

Clanging New York Subways, Screeches Intact, Go Miniature



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Bruce Koball's microphone soaks up the subway system's noise.

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The New York City transit system has been filmed and photographed, drawn and chronicled in hardback and in newsprint. Soon it will be heard.

All week, a man with a microphone has walked the subway platforms to collect the clattering of the rivets and the whistling horns, the distortion in the loudspeaker, the hush in the compressor's song and the dying of the brake like some wounded thing.

Even in that racket, some find value. The recordings are the chief selling point of a new reproduction of a subway train by the Lionel model train company made under a license from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for completion by year's end.

Other companies have made models before, but this one pays unparalleled attention to sonic detail, recreating the subterranean soundscape in elaborate hi-fi to win the favor of collectors and self-styled train geeks, keepers of a nostalgic anachronism to rank alongside comic books and baseball cards.

Among their number count the musician Neil Young, so devoted that he conceived a control system to reproduce the sounds of the rails, then acquired a minority interest in Lionel more than a decade ago.

"Realism is the byword," Mr. Young said by telephone. "It's a heavy thing moving down a track, like a real thing even though it's a miniature."



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Bruce R. Koball recorded a passing train at a station in Brooklyn. His journey also took him to railyards and the New York Transit Museum.

The system he championed has been used to recreate old steam engines, the historic diesels of the short lines and the Acelas of the Atlantic seaboard. The subway model will combine the sounds of vintage cars with recreated station announcements from the Brighton Local, a predecessor of the Q train, which runs from Midtown to Coney Island.

To capture the sounds, the company dispatched the man with the microphone, Bruce R. Koball, a Queens native who long ago decamped to Berkeley for its institutionalized counterculture. Mr. Koball, who has a thin white beard and thick glasses, dressed for his assignment with multiple belt accessories and a bulky headset wired to a recording device inside a fabric bag hanging from his neck. His microphone was fastened to the end of a long black pole and covered with a conical silvery reticulum like some futurist's mosquito net. He looked like a hiker spaceman.

Recording began below Brooklyn on Monday, in the tunnels of the New York Transit Museum. There Mr. Koball was joined by a few transit supervisors and Mark Wolodarsky, an off-duty conductor. Mr. Wolodarsky was standing in the cab of Car 9306, a model R33s introduced in 1963 to run the 20-minute route from Times Square to the 1964 World's Fair in Queens.

"I'm more or less ready to rock and roll here," Mr. Koball declared.

Mr. Wolodarsky activated the train's generator to charge the batteries, then opened and closed the doors. The men on the platform deemed the action too fast, and Mr. Wolodarsky tried again.

"There was no puff of air," lamented a supervisor, James Harris. Mr. Wolodarsky tried again. In this manner they recorded the compressors and the generator, the brakes and the brake release. There were two long buzzes and two short, signals between conductor and motorman, then a low whistle, a guttural rumble and a high lonesome sound.

Mr. Koball moved his microphone from the platform across the tracks, then through the doors and inside the car, a perspective that will be unavailable in the Lionel version. As a rattle died away, Mr. Harris held up a palm, waving deliberately as though conducting in some other sense.

One at a time came a high horn you could feel in your heart and a low one like a ship's warning, each emanating from a common diaphragm. Someone asked for another low horn, but Mr. Wolodarsky said the pitch was beyond control.

"I can't," he said. "It's up to the train."

Then the men emerged from the tunnels with their gearboxes and their tripods to walk the Brooklyn sidewalk like some sonic spelunkers from an alien world, bound for another station, another yard, another car and the sound of a hundred tongues talking and the quack and the hum and the clack and the thud calling one to another while the trains go by.

Outside a railyard near the Green-Wood Cemetery, the party was stopped by a security detail, held up for an hour to wait by a razor-wire fence.

A cellphone rang and Mr. Koball answered.

"Neil!" he said. Then he paced by the tracks for a good long piece, speaking of switches and routers and circuits, happy as a schoolboy. By and by he passed the phone along, and the familiar voice on the line grasped at the grandeur of the city trains.

"It's a symphony of motion and sound," Mr. Young said. "New York City. What's more American than that?"

John Schwartz contributed reporting.