

Tracks

Background: Every city seems to have a set of train tracks that divide the town, often on socioeconomic and racial lines. Historically in the US this is true, and the cliches “across the tracks” or “the other side of the tracks” became common euphemisms for this phenomenon. My hometown has it, although it’s not that pronounced. It was more subtle, but it was there. The further you came on our side of the tracks, the less money there was, the more blue collar it became, and the more racially diverse it was. Most of the people we knew were “normal”, meaning not all that fancy, but not unsophisticated either. Most went to college, if that means anything.

There were these small houses built in rows in neighborhoods after WWII to provide inexpensive housing for returning veterans. In general, the houses, cars and lifestyles were modest. The further you went on the other (west) side of the tracks, the more you got into lavish houses, rich private schools, luxury cars, and wealth. We played sports against some of those kids and saw them show up to games in their parents’ BMWs and Mercedes, wearing nice sweat suits and leather Adidas shoes at a time when that wasn’t common, at least not on our side. I don’t recall if we were impressed, jealous, resentful, or indifferent. But it was noticeable.

I live in that area now. It feels like I graduated or accomplished something.

We never really felt like we were missing anything - we were private school kids ourselves, albeit at somewhat more modest, parochial schools - but we weren’t rolling in it either. Vacations and material things were mostly modest by the standards I see now. Times change.

So, there’s some truth to this song, and some embellishment from this writer’s personal experience for effect, but it’s not pure fiction either. I imagine it is closer to the truth for others.

Written: 2023

Verse

Every town has its tracks
Dividing the ups from the downs
The north from the south
The smiles from the frowns
The north half tends to prosper
While the south side rots
If that's where you grew up
You were the have nots

Verse

But it never felt like that
Never thought of it that way
Never wanted any privilege
We just went about our day
We had each other's backs
That was more than enough
Kept our heads held high
Especially when things got rough

Chorus

Across the tracks
Over the divide
Where real lives lived
And real lives died
Across the tracks
We were taught to believe
Said we'd never go back
But you never really leave

Verse

Running next to the Pike
Splitting the east from west
Downtown to all points north
Our side felt second best
Pass all those small houses
Built after World War Two
The same exact model
Row after row fills the view

Verse

All those heroes came home
After fighting the last great war
Raised a lot of good people there
Who didn't ask for anything more
Some of their sons came home
Shell shocked from Vietnam
You could tell who they were
From the tracks running up their arms

Chorus

Across the tracks
Over the divide
Where real lives lived
And real lives died
Across the tracks
We were taught to believe
Said we'd never go back
But you never really leave

Bridge

The crossbuck warns its presence
The gate arm blocks the path
Signal lights blare a warning
To stay out of the train's wrath
The box cars ramble on
The train whistle screams
Next stop Summit Ave
Been there since 1873

Verse

We used to count our pennies
There wasn't much else to count
Except days on earth we had left
Neither felt like a large amount
We'd take those pennies
Place them on the tracks
Watch the train pass
Squash those pennies flat

Chorus

Across the tracks
Over the divide
Where real lives lived
And real lives died

Across the tracks
Stuck on our side
They said we'd make it out
But we always knew they lied

Across the tracks
Below the ravine
We left our own tracks
In the space in between

Across the tracks
We were taught to believe
Said we'd never go back
But you never really leave