

Sounding the Motor City: Chrysler and Detroit's Legacy

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Abstract

Screen shot from "Selected of God Choir" Chrysler commercial. Selected of God are better known for their appearance in Eminem's Chrysler commercial that aired during the Super Bowl.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Advertising, American Studies, Article, Class, Hip Hop



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*Screen shot from "Selected of God Choir" Chrysler commercial.
Selected of God are better known for their appearance in Eminem's
Chrysler commercial that aired during the Super Bowl.*

Last February, Chrysler premiered during the Super Bowl its “Imported From Detroit” campaign with a stunning 2-minute ad that showcased Detroit to the soundtrack of [Eminem’s “Lose Yourself.”](#) Helen Freund and David K. Li at *The New York Post* [called Eminem the star of Super Bowl XLV’s ads.](#) MyFOXDetroit.com mentioned how [the people of Detroit showed their love for the ad on social media.](#) Jeff Karoub and Mike Householder from The Associated Press said [the ad “sent shivers of pride through the battered city.”](#) Although the ads are, ultimately, about cars, they also sell us stories of the Motor City.

The commercial starts with scenes from a grey day in Detroit. We see streets, factories, and street signs. The voice-over helps weave a story of a working-class city: “What does this city know about luxury? What does a town that’s been to Hell and back know about the finer things in life?” From the vantage point of a Chrysler, we see shots of Detroit as it drives through the city and the suburbs. At the end, Eminem, a Detroit native, parks the Chrysler 200 in front of the [Fox Theater](#) and walks in to find a choir singing along to “Lose Yourself.” Ultimately, the video is a declaration of pride in American craftsmanship but also a statement of the strong will of an American city with working-class roots; this is emphasized when Eminem looks straight at the camera and states, “This is the motor city. And this is what we do.”



https://youtu.be/SKL254Y_jtc

Although I tend to be critical of the messages advertising sends viewers, this commercial drives chills up my spine every time because it shows pride in an American city. However, what moved me to write this post was one of the most recent ads from the “Imported from Detroit” series. The commercial for the Chrysler 300 (2012 model) uses a sample of Bobby Blue Bland’s “Ain’t No Love in the Heart of the City” (Dreamer, 1974) from Jay-Z’s 2001 hit “Heart of the City (Ain’t No Love)” (found on his album *The Blueprint*). The commercial starts with a panoramic view of Detroit, followed by the Chrysler 300 emerging from an underpass. The camera moves on to shots of different areas of Detroit as well as people on the street and street signs (for example, one of the signs we see is the sign for 8 Mile). Also, whereas most car commercials show cars without license plates, this ad proudly display the cars’ Michigan tags.

https://youtu.be/sMey6AL_SRE

The music in both of these ads acts as a way of reminding us about Detroit (the first a song by a Detroit native, the second a song that makes us think about cities), but the music also calls into question the luxurious excess of the automobile. The ads try to draw attention away from the automobiles and toward the working-class community that keeps Chrysler running; they emphasize their ties to the Motor City. However, as Angie Schmitt points out in her blog post “The Hypocrisy of Chrysler’s ‘Imported from Detroit’ Campaign,” the ads betray the viewer:

Chrysler is selective about the Detroit it celebrates. Absent is the [ruin](#) that now accounts for a large share of the city. Invisible is the [crushing poverty](#), constantly present in the urban landscape. The driver in [the most recent installment](#), traveling out from the center of Detroit to its suburbs, is in control of his fate (thanks to his snappy ride) in a way few in the region really are.

Despite the defiant sentimentality of its ads, Chrysler, as well, is selective about its commitment to the city of Detroit.

Although the ads are visually stunning (but many of the ads produced by Wieden+Kennedy advertising company are—[just look at their roster of clients and click on some of the brands](#)), the ads also stage a conflict between race and class through the soundtrack. What is the message these commercials are trying to communicate through their music and their cars? On the one hand, they affirm the presence and reemergence of an American car company, one of the major car companies that was hit hard in the most recent U.S. recession. On the other hand, the ads use a discourse of class (also race) to sell a luxury product. The commercials want to connect Chrysler to Detroit's working-class identity, and the soundtrack is supposed to act in service of that through the choices of artists and music.

A good example of this is the [John Varvatos](#) "Attitude" ad for Chrysler (less popular than the Eminem ad and the more recent Chrysler 300 ad).

<https://youtu.be/T8CC1meDgeI>

Varvatos is a designer from Detroit, located in New York. The commercial shows us Varvatos at the [Dope Jams](#) record store in Brooklyn, on his way to his Manhattan studio. The voiceover tells us the key to his success is that he was "surrounded by the perfect combination of rock and roll and heavy industry." The working-class theme is emphasized in this commercial, especially in the last line uttered by the narrator: "that's what a blue collar attitude can do in a white collar world." (It also creates a dichotomy where New York is the "white collar world" to Detroit's "blue collar attitude.") Unfortunately, the ads commodify class struggles and class values. The ads use working-class values to appeal to the consumer.

Music is not far removed from the automobile industry in Detroit. The Motor City not only exports cars, but is also an exporter of music. Suzanne Smith, in her book [Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit](#) (2000), traces the development of Motown within the sociocultural context of Detroit in the 1960s. She explains how the automobile industry in Detroit benefited from African American labor, meanwhile excluding them from "controlling the means of production" (15). On the other hand, Smith also points out that Motown profited from the introduction of the transistor radio in 1953, for drivers could now listen to music in their cars. Motown execs were very aware of the new market that this would provide them. "Both the musical form and the audio fidelity of Motown hits such as 'My Girl' and 'Shop Around' were well suited and often produced with a car radio audience in mind" (123). The ads remind us how listening to music has become part of the experience of driving—and how that was not coincidental.

Ultimately, these ads remind us of how sound can act as a door into the social and cultural context surrounding the cars. However, I want to leave my readers with a thought: the ads are also about Detroit. If car ads require, in general, remarkably non-specific setting, Chrysler goes in the opposite direction and makes it all about the location. The ads, although problematic, remind us of the power and importance of place, whether in its Detroit ads or in its [Portland, Oregon](#) ad or its [Los Angeles](#) ad. If Jay-Z and Bobby Blue Bland sing "ain't no love in the heart of the city," these Chrysler ads show that the city has plenty of love to give.

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