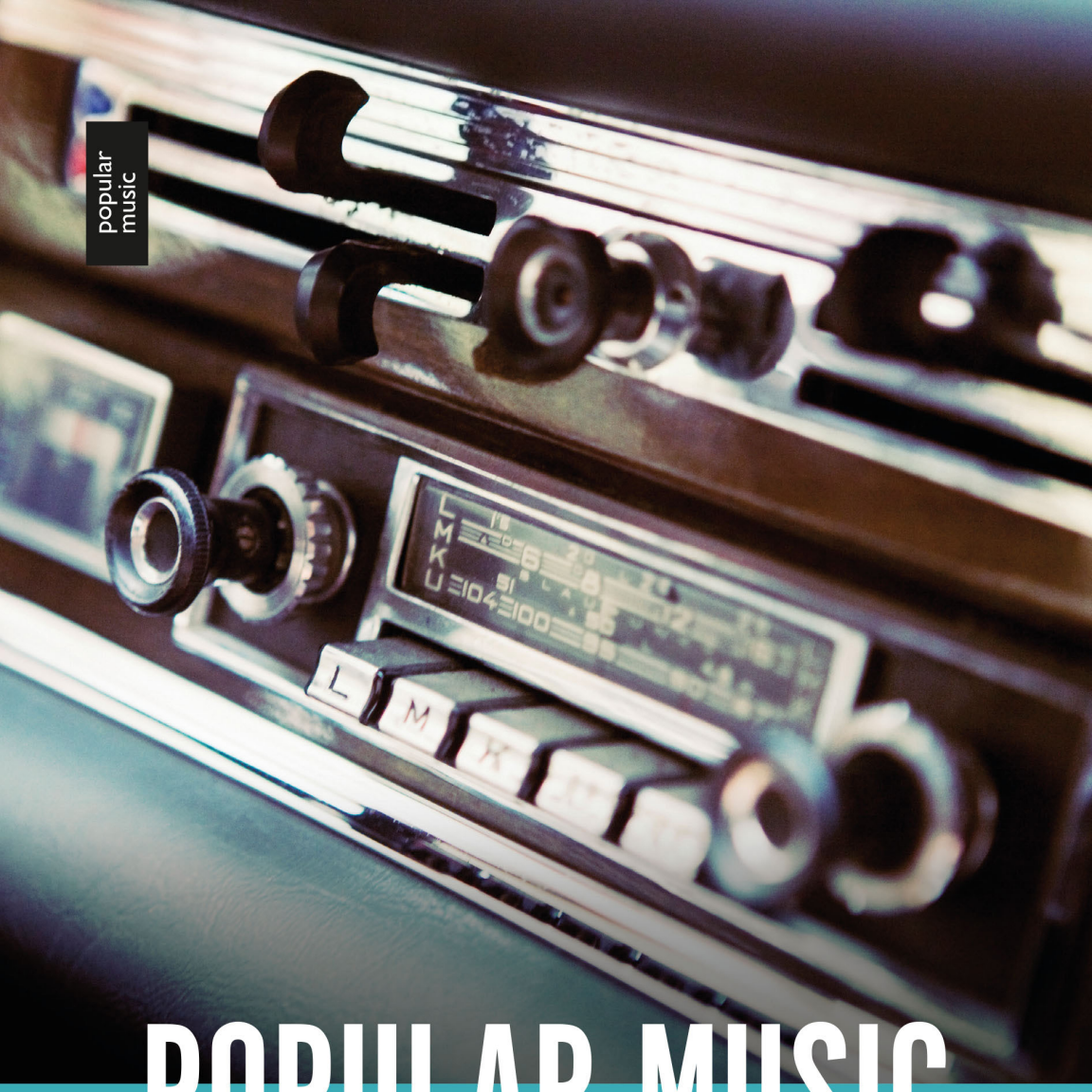

POPULAR MUSIC AND AUTOMOBILES

Edited by
Mark Duffett & Beate Peter

BLOOMSBURY

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Introduction

Mark Duffett

For anyone who has seen it, the moment in the heavy metal comedy *Wayne's World* (Spheeris, 1992) is not hard to recall. Rock fan Wayne Campbell, played by Mike Myers, says, "I think we'll go with a little 'Bohemian Rhapsody,' gentlemen." He loads a tape into the cassette player of his friend Garth's car. The two enthusiastically sing in operatic style while two more buddies add backing. Everyone rocks to the music as they cruise the streets of Aurora, Illinois. Wayne and Garth's friendship is reflected in the way that they sit together, grin from ear to ear, and sing along in harmony. Their sociability is not just signified through a shared admiration for Wayne's choice of song, or by their mutual karaoke prowess. The fact that we see a choir of singing heads, a bit like Queen in the "Bohemian Rhapsody" video, only adds to the moment's mirth. Any recognition of communal emotion is enhanced by the fact that the scene is encapsulated within a motor vehicle. Wayne and Garth are not just moving in their car. They are enjoying an experience that connects their love of Queen to the pleasure of riding in Garth's light blue 1976 AMC Pacer Burton, a model made more individual by its mismatched wheels and tacky 'go-faster' stripes. The head bangers' geographic and musical journey forms a unified experience. It signifies their adolescent masculinities. They understand that the two spheres, cars and music, are the connected ways of traversing the world.

With its light-hearted communality, the *Wayne's World* ritual seems strangely familiar—not just because it has been regularly resurrected by comedian James Corden with different music celebrities for the 'carpool karaoke' segment of his version of the CBS series, *The Late Late Show*. One way or another, part of us is, somehow, a bit like Wayne and Garth. We live, and move, in cars. We drive, we ride, we listen, we sing. We participate in popular music. The head bangers' experience reminds us that we understand motor vehicles as intimate spaces. It demonstrates how motor cars and commercial music have become closely associated as *symbiotic commodities*.

This volume has its origins in an international symposium called *Popular Music and Automobile Culture*, organized at the University of Chester in June 2012 with the help of my co-editor, Dr Beate Peter. In what follows, most chapters are contributions from delegates who attended that event. We argued in our call for papers that automobiles and popular music have long been intertwined. It almost goes without saying that the match is widely understood as a natural one, even though it remains relatively unexamined by researchers. In 2001 Michael Berger wrote:

