

Steam Locomotive Recordings--O. Winston Link (1957-1977)

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Essay by Tony Reeve (guest post)*



O. Winston Link

In 1955, O. (Ogle) Winston Link (1914-2001), a New York-based commercial photographer, was on assignment in Staunton, Virginia, photographing Westinghouse window-unit air conditioners. Link, who grew up in Brooklyn and spent most of his life there, had a life-long interest in steam locomotives and steam-hauled trains. He took the opportunity to travel to nearby Waynesboro, Virginia, which was served by the Norfolk & Western Railway. Link had heard that the Norfolk & Western, the “N&W,” was the last major railroad in the United States operating entirely with steam locomotives.

Using the equipment he had with him, Link took his first photo of a Norfolk & Western steam engine during his visit to the area. Excited by what he had seen, and the resulting image, Link envisioned a sweeping photographic project documenting the N&W in steam, especially at night. From 1955 until the end of steam on the Norfolk & Western in 1960, Link made more than 20 trips from his base in New York to portions of the N&W service area located in Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. He spent a great deal of money on this self-funded project, and garnered the full cooperation of the N&W, which gave him extensive access to the railroad and its employees.

Link’s photographic work remained largely unrecognized until the early 1980s, although he is now considered one of the greatest photographers of the “age of steam” on world railways. His work has influenced photographers from rail-subject specialists such as Jim Shaughnessy to art photographers like Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson.

As Link’s Norfolk & Western project progressed, he developed an even broader vision; what today we would term a multimedia treatment of the subject. He began documenting steam on the

N&W with color images as well as black-and-white ones, sound recordings, and even 16mm movies.

In fact, from about 1957 until the early 1980s, Link was best known for his recordings, which were all self-published. He issued six collections during his lifetime, generally called the “Sounds of Steam Railroading” series, volumes one to six. Five of these were 12-inch, 33 1/3 rpm recordings of the Norfolk & Western in steam. Although recorded from about 1956 until 1960, these five records were released over a twenty-year period: “Sounds of Steam Railroading” (1957), “The Fading Giant” (1958), “Thunder on Blue Ridge” (1959), “2nd Pigeon and the Mockingbird” (1961) and “Mainline to Panther” (1977). To sell his records, Link advertised in vehicles such as “Trains” magazine.

Listening to the quality of these recordings today, it is hard to believe that Link was not a highly experienced sound engineer. However, when Link decided to add sound to his Norfolk & Western project, he and his assistants had no background in sound recording. Fortunately, by the mid-1950s the tape recorder was available, so Link did not have to struggle with disc or wire recorders. Link’s first sound recordings, made in early 1956 on a small, home-use tape recorder, were not successful, due both to the low quality of the equipment and Link’s lack of experience with tape recording.

But Link was both a fast learner and an artist willing to invest in his project. After his early, unsuccessful experience with a consumer-grade tape recorder, Link purchased a Tapesonic recorder, a heavy, durable, professional monophonic tape recorder. At first, Link had to have house power available to run the Tapesonic, but challenges related to the availability of electrical service on location led him to develop a power supply, a motor generator providing 120-volt AC current powered by two automotive batteries. The Tapesonic was used exclusively until about 1958, when Link purchased a then state-of-the-art Ampex stereophonic tape recorder. The Ampex was then generally used, with the battery power supply, through the end of the project. Link and his assistants generally recorded on 1,800-foot reels of tape at 7 ½ inches per second.

Link’s recordings of the Norfolk & Western came at the right time, and not just because of the availability of Norfolk & Western steam, or of high-quality tape recorders that could be used in the field. With the development of the twelve-inch 33 1/3 rpm record, and high fidelity sound playback equipment available to consumers, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw a wave of audiophile interest. “High fidelity” and then “stereo” were the way to listen, and sound effects records enjoyed a vogue—including Link’s “Sounds of Steam Railroading” twelve-inch 33’s.

The tracks on the five Norfolk & Western volumes in the “Sounds of Steam Railroading” series fall into two general groups. Many of the tracks—for example, those on “Sounds of Steam Railroading” and Side B of “The Fading Giant”—are short tracks sequenced on the record in question as songs would be on an album of music. The others—such as Side B of “2nd Pigeon and the Mockingbird”—are long passages of sound that may fill an entire album side. While both types of recordings are historically important, it is the shorter tracks that hold most listeners’ attention today.

Indeed, the most noted of Link's sound recordings are several of the shorter tracks. The wail of Jimbo, "the Hound of Husk," in response to a steam engine whistle is memorable and striking, as is the arrival, station stop and departure of the "Virginia Creeper" at Green Cove, Virginia (Tracks 2 and 3, Side B, "The Fading Giant"). The train caller at the Roanoke, Virginia Norfolk & Western station, Buck Stewart, intones the names of destinations in a strong accent that today's listener may never hear in person (Track 1, Side B, "Sounds of Steam Railroading").

The most noted of Link's sound recordings, in this listener's view justly so, is Track 4, Side B of "The Fading Giant," "Train #2, The Pelican, arrives Rural Retreat, VA, with background of chimes from the Lutheran Church—departs." As the track opens, and throughout the sequence, Christmas carols play on chimes. A low whistle is heard, a train approaches, a crossing signal adds its noise, and the train clatters to a stop with a final, grating squeal. After a quick pause, the train roars away, grows fainter, a whistle fades into the night. The chimes then come back into sonic prominence.

The track is a tour de force, not only for the quality of its sound, but also for the multifaceted image it paints with its auditory content. The Christmas carols tell the listener this is a train carrying people home for the holidays (the sequence was, in fact, recorded on Christmas Eve, 1957). The echoing, far-off sound of the whistle tells the listener that the setting is probably in the mountains, as it was. The clangor of the stop shows how the train dominates the quiet town upon its arrival, and demonstrates its power. Finally, the vanishing sound of the train, and the continuing music of the chimes, provides a solid end-stop to the piece—and also suggests that a farewell to steam may be imminent (in fact, this part of the N&W was converted to diesel locomotive power a week after the recording was made).

O. Winston Link's "Sounds of Steam Railroading" provide a glimpse into our national past, when railroads spanned the United States and steam locomotives were one of our key national icons. Link, the Norfolk & Western (now part of Norfolk Southern Corporation) and its wonderful steam locomotives are gone now, but these recordings, and Link's magnificent photographs, live on to show all of us how Americans lived during the age of steam.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.