



BECOMING AN AMERICAN B(R)AND: PRE-EXISTING POPULAR MUSIC IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

by Joanna Love

Relationships between the American advertising and popular music industries date back to the turn of the twentieth century. Songs like “In My Merry Oldsmobile” were

composed in the popular Tin Pan Alley idioms of time and circulated as sheet music for families to perform around their living room pianos. In the 1930s, radio variety shows featuring popular music idioms were sponsored by household corporate brands, and when stand-alone radio jingles (short tunes composed specifically to advertise a brand) gained prominence, they often emulated the forms, instrumentation, vocal timbres, and rhythms and even sampled melodies from then-popular genres like country and western, barbershop, and Tin Pan Alley. After World War II, the rise of the baby boomer generation and their love for rock and roll not only changed the sounds of the American music industry but also eventually infiltrated the business of advertising. As musical audiences grew increasingly fragmented, corporate marketers realized that they too could cater to specific age ranges and regional interests. With the rise of the television culture in the late-1950s, marketers not only sought to *emulate* the sounds of popular genres but also began to incorporate famous musicians and their pre-existing songs (those created outside a commercial’s context) into television commercials.

Increasingly, advertising agencies began licensing (paying record labels for the rights to borrow) recognizable pre-existing popular music for television commercials. This caused music’s role in advertising to shift from mere background accompaniment to perceptible foreground entertainment and allowed hit tracks to become an active agent in marketing campaigns. Marketers hoped that potential consumers would transfer positive feelings and meanings associated with specific genres, songs, and musicians to the advertised commodities. As the twentieth century progressed, popular musicians also realized the potential benefits offered by these co-branding arrangements, which

included an increased exposure to mass audiences and opportunities for higher record sales.

By the end of the twentieth century, pre-existing popular songs had been incorporated into television commercials in countless ways. Three high-profile licensing deals created the climate for the co-branding relationships that have become commonplace today among new artists, marketers, and corporate brands. The first was Pepsi-Cola's 1984 "Choice of a New Generation" campaign, in which the soda giant paid Michael Jackson a record \$5 million to sing a jingle over the backing track to his then-hit song "Billie Jean" in two television spots. The commercials were pioneering in their placement of slogan material over memorable sound bites from his well-known single, including the syncopated opening groove, energetic pre-chorus, and danceable chorus. The spots also proved visually impressive, with their inclusion of flashy costuming, iconic choreography, and fast-paced editing techniques styled after Jackson's MTV videos. The innovation and timing of Pepsi's campaign at the height of Jackson's fame gave it unprecedented success, ultimately boosting the soda giant's sales over those of archrival Coca-Cola for the first time in history. And when coupled with his MTV videos and chart-topping singles, Jackson's commercial exposure on network TV also arguably aided him in securing *Thriller* as the best-selling album of all time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a 1987 commercial made by the athletic apparel and equipment company Nike, Inc., demonstrated the often-controversial place that pre-existing music can have in advertising. Nike's spot created considerable audience backlash and even prompted litigation by featuring a well-known version of the Beatles' 1968 hit "Revolution." Because the living Beatles members neither owned the rights to the song nor approved its use in the commercial, "Revolution in Motion" reignited debates over copyright and musical meaning in advertising. Snippets from memorable sections of the song's opening guitar riff, poetic first verse, soulful bridge, final refrain, and outro were cut up and spliced together to support black-and-white images of "common" people participating in various athletic activities. Beatles fans (and baby boomers in particular) were appalled that a song they understood to uphold countercultural ideals that included anti-consumerism was parsed down, restructured, and ultimately stripped of its original meanings to support Nike's corporate interests. The negative responses to "Revolution in Motion" also indicated that despite the success achieved just a few years prior by Michael Jackson's Pepsi spots, baby boomers held an unwavering stance against musicians from their own generation "selling out" their music to advertisers.

The third major licensing event of the twentieth century occurred in 1999, when Moby, an underground electronic dance music (EDM) artist, licensed the tracks from his newest album *Play* to various corporate brands, including Volkswagen and Nordstrom, Inc. Many of these commercials proved innovative in their synchronization of *Play*'s electronic blending of sampled vocals and other live sounds with visual images that were equally as avant-garde. And despite the sometimes-incongruent messages conveyed between the songs and the images (as in the Nordstrom commercial that portrayed "Porcelain" as a romantic tune despite its angsty lyrics), Moby's music was well received and sparked widespread interest. In fact, the exposure *Play* gained from its inclusion in commercials (and even a British indie production company) caused audiences to pressure radio stations previously unwilling to play Moby's tracks to give his songs substantial airtime. As a result, Moby's EDM album achieved unprecedented success by reaching audiences typically accessible only to mainstream pop, rock, and R&B artists backed by major labels. The appearance of *Play*'s tracks in various corporate commercials garnered it eight number-one singles and propelled sales to an astounding 10 million copies worldwide. The commercials also set the standard for pairing EDM tracks with corporate brands.

In the twenty-first century, licensing deals have become crucial for unknown artists and underground genres. This change reflects the music industry's struggles with the negative impact technology has had on record sales and the consolidation of nationwide playlists at Top 40 radio stations, which allows few airtime possibilities for untested, new, and upcoming artists. The shift toward the advertising industry as an essential patron for new music indicates not only a change in the cultural distribution of music but also a potential shift away from the negative reactions once made by baby boomers about "selling-out" to a wider acceptance of corporate influence on artistic production.

"Sonic branding" with pre-existing popular music has therefore become a central focus in contemporary advertising practices. Today's television (and now, Internet) commercials not only feature well-known pre-existing popular songs but also now seek to expose new artists to young audiences. An increasing number of corporate brands search for up-and-coming tracks to feature alongside youthful products in the hopes of breaking new singles and creating buzz for corporate goods (a practice known today as affinity marketing). Marketers no longer think it adequate to be current on the latest musical trends, but believe that millennial consumers can be reached only if brands demonstrate their ability to be tastemakers. Time

will tell what long-term effects advertising's increasing influence on the selection, dissemination, and even commissioning of popular music for commercials will have on the music industry and, more specifically, on popular music's sounds and production, but recent commercials by Pepsi-Cola ("Music Icons") and Toyota Motor Company ("Style Never Goes Out of Style") indicate that corporate brands already consider themselves to be fully inscribed in the past, present, and future of popular music.

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