thunder road

ROCK & ROLL, SUBURBIA AND THE AUTOMOBILE

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The 1960s ushered in profound changes to the American way of life. Rock music had transformed the sonic landscape, and the landscape itself had been transformed by suburbia, the interstate highway and "urban renewal." The automobile, now in what may be called a golden age, played an important role in the transformation of both music and the landscape; it was a common theme in the songs of the time and was what enabled the move away from urban areas into suburbs--along the highways.

The seeds for the changes of the 1960s, however, were sown in the 1950s, as baby boom kids grew up in suburbia and as the urban poor (both black and white) were under attack by new highway developments that tore apart their neighborhoods. Urban culture and suburban culture faced off in the music markets and on the airwaves; in living rooms, and perhaps more importantly, in automobiles.

Automobiles, in both literal and figurative form, became something of a rallying cry to the disenchanted teenagers of the sixties, many of whom had grown up in suburban households. Its promise—power, self-determination, speed, freedom from constraint and authority—resonated with youths who were trying to carve their own identities from the anonymous lump that suburbia had left them with.

Music provided the impetus for automotive culture and suburban youth through much of the fifties and sixties. Often, the music of poor, urban people—black and white, though with mostly black sonic influences—provided musical links to the automotive culture; the beat of rock and the thrum of a V-8 fueled the massive changes that would sweep the states throughout the sixties.

Three aspects of fifties and sixties culture interest me particularly: the automobile, music and the music industry, and the mindset of suburban teens. By looking at significant automotive developments, important songs and the

1929
October 28: Stock market crash. The Chrysler building is the tallest in New York.

1930s
Luxury car makers Auburn, Cord and Duesenberg die.

great changes that marked the move from urban culture to suburban culture, I hope to draw some kind of link between the three; explain, at least to myself, how it all worked together; how it created what it created. If, in fact, it actually did.

This discussion will be framed through a series of what might be considered pop-culture "landmarks" at the top of each page; things that were going on outside of the three aspects that I wish to focus on but which probably left indelible marks on cars, songs and suburban youth.

Sowing the seeds: interstates destroy inner cities; the move to suburbia

The American landscape underwent dramatic changes in the 1950s with the expansion of the interstate highway system and the growth of suburbia. As the car had evolved from its rural mud-car roots to a symbol of glamour, with its electric starter, radio and air-conditioning, it demanded better roads and highways, which in turn fueled faster, larger and more opulent cars (Jackle 295). Constructing the highway system, however, was not without major costs. From 1949 on, during the urban renewal program, inner cities were bulldozed as overpasses, expressways and off-ramps were erected. Whole neighborhoods were sacrificed, creating a series of social ills that are still present today (Jackle 306).

Cars, precipitating the metamorphosis of the urban landscape, crushed the inner city under the "assault of freeway construction" (302); eventually 40% of the urban population moved into the burbs.

The inhabitants of these inner cities, who were predominantly African-American, had few places to turn in the face of the destruction of much of their lives: most of them could not afford homes elsewhere, despite what they had been paid during the expropriation; many of them turned to something they could (sometimes barely) afford: their automobiles.

For many black males during the fifties, cars were one of the very few ways

1934
Bonnie and Clyde.

1935
Elvis Presley is born. First "aerodynamic" car, the Cord 810 Westchester, is launched.

that they could express a degree of self-control, a degree of masculinity. Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88", which is ostensibly about a V-8 engined Oldsmobile, is also laden with sexual references (Bowman 01.05.98).

Everything had changed for blacks in the early 1950s. They were "doing their own thing in a new era, for labels created especially to sell to the black market; and good white songs were becoming scarce" (Clarke 366). Chuck Berry's "Maybellene," released in 1955 by black-oriented Chess Records, shows how important cars were in blacks' own thing, even if not all of them could afford one. He explains the lines:Girls in my dream car, door to door
My Ford bogged down, wouldn't hold no more

by telling us their source was:

> Memories of high school, trying to get girls to ride in my 1934 V-8 Ford. I even put seat covers in it to accommodate the girls that the football players would take riding in it when I was in class.
>
> (Berry 144)

Years later, the automotive experience was still so important that he added another verse, describing a funeral Cadillac in what "would have been the only opportunity I could have to ride in one" (145):

> First thing I saw was that Cadillac grille
> Doing a hundred and ten dropping off that hill
> An uphill curve and a downhill stretch
> Me and that Cadillac was neck and neck (145)

1938
First Sturgis rally for Harley-Davidson nuts.

1939–45
World War II. No cars, no pressing of records, women in the workforce.

