

Charlie on the MTA



1. Let me tell you the story
Of a man named Charlie
On a tragic and fateful day.
He put ten cents in his pocket,
Kissed his wife and family,
Went to ride on the MTA.
Chorus:
Did he ever return,
No, he never returned
And his fate is still unlearn'd.
He may ride forever
'neath the streets of Boston,
He's the man who never returned.
2. Charlie handed in his dime
At the Kendall Square Station
And he changed for Jamaica Plain.
When he got there the conductor told him
"One more nickel".
Charlie couldn't get off that train.
Chorus
3. Now all night long
Charlie rides through the tunnels
Saying, "What will become of me?"
Crying "How can I afford to see
My sister in Chelsea
Or my cousin in Roxbury?"
Chorus
4. Charlie's wife goes down
To the Scollay Square station
Every day at quarter past two
And through the open window
She hands Charlie a sandwich
As the train comes rumblin' through.
Chorus
5. As his train rolled on
underneath Greater Boston
Charlie looked around and sighed:
"Well, I'm sore and disgusted
And I'm absolutely busted;
I guess this is my last long ride."
Chorus
6. Now you citizens of Boston,
Don't you think it's a scandal
That the people have to pay and pay?
Fight the fare increase!
Vote for George O'Brien!
Get poor Charlie off the MTA.
Last Chorus:
Or else he'll never return,
No, he'll never return
And his fate will be unlearned.
He may ride forever
'neath the streets of Boston
He's the man who never returned.

The text of "Charlie on the MTA" was written in 1949 by Jacqueline Steiner and Bess Lomax Hawes. The melody was composed by Henry Clay Work as "The Ship That Never Returned". It was also used for "The Wreck of Old #97". He also wrote "Grandfather's Clock".

In the 1940s, the Boston Metropolitan Transit Authority fare-schedule was very complicated. The booklet that explained it was nine pages long. Fare increases were implemented by means of an "exit fare". Rather than modify the entrance turnstiles for the new rate, the MTA just collected the extra money when leaving the train.

One of the key points of the platform of Walter A. O'Brien, a Progressive Party candidate for mayor of Boston, was to fight fare increases and make the fare schedule more uniform. This song was one of seven songs written for O'Brien's campaign, each one emphasizing a key point of his platform. Will Holt recorded the story of Charlie as a pop song for Coral Records. After many complaints were received from Boston inhabitants who considered Walter A. O'Brien (a Progressive) to be a Communist, they pulled the record. In 1959, The Kingston Trio released a recording of the song. They changed the candidate's name to George O'Brien to avoid controversy. Besides that,

by 1959 nobody outside of Boston (or inside, for that matter) remembered Walter A. O'Brien.

Walter A. O'Brien finished dead last in the five-person race. He received only 1.23% of the 296,990 votes cast. He later moved to Maine where he worked as a librarian and later ran a bookstore.

The Kingston Trio's performance became iconic. Several groups like The Chad Mitchell Trio, Dropkick Murphys and They Might Be Giants wrote parodies, some even referencing "poor old Charlie".

You can see from the three-chord structure why it became so popular with us budding folkies in the 50's and 60's. You can't get a much easier-to-play hit song. Originally the verse and chorus were sung to the same tune but The Kingston Trio started the chorus higher.