

Learning To Fly On A Train To Austin | Allan Besselink

Written by Allan Besselink
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It had all lead up to this one particular moment. It was August 12, 1990. I was standing on the edge, ready to jump.

I had been thinking of moving to Texas for years. Somehow, it had wedged it's way into my consciousness. The fascination started with an exploration of Austin music in the early '80s. After graduating from Queen's University, I took a week to hang out in Austin to experience it and explore the great state of Texas. I flew back to Canada thinking that this might be a great place to live.

I realized that as a physiotherapist, I could work in just about any place I desired. The decision would be just as much about quality of life as it would be about my career. With that in mind, on May 20, 1989 I went on a two week fact-finding mission to Austin.

Now, 442 days later, it had become a reality. I had jumped all the hoops, packed up my things, and I was ready to go.

Now all I had to do was hop on that train and ride. Yes, you heard correctly: a train.

The days leading up to the move were surreal. It was very hot that weekend – for “[Brockville](#) -in -August” standards. Friends stopped by to say hello and goodbye. There was the obligatory “last night out in Brockville” at the local watering hole, Caroline’s. I even found time to record a music demo with

[Terry Baldwin](#)

the day before leaving. When you are offered free studio time, you take it!

The plan was to leave the night of August 12, drive to [Syracuse, New York](#) , and depart on an [Amtrak](#)

train in the wee hours of the morning. There was a part of me that could see the romantic side of this, the travel on two silver rails across the country, just like Huckleberry Finn floating down the Mississippi. I am sure I was more than just a few steps removed from that era. But when you are 24 years old and about to embark on a life adventure, a train might as well have been a raft.

I packed up a few things, which basically amounted to whatever I could carry with me. I had a big backpack, a guitar in one hand, another soft bag in the other, and a box. All in all, I had my clothes, a couple of scrapbooks, some reading material, a Walkman and some tapes, and a guitar. That’s it. I had a couple of boxes of books shipped shortly thereafter – books that I would need to help me prepare for the state licensure exam.

And then, the moment was upon me. It was Sunday, August 12, 1990 at 9:45 pm. It was time to leave Brockville. As we drove to Syracuse, I had a mix of emotions. The excitement of it all was overwhelming. But I also had great trepidation. Was this the right decision?

I remember stepping onto the 1:30 am train (Monday, August 13) and waving goodbye. The passenger cars were all quiet and dark, leaving me with plenty of solitude and time to ponder what I’d just done. It was too late to turn back now. It was time to make the best of this path I’d chosen. There wasn’t much sleeping done that night.

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I can remember parts of the trip on the south side of Lake Erie listening to “[Exile On Main Street](#)” by the [Rolling Stones](#)

. In retrospect, it’s funny how we can associate music with certain moments and memories. “Sweet Virginia” is one of those songs. I arrived in Chicago around 1:30 pm the same day, changed trains, then embarked on the 28-or-so hour trip to Austin. Of course, it was delayed en route when I was more than anxious to just get to Austin once and for all.

I finally arrived in Austin on August 15, 1990. I remember that first step off the train and onto the platform at the Amtrak station in Austin. A new life was upon me, a blank canvas staring back at me.

It is amazing what you learn when you travel, and it is amazing how the frugality of the moment becomes so readily apparent when you’ve had time to earn a living and get used to more “stuff” in life. I look back at those times with great fondness, and the memories of doing something because it was just the right thing to do at the time.

Now, 21 years later, I can reflect back on it and say that, without question, it was the best decision I’ve ever made. At least to this point in my life. But I also look back and realize that it wasn’t just a 2000 mile odyssey – it was just a piece of a journey to explore myself.

In many ways, I was simply learning to fly. I just did it on a train instead.

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