1946
The Gateway Arch in St. Louis is started.

Little Richard, the "tornado" on stage (Clarke 377), passionately shouted his dirty automotive-reference laden songs like a screaming engine:

> Long tall Sally she's
> Built for speed
> She got everything
> That Uncle John needs (377)

The burgeoning black music market was also reaching a larger white audience. In the years between 1955 and 1960, a million fifteen-year-olds entered the american population (Clarke 490). The majority of them lived in the suburbs, with still more cars on the road, still more houses, and finally, the ultimate shrine to western civilization—the shopping mall.
Within these malls, kids—for the most part, affluent white Americans (Jackle 303)—were exposed to black music, something that would play a critical role in the development of white automotive-related songs in the sixties.

Even in its infancy, though, suburbia's problems were evident. Commercial strips, whose layout and architecture were dictated by the car, were an unplanned, evolving dinosaur of an eyesore (306), littering roadsides with flashing lights and bright signs. As families started to climb towards the 2.7 cars they would own by the middle of the seventies, gridlock on the wide thoroughfares was becoming unbearable.

Warts and all, suburban life ushered in a new way of living (308), a fast, crude, barbaric age based on instant gratification. Universal access to cars promised freedom of a basic kind to suburbanites, and was becoming a dream that African-Americans could also attain. The social mobility and enhanced status that a bright, shiny automobile granted you became a major theme in popular music, especially for lower-income blacks who saw their communities being

1947
Henry Ford dies.

late 1940s
Hillbilly music becomes "Country & Western."

destroyed through literal and metaphoric car windows.

Suburban dystopia in the sixties: comics, beatniks and the open road

Inside the shopping malls of suburbia, a potential revolution was brewing. American families, and more importantly, American children, were learning about instant gratification, were for once prosperous enough not to worry about having to go straight to work when it was legal, were allowed to "find themselves." They could afford to read more, listen to more—and, perhaps most importantly—they could watch television.

In 1952, Jerry Garcia's mother moved out of the city to raise her children in a "better" area—Menlo Park, about thirty miles out of San Francisco. Amongst the perfectly manicured lawns and antiseptic tile floors of the shopping malls, he immersed himself in books and magazines, getting hooked on *Mad* comics. Unlike the view that many musicians and artists take towards sanitized suburbia, he instead insists that much of the music he would later make wouldn't have been possible without it. Suburbia and shopping malls, he told Troy Sandy, "helped me acquire the satirical outlook that was so liberating for American kids in the fifties" (6).

The relatively affluent suburbs also opened up new automotive experiences, introducing imported cars to the American public. Garcia was smitten with his seventh-grade teacher's MG, and Volkswagens, which were to later be closely associated with the Grateful Dead, were increasingly common.

But suburbia's biggest influence may have been on urban culture, which reacted to its artificiality and cleanliness with "beat." The Beatnik scene in San Francisco produced such people as Jack Kerouac, whose 1957 *On the Road* became the bible of the beat generation. Chronicling two dropouts "trekking across the country from New York to San Francisco, Mexico to New Orleans in search of kicks, pleasure and truth," (Sandy 18) the novel promised adven-

late 1940s–1950s
The motel changes habits in overnight accomodations. Drive-in movies are an economic force.

1950
McCarthy launches the anticommunist campaign.

ture, romance, *everything*—a refusal to bow to suburban authority or conservative social norms (18). More importantly, it affirmed the primacy of the road as an instrument of freedom and self-determination for many youth.

Kids from the country were getting into cars in a big way, too. After receiving $50,000 from his RCA signing—an unprecedented amount of money at the time—Elvis Presley bought a green Lincoln convertible before a new guitar (Brown 47). "I told myself," he said later, "that if I ever got any money, I was going to get my fill of cars."

Teenagers'—urban and suburban—fascination with cars, combined with the ironic affirmation of the road by the beatniks, was pouring the bed for a road that would lead American teens and American music in a whole new direction; a road that led west.

The new utopia: surfing, drive-ins and dragstrips in California

A gold-rush hotbed in the 1850s, and later the thirty-first state of the union, California in the late fifties and early sixties characterized the "sentiments of the droves of migrants from the Midwest and the East Coast who travelled [there] with hopes of sun, fun, and jobs" (Szatmary 68). Californian music—a bright, bouncy sound that "glorified beaches, bikinis and hot rods" (68)—and the bait of open beaches and open roads also had much to do with its appeal.

Automobiles played an important role in the surfing culture first musically popularized by Dick Dale and the Deltones—and Fender guitars. Surfers, very few of which, despite the stereotype, actually lived on the beach, became cult followers of "woodies"—upright station wagons with wooden side-panels that were ideal for transporting boards to and from their suburban homes.

The Beach Boys, one of the first and certainly most popular proponents of the surfing culture, were also very much into car-customizing and drag-racing; car trips and car tuning were central to many of their songs.

