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Railroads to freedom: The drifters living and dreaming on America's freight trains

By Charlie Cooper
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Running from poverty or chasing their dreams, these drifters find a kind of freedom on America's freight trains – and Mike Brodie has gone along for the ride, creating these haunting photographs.

Nothing cuts to the heart of America like the railroads. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with country, blues or even Bob Dylan will know how trains rattle through American folk music, evoking the great open spaces of the continent – and the individuals that get lost in them.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, tens of thousands of economic migrants were to be found bedding down each night in the boxcars of freight trains that swallowed up the immense distances between states. A great many of them didn't even have anywhere to go. Thanks to troubadours like Woody Guthrie, the legend of the hobo was born: the American wanderer spirit, a modernist descendant of the rail-building pioneer of generations before.



Nearly a century down the line, thousands are still riding the rails, mostly young men and women, some running away from poverty in a country that still struggles to provide for its poor, others just looking for an adventure and the romance of the railroad.

One of them, Arizona-born Mike Brodie, decided to take some pictures along the way. Leaving his home in Pensacola, Florida at 17, he spent the best part of ten years jumping freight trains, hitchhiking and finding work and sustenance where he could. Using an old Polaroid camera that had been sitting redundant on the back seat of a friend's car, he began taking pictures in 2004 – and found it hard to stop.

The photographs he took in the ensuing years are a rare document of an American subculture – and a curious portrait of the country's youth. Collected together into a new book, *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*, the pictures centre on the people Brodie met along the way.

"I never knew what these photos were going to turn into, what they were going to represent," he says. "It

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was intuitive – photographing things near to me, things attractive to me, things that seemed important at the time, but I always knew I wanted to photograph the train hoppers."

Though conscious of the cultural archetypes in whose tracks he was following, Brodie says the "lure" of the railroads was instinctive. So too was his affinity with the camera. "I learned it somehow – training myself and seeing other things quite randomly I wanted to copy," he says. "The first pictures I liked were the photos in the BMX and skateboarding magazines I read as a kid. I came across books; one was Stevef McCurry's portraits for National Geographic. Most of my first pictures sucked, though."

His natural eye for composition and instinct for the foibles of Polaroid photography quickly began to attract the attention of established photographers and galleries. But even when his pictures began appearing in exhibitions, Brodie kept on riding the rails. He changed from a Polaroid to a 35mm Nikon F3, but his subjects remained the same – the train hoppers.

Brodie himself insists that he wasn't running away from anything – and nor were many of his fellow travellers. "I can't speak for everyone but the majority just wanted a taste of that free lifestyle, that American adventure. They wanted to leave town, ride the trains, see the country and figure out what they wanted to do with their life. As for myself, I was naturally drawn to go and... check some things out."

One of the most striking images shows a slim young man doing a very good impression of Johnny Cash's iconic middle finger – while hanging off the back of a speeding train.

"He goes by the name of Soup," Brodie recalls. "From Montgomery, Alabama. A movie could be made out of his life. He left home and went on the street at a young age. He was running away from something. Everyone else was doing it by choice. He was different."

Brodie has become something of an unlikely favourite of America's photographic establishment, who were astonished by the technical accomplishment of this unknown, self-taught drifter. He won the Baum Award for Emerging American Photographers in 2007 and has been featured in exhibitions all over the USA.

Despite the adulation, Brodie, 27, now works as a truck mechanic in Oakland, California. He says he will take photographs again "once I've made a life for myself". He says he does think about riding the railroads again – and he still sleeps in a sleeping bag every night.