

Subway

BY GUY ARSENEAU

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AROUND TOWN

It is as much a part of New York City as the Empire State Building and gypsy cabs running red lights: travel by subway. In 2006, the average daily ridership was 4.9 million people. During rush hour it feels as though every last subway commuter is in a single car, yours. While New York City may be number one in many things, it comes in third among the most frequented underground transportation systems in the world. Despite the Big Apple's annual total of 1.5 billion subway passengers, Moscow and Tokyo, respectively, take the top spots. As a necessary, if not always preferred, method of travel for Gotham residents, subways offer an interesting perspective on those who use them. Routines, rituals and assorted characters make up this subterranean environment. While the list offered here may not be exhaustive, it should be familiar to all city dwellers.

Crack Heads: As a rule, these are young, blond and overwhelmingly female. Staring blankly into space with a vapid expression in her eyes that says "Nobody home," she relentlessly cracks her gum loudly, regularly and with a brainless abandon. The annoying sound emanates from her oral cavity at approximately fifteen second intervals. Usually gifted with an I.Q. of negative five, she is immune from the icy stares coming from her fellow commuters. As a general rule, she will remain on the subway until the last stop, thus insuring that all other straphangers enjoy her serenade from Hell.

Cell, Cell, Cell! On the street, in bathrooms, funeral homes,

and religious services, but most especially on subways, this is the obsessive-compulsive cell phone user. Evenly divided between men and women, The Cell often induces added agony by combining cell phone usage with the gum cracking of the Crack Head; thus giving their fellow passengers not one, but two reasons to hate them. In general, Cells communicate with one another by relying on a two-term conversation, "Where you at?" and "like." These repetitive terms serve as background notes for the relentless symphony of a Gum Cracking cantata.

"You go down into a ditch and watch a million people wiggle, wiggle to get on a train"

-Kathleen Cavanaugh, Kankakee, Illinois, commenting on her impression of the New York City subway system.

Male "cellheads," who constitute a subphylum of the Cell genre, induce terminal rage when they communicate with one another via cell phones even though they are sitting directly across from each other. In addition to their loud and obtrusive electronic communication patterns, they often times scream at each other from the distance of five feet. Male offenders usually try to impress their audience of total strangers by "Hard Ass" business talk designed

to leave their unwilling listeners believing they are riding to work with someone who is a cross between Donald Trump and Bill Gates. With all of their business savvy, why are these self-appointed Captains of Industry going into their offices on a subway car?

Dutch Boy: As even the most casual subway riders knows, trains jerk suddenly, make sharp turns, come to abrupt stops and are often the source of human stampedes at major station stops. These facts do not, however, deter otherwise intelligent women

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from putting a sharp stick up to their eyes. Members of the Mascara Mafia stare intently into small mirrors as they try to extend their eye lashes across several time zones. More seasoned makeupmeisters brush on endless coats of powder, blush, skin toner and rouge to their faces. Those who indulge in this practice are wasting their time. If they need that much of a disguise, they might as well get a paint roller and a gallon of Dutch Boy. Fortunately, at least for now, men do not shave or apply underarm deodorant during their daily travel routine. If, however, urinals ever become standard items on trains the men might catch up to the women in the area of unbecoming informality and personal practices that were, are and should be reserved for the privacy of one's bathroom.

M.I.T: No, this is not the Massachusetts-based institute of learning, but rather MIT—Muggers in Training. Made up primarily of young males, these wolf pack groups of up to a dozen or more acne-enhanced punks take over a subway car and gleefully perform “psychological muggings.” Loud, rude and obnoxious, they make sure every obscenity they can think of peppers their moronic and bombastic conversations. These gangs of no-frills thugs delight in using sexual slang in front of the older and more vulnerable women passengers. The idea, of course, is to intrude on social space and intimidate by their foul language. One of their most common habits requires the use of the subway car as a gym as they do pull-ups on the overhang passenger bars. Throughout the boroughs, these groups have a common dress code of low-slung baggy pants that gives them a remarkable resemblance to oversized babies waddling around with a full load in their diapers. These Sons of Satan turn even the most avid Pro Lifers into activist supporters of retroactive abortion.

Mole Patrol: Short, slightly plump and in town only to visit a relative, she is at once suspicious and overwhelmed by the sheer size and speed of urban life. The ins and outs of city living utterly elude her as she clings to the more familiar markers associated with her suburban living habits, usually formed by her life long residency in the far off Midwest. Funny, loving, sometimes irritating, but always entertaining, her views on New York City are fast, furious and funny. During the course of her travels on any of the 6,200 subway cars that keep New York City moving, she dismisses the whole experience and system as going on “Mole Patrol.” Expanding on her ever upfront opinions, she states, “You start off someplace you don't know, you go down into a ditch and watch a million people wiggle, wiggle to get on a train, and then you travel like a mole through a ditch, and when you come out you still don't know where you're at.”

Clean Queen: For centuries, scientists, theologians, philosophers and bar flies have wrestled with the question of intelligent life in the universe. At last, the Clean Queen now provides a definitive answer—there isn't any; at least not on the New York City subway system. Rare but not unseen, the Clean Queen boards a train car, looks around cautiously and then proceeds to spray her seat and handrail with Lysol disinfectant. After saturating the plastic surface of her seat with this aromatic cleaner, she wipes it dry over the course of several minutes. Once she is satisfied that her hot crossed buns will not pick up a disease, she puts paper towels down anyway. It is not uncommon for her to wear rubber gloves. Some speculate that in her quest for cleanliness she applies Clorox bleach as cologne. More often than not, the Clean Queen will also don a mask, thus giving herself an uncanny and uncomfortable resemblance to Pop pervert Michael Jackson. In closing and *In Transit* with these comments and observations on our fellow citizens and travelers, it is now time to *Beat It*. ■