> Aside from articles in periodicals there is very little of the automobile's influence on and portrayal in music. There is no book length, scholarly treatment of the subject. In fact, only three volumes devote any attention to it, and one of those is a reference work. . . . This paucity of material is somewhat surprizing given the long association between motoring and musical composition. (p. 220)

More scholarship has emerged since Berger's reference guide was published. With some notable exceptions, much of it has, however, been piecemeal. One might ask, then: Why should we put music and automobiles together? Is it just a vague theme—little more than a kind of common sense connection?

Not only has popular music formed a soundtrack to the age of the automobile; its driving beat has constantly provided a playlist that *reflects* the era of the combustion engine. As Widmer (2002) suggests, cars have long exerted a hypnotic hold on the imaginations of commercial songwriters. Not only do people love to sing about motor vehicles; when we look at their efforts in context, they also form stages in a regular movement between consumerism and customization, margins and mainstream. In 1941, for example, Memphis Minnie's "Me and My Chauffer Blues" reflected African American aspirations. "Rocket 88" spoke of the pleasures of using a shiny new Oldsmobile as a means to secure bragging rights in games of courtship. Gene Vincent starred in the juvenile delinquency flick *Hot Rod Gang* (Landers, 1958). The Beach Boys' 1963 "Little Deuce Coup" expressed an owner's affectionate relationship with his reliable and trusted vehicle. Who, too, could forget Rose Royce's later hit "Car Wash"? In the 1970s, "Chevrolet" by ZZ Top and "Low Rider" by War offered different, but equally cinematic, perspectives on the experience of driving. In complete contrast, in 1978 and 1979, "Warm Leatherette" by the Normal and "Cars" by Gary Numan imagined futuristic worlds in which motor vehicles reflected human alienation. In the 1990s, hip-hop took over the steering wheel with songs like "Two Dope Boyz (in a Cadillac)" by Outkast and "Let Me Ride" by Dr Dre. In the early

YouTube era, South African rap-ravers Die Antwoord flaunted their 'Zef style': a self-conscious tackiness centred on the idea of driving the Ford Zephyr. Die Antwoord formed its own label in 2011 called Zef Recordz. These are just a few flashpoints in the ongoing connection between popular music and automobiles, a cultural intersection that has frequent and regular traffic.

