally call even new songs “old” in an effort to tap into this sentimentality, effectively constructing the song as “a good one”. The set of the Rodgers video of “Waiting for a Train” is testimony to this. Roy says, “When one sees the movie set (granny knitting in the rocking chair, etc.), you get the feeling that Jimmie and the movie-makers are going for that ‘old’ sentimental thing so loved in country music.”