

Everybody's Here

At Bus Station Nation



By Henry Allen

It's that bus station smell. It hits you just past the fingerprinty glass doors, just one step into the waiting room in almost any bus station big enough to rate a cafeteria and pay toilets—the stale, sweet, sooty urban smell of cigar smoke, old sweat and carbon monoxide; the tart, grimy smell of winos, and the starchy air of the cafeteria, like the mess hall of a troop ship, with that same hourless quality of mass travel anywhere in America—in this case the Washington Greyhound station at 12th Street and New York Avenue.

Same smell as any bus station, same air-brake sighs and diesel groans, same crowd in the waiting room, slouched in the bolted-on TV sets that nobody watches.

A nun stands by her suitcase, a black raincoat hanging over her arm.

A skinny, big-wristed mother with a ticket to Knoxville wrestles a baby into a diaper.

A soldier sprawls sleeping next to his duffle bag after two days of living on cigarettes, cheese sandwiches, and the scenery from a Scenicruiser window.

Two red-eyed hustlers, an hour before dawn and still no drunks rolled, no pockets picked, complain:

"Hey man, we messed up the night."

"I think we did."

Welcome to Bus Station Nation. Everybody's here. Everybody, that is, except the money crowd that flies first class and thinks it's Everybody.

This is the other Everybody, hauling its American load from Kansas crossroads and Appalachia gas stations and other neon funks of city bus terminals to Washington, D.C.

Wisdom

"Yes, the man on the street," muses Walter Thomas, a "regular," and "would-be writer" who likes to muse at the bus station in the early morning hours, a black, bony, elabo-

ately spoken man of 38 with cheekbones winging out from sunken temples.

"The man on the street doesn't affect the course of history, but he's good for melodrama, for newspaper stories. We in America allow everyone to think he can be President, and so he feels cheated, he despairs. Though ultimately, of course, there's no resource but the human resource."

And on and on in bus station wisdom, coffee-cup philosophy, watching the folks stream through and hang out, hustle and argue, sleep, read, yawn, wait, wonder, eat, die and be born. (Seven deaths and two births in the station in the last 20 years according to H.C. Pendleton, assistant to the regional manager for Greyhound.)

The National Association of Motor Bus Owners, duly records that 14,500 bus stations spangle the American countryside. In 1971, 398 million bus passengers rode an average of 109 miles per trip. (About 158 million people traveled by plane, and 71.5 million took the train.)

"Everybody rides the bus," says G.O. Brown, terminal manager.

The downtown Greyhound station epitomizes the march-of-progress school of architecture that scattered its sculptured monuments around the country before World War II—a pale, fluted concrete tower lofting a neon greyhound into the sky, a concrete movie-style marquee over the arched bank of glass doors, a semicircular waiting room—none of the modern international school design that makes it impossible to tell gas stations from motels from shopping malls.

This bus station was architected to house a noble vision of the American traveler in 1941, back in the age when they could set a romantic movie—"It Happened One Night," with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert—on a bus.

"Those were the good years," says James Fleming, who's been a bus station redcap in Washington for 42 years.

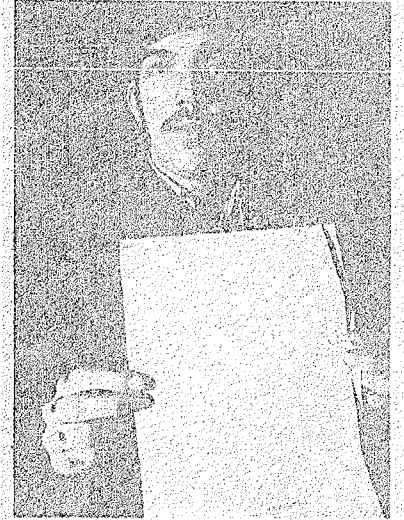
"The tips ain't like they used to be. I like it here, though. I get along with anybody—make friends in hell if I had to. There's all kinds coming through here, good and bad."

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Photographs by Ross Chapple

An off-duty security guard holds up the fruits of a day in court—an order signed by a man who promises not to return to the bus station.



There's a fat girl with quick little eyes hidden behind harlequin glasses. She talks to herself, says: "I don't have the money."

There's Marine PFC Anthony Stewart, 21, one Friday night, still starched and eager from boot camp, heading for Brooklyn to see his girlfriend, Joyce.

There's a wino wandering stifflegged and frowning across the waiting room floor one afternoon, like somebody dodging falling anvils.

There's an Amish couple in black, one 2:15 a.m., the wife in black sunbonnet, the husband in billygoat beard. They move from table to table in the cafeteria as Willy Mitchell, the busboy, puts the chairs up so he can mop.

Plus "the regulars," as they're known by the Wackenhut security guards, and the metropolitan police. Lounging against the men's room wall, sleeping over cold cups of coffee, a legion of the morally handicapped makes the bus station its headquarters and hunting ground: pimps, pickpockets, winos, junkies, whores, transvestites, Murphy men, pushers, all-round hus-

ters and restroom commanders.

You tell the regulars from the passengers by the fact that passengers seem to dream about someplace else and the regulars study the station with the devotion of brokerage house regulars watching the Trans-Lux price quotations—though it's worth noting that almost everybody seems to be in costume, the college kids in their Colorado climbing boots, the paramilitary blacks in berets and sunglasses, the off-duty servicemen in their stepress PX cloches, the motorcycle freaks with everything—sleeveless denim jackets, homemade tattoos, missing teeth—but motorcycles.

Hard to say why traveling makes people dress up, but it does. Grandmothers primp up sporey in Florida retirement slacks and hushpuppies. Down in the men's room a drifter scrapes away at five days of beard with a naked razor blade, contorting in the mirror to catch the light.

The hustlers dress up just like . . . hustlers, in all the flash vinyl, fake fur and velveteen bellbottom prosperity they can afford, except some-

times—dig it—one kid trucks past the candy counter with that slow hustler strut, shoulders high, eyelids low, hanging loose as if he's dangling from a wire fastened between his shoulder blades, and he's wearing his hustler's safari hat, and the coat with the belt dangling in back—but he hasn't gotten up the money yet to get himself out of those old ghetto-kid groundgridders, the high black basketball sneakers.

He dangles and glides to the ticket counter. He buys a ticket to Baltimore. Three hours later he will cash in the ticket to Baltimore, having bought it only to keep the guards from hassling him out of the station.

The Hustles

Sometimes you can't tell the hustlers from the hustled.

Johnny Lee Dallas (the fictitious name that sounds best to him at the moment) has been panhandling and dodging the guards for two days. Twenty years old, little knife scar on his left nostril, wears a fatigue jacket with the name "Frujillo" on it.

"I'm AWOL from the Army, man. Sergeant out at Ft. Ord bearin' up on me . . . My wife came and got me, we went back to Detroit. We had a fight a couple of weeks ago, I split for L.A. I got grandparents there. They give me \$200 to get back to Detroit. I stop in Mexico to buy a suede coat for my wife, smoke some of that Panama Red. I hitchhike back from there, end up in Washington with \$110. First night I get here, this dude down in the men's room says he can sell me a pound of reefer for \$150. I say I don't have but \$110. He says that's all right. I needed something to relax me, you know. And I figured I could sell it in nickel bags to these service dudes.

"But that dude rip me off. That reefer is nothing but some kind of weed and a lot of flour or something underneath it.

"So I ask this faggot if he knows some place I can sleep, except I don't know he's a faggot till we get to his place and he comes on. Man, I can't stand that. I come back here, try to panhandle enough money to buy a ticket to Philadelphia. I got friends there. I

