

Songs for the Quarantine #28: The City Of New Orleans, Arlo Guthrie

Good morning, Roll Over Easy, and welcome to the twenty-eighth Songs for the Quarantine, coming to you live this week from the Ferry Building. I'm @suldrew. Every week while we are under shelter-in-place, we'll bring you a song that's perfect for taking your mind off social distancing, that you can listen to while you walk in the park, or work from home, or put on a mask and hop on a Caltrain to San Jose, or an Amtrak to Los Angeles.

Good morning America, how are you? Today, with the future of rail travel top of mind for voters and commuters alike, let's listen to The City Of New Orleans, sung by Arlo Guthrie. This [classic](#) was written by [Steve Goodman](#) on a trip from Chicago, in [1970](#), when the future of rail travel was very much in question, a year before Congress relieved freight railroads like the Illinois Central of the "burden" of passenger rail and created Amtrak. Guthrie covered it two years later, and it's also been performed by (among others) John Denver, Willie Nelson, and Nelson's supergroup [The Highwaymen](#).

Fifteen cars and fifteen restless riders - have you ever seen a train so long, or so few passengers? These days, commuters and long-distance Amtrak consists alike rarely run so empty, except lately, in Covid. Amtrak's own [City of New Orleans](#), which they brought back in 1981 after picking up the route from the old Illinois Central, carries [21 times that number](#) per trip every day. That's hardly a train that's "got the disappearing railroad blues," as Guthrie sang in 1972 - and it pales in comparison to Caltrain, which over its 77-mile route carries [twenty thousand as many](#), on [70 trips](#), on a typical weekday.

Today, train travel is very much on our minds. Consider future Railfan-in-Chief Joe Biden, who brought back the classic whistle-stop tour as part of his campaign, even getting access to Amtrak's track inspection car so he could [check out the route](#) as he traveled through Ohio and Pennsylvania. In California, High Speed Rail keeps building infrastructure in the Central Valley while Caltrain invests in electrified service. Any thought that the trains were going away has been long replaced by the understanding that steel wheels on steel rails might just be the best way to get around the state while fighting climate change.

So head down to [Milepost 0.2](#) of the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad, later Southern Pacific, whose headquarters was across the street at One Market with the giant S-P neon sign that you can see in Vertigo, tag on with your Clipper, and head down the Peninsula on a train that's been running since Abe Lincoln was President, on a "magic carpet made of steel" that will soon be powered by [25 KV](#) of alternating current. And, if you haven't already mailed in your ballot, vote yes this week on Measure RR.