> Brian [Wilson] and Gary [Usher] were driving on Western Boulevard, headed for an auto-supply store, when Usher started talking about saving up for his dream car. "Save my pennies, save my dimes," Usher said, and Brian started to hum a tune. "I need more horses," Usher said of his 248 [cubic-inch displacement] Chevy. "This dog's not quick enough." Suddenly, Brian said, "That's it! We gotta write a song about the hottest car on the road." That night, they wrote "409." (Gaines 74)

"409" got massive airplay in Los Angeles, fuelling a major on-air discussion. DJ Roger Christian, a car nut himself, thought that the 327 Chevy was a better, faster car, though the more expensive 409 was what GM was pushing. Murry Wilson, Brian's dad, listened in on the discussion, and decided that "this was the man to write more car lyrics with Brian" (Gaines 86), understanding how important that cars were—still are—to image- and speed-conscious Californians.

The surfing culture, and the Beach Boys, continued to grow. In March of 1963, "Surfing USA" was released, and brought an entire nation to California with "if everybody had an ocean" (100). Once there, they discovered drag-racing culture—"Shut Down" described a race between a Corvette Sting Ray and a 413 Dodge—and perhaps most importantly, cruising.

"I Get Around," with its soaring vocals and breezy lyrics about a group of guys who cruised around in their cars, who have "never been beat" and who "never miss with the girls we meet," became the first #1 hit for the Beach Boys (115) and also came to embody all of the tenets of the youthful Californian life—sun, girls, cars and fun. Its cleanliness and wholesomeness also validated suburban values. Its appeal was so widespread, in fact, that the Beach Boys even made a guest appearance on the BBC's car-enthusiast show, *Top Gear* (117).

1955
First McDonalds. "Heartbreak Hotel"; "Rock Around the Clock". Disneyland opens; James Dean crashes his Porsche.

1956
Harland Sanders hits the road in a Ford to sell fried chicken.

1957
With its "new-wave" cars, Chrysler introduces tailfins to America.

But it was "Fun Fun Fun," a song about a girl who borrowed her father's Ford Thunderbird to ostensibly go to the library but instead went to meed her boyfriend at his apartment, that truly became "a classic of teenage rebellion," and soon became a "catchphrase of American culture" (112). California—more so even than Detroit, with its vaunted Woodward Avenue—became the centre of the hot-rod culture that would eventually sweep the entire United States. Songs like Johnny Bond's "Hot Rod Lincoln," the Duals' "Stick Shift," and Jan and Dean's "Surf City," "Drag City," and "Schlock Rod," brought drag racing into the very mainstream of American culture. Car culture, like suburbia, was growing larger and ever-more inclusive: even Little Old Ladies from Pasadena raced, at least in California.

Despite California's squeaky-cleanliness, all was not sweetness and light. Tired of sanitized, perfect rock-and-roll, teens and car nuts alike were tuning into songs that were grittier, more critical, and less happy with suburbia, a drive that would lead them back out onto highways that were increasingly potholed and rutted, but a drive that had the potential to greatly expand their horizons.

Flight songs: leaving the past behind for the past, along the highway

As suburban areas got more and more crowded—and as they became larger and more racially diversified—teens living in them started to become disenchanted with the suburban life. Bruce Springsteen, who hailed from Ashbury Park, New Jersey, perhaps exemplified this mindset the best.

Born To Run, an instant classic, was an album that contained no stylistic breakthroughs (Marsh 127), but struck a real chord amongst suburban youth who were becoming frustrated with the artificiality and superficiality of their lives. Composed of songs that were "in fact, little stories [that] add up to one big story, one that simply follows a boy and his girlfriend through a long, tragicomic day, a bit like American Graffiti without the saccharine" (130). Every life they

1958
W.C. Handy dies. Last sand race is held on Daytona Beach. Boeing 707, first American jetliner, is introduced.

1959
NASCAR comes into its own at Daytona Beach International Speedway. Berry Gordy founds Hitsville USA, to become Motown Records.

encounter has a "half realized potential, not just for violence but for catastrophe."

"Thunder Road," says Dave Marsh, "is a statement of purpose...it celebrates the virtues of day to day loving while articulating the hero's deepest fears" (130). Its characters live in a suburban hell, filled with cruel streets, poverty, desperation and empty lives:

> They haunt this dusty beach road
> In the skeleton frames of burned-out Chevrolets...
> It's a town fulla losers
> And I'm pullin' outta here to win! (131)

In this dystopia, cars and guitars are not a panacea of course, but they "may be a way of escaping these cruel streets" (131). There's always a chance if the girl will only believe as deeply as the singer in salvation, heroism, and, most importantly, the power of the road and the automobile to take them there:

> Roll down your window and let the wind blow back your hair
> The night's bustin' open
> Those two lanes will take us anywhere (131)

"Born To Run," the album's title track, is driven, possessed, propelled "by the mighty roar of God-knows-how-many Fender guitars slamming into the same riff, racing to a climax on a dead-end street" (Marsh 132). Sung flat out, it drips with suburban desperation—as though the singer's life depends on getting through a tight corner at maximum speed.

The streets they're trying to escape are cruising strips right out of real life (132), endless highways lined on either side by drive-in restaurants, movie theaters and amusement arcades, the "kind of street that seems to run through

every town with more than a handful of teenagers...this place may be Nowhere but it is now a Universal Nowhere" (132).

As Springsteen and his companion Wendy discover, though—and as many suburban teenagers discovered in their own struggles—there is no way out. "Born To Run"'s snapshot of this "endlessly circled paradise" (133), girls primping and boys acting tough, is one of the ghost lovers of "Thunder Road" being condemned to roam the strips forever:

> In the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream
> At night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines...
> Baby this town rips the bones from your back
> It's a death trap, a suicide rap
> We gotta get out while we're young
> 'Cause tramps like us, baby, we were born to run.

The move away from the cities fueled a 1970s obsession with highway imagery. Bachman Turner Overdrive's Fred Turner, who "built hot rods through [his] younger years" (Melhuich 98) became fascinated with highway machines: "anything that would scream at a high pitch, you know...I liked anything that was loud and tough."

"Roll On Down The Highway" is an example of how important that trucks had become. They symbolized rebellion against authority, against the conformity that so permeated the suburbs and the roads around them:

> There's a cop in the corner, look he's starting to write
> I don't need no ticket, so I screamed out of sight. (87)

As disenchantment with suburban life grew, many people looked to the road as a viable way to make a living—and making a living on the road was impossible

1963
Vietnam begins; JFK is assassinated; Alcatraz is closed; Studebaker closes down.

1964
The Free Speech movement at Berkeley. The first "muscle car", the Ford Mustang.

without a truck:

> Climb back in the cab cross your fingers for luck
> We gotta keep movin' if we're gonna make a buck. (87)

Like Springsteen, however, BTO—whose logo is a stylized gear—have to admit to the all-encompassing power of conformity and suburbia; the road is the wrong place for them, and the authorities eventually catch up:

> Look at the sign, we're in the wrong place
> Come on boys, let's get ready to race
> 454 coming over the hill
> The man on patrol is going to give us a bill. (87)

The present and future: traffic, gridlock and cruising

As long as cars, roads and teenagers continue to exist, their interactions will provide important fodder for musicians, and automotive subjects and dreams of the open road will continue to permeate the consciousness of both the people who make and consume music.

Even in the age of nonstop restorative construction on American interstates, of road rage, of gridlock that keeps commuters stuck in traffic for hours, cars are going to be important in music—it's just that their role will be slightly changed. We can see this now in many hip-hop videos, where cars are less an expression of speeding away from roots, but are rather a tool for cruising through it, staying in touch with it—countless rap videos feature the artists riding in the back of antique lowrider convertibles, perched on the rear package shelf and cruising slowly through urban neighborhoods.

Cars in this culture are also a powerful symbol of material success and the aspirations of many urban youth. In the traffic-clogged landscapes that we see

1965
The Houston Astrodome is completed.

1966
Star Trek hits the airwaves; Walt Disney dies.

in music videos, big luxury cars abound: visitors to a fictitious house in Notorious BIG's video arrive in Mercedes CLKs; Will Smith drives and flies a $300,000 Aston Martin DB7 through one of his videos.

In a way, the current obsession with cars in hip-hop culture is an indication that cars and music, from their roots in 1950s inner cities, have come full circle in their relationship. They've traipsed through suburbia together, they've ventured out onto the highways, drag-raced through California, and have hightailed it back, away from the obsessively clean and antiseptic utopias right back into the ugliness of downtown.

Yet fantasies about automotive transcendence are as present now as they ever were. We still hope that cars will elevate us above our own circumstances and

1967
Richard Petty wins 27 of 48 races. The Gateway Arch is completed.

average looks; that brightly polished fenders and alloy wheels mean something to the opposite sex; that we can really escape our past into the light at the end of the interstate tunnel.

Whether cars actually can do this or not is almost immaterial; for so many years, they've been symbols of adolescent rebelliousness and disrespect of authority—and perhaps more importantly, have given teens a sense of purpose and drive that they might not have had otherwise. Whether our aspirations and dreams have been misguided down the automotive road matters much less than the fact that we have had them in the first place. And music, music that preaches the cult of cars, has given teens something to grab on to in lives that have often been less than full.

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