For the rest of this introduction, I will outline eight dimensions of a relationship between commercial sounds and motor transport.

My first point is that as parallel commodities, cars and popular music became instrumental in *catalysing America's shift into an era of high modernity*. It is just not the case that cars were in one cultural place and music in another. They were, instead, two elements that were more closely connected when the United States underwent a monumental process of social transformation. Rock 'n' roll, for instance, indicated changing times, but not only as an expression of sexual liberation or generational rebellion. The music was practised as part of what was literally a change of landscape designed to promote the increased use of automotive transport. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the first episode of BBC4's recent three-part documentary *Rock 'n' roll America* (O'Casey, 2015) began not with Elvis but with a newsreel about Levittown, New Jersey: "a city that was completely planned before the first house was built." The federal government secured America's economic boom, in part, by guaranteeing mortgages and passing the 1956 Interstate Highway Act. A series of new residential communities reflected collective settlement of Americans in neatly regimented single-family homes. Between 1945 and 1960, rapidly fabricated suburbs attracted 30 million inhabitants. In this new environment, mass consumption began to blur hierarchies established in the workplace and contributed to new expressions of social identity (Gartman, 1994, p. 139).

Motor vehicles became the key mode of transport used to navigate miles of neatly kept streets and move to and from the workplace, but they were not simply a means of transportation. Car manufacturing and popular music were inspired by the shared practice of motoring—commuting, cruising, or escaping. As car sales increased, styling came to the forefront of the automobile industry, to the extent that by the middle of the 1950s the most popular product lines were updated every two years. Under the creative leadership of Harley Earl, General Motors opened at $125 million Technical Centre in Michigan (Gartman, 1994, p. 148). Cars became desired as spaces for living in—dream machines. They developed more powerful engines and sleek forms with chromium, fins, and fenders. Motor vehicles began morphing into space rockets. Aided and abetted

by portable and in-car transistor radio technology, 1950s drivers enjoyed popular music as their chosen soundtrack (see Wall and Webber in this volume). It was the sonic supplement for a widely shared experience.

Secondly, musical attention to car travel has *reflected upon the landscape*. From highways to suburbs, the use of automobiles brought whole new localities into being. Popular music often accompanied the experience of surveying the world of 'carchitecture.' Such was the link between contemporary music and cars that the emergent mid-century freeways hosted what became known as 'doo-wop' architecture. Referencing dual determinants from the same taste category—a music genre and automotive geography—'doo-wop' locates a style characterized by motels, highways, gas stations, diners, drive-ins, and miles of unhindered freeway. Such places have now become monuments reflecting not only *how* the mass adoption of automobiles reshaped physical infrastructure and geography, but how far they transformed the experience of living in the modern, Western world (see Foster, 2003). Although 'doo-wop' now looks as kitsch as Bakelite, it remains in need of heritage preservation as a style that defined a playful era of modernity. Driving has its own, distinctly modern rhythm: passing crossroads, waiting at crossings, taking the fast lane, stuck in a jam. Car travel makes vistas of the city visible both by day and at night. Popular music explores that territory.

Thirdly, in the 1950s cars were, more so than ever before, sold and used not simply as transportation tools or means to an end. Instead they became *branded*: imbued with symbolic meaning and linked to personal fantasies. As commuting confined conformist drivers to the quotidian rhythm of moving between suburban life and daily labour, new visions of escape fired the motoring imagination. Cars became instruments of freedom and individuality. American culture developed a fascination with speed and escape. James Dean's lethal crash near Paso Robles at the end of September 1955 sent shockwaves through teen circles across the country. While the probability that Dean was speeding when his Porsche 550 Spyder hit a Ford Custom has been contested, the fact that he called his car 'little bastard' indicates that defiance expressed through reckless driving had already become part of his celebrity image. In a time when the tempo of generational change was rapidly increasing, Elvis saw James Dean as an emblem of the youth market and its changing concerns. Though Dean did not leave a direct *musical* legacy, his 'live fast, die young' image (see final chapter, this volume) became associated with rock 'n' roll stereotyped as the choice of reprobates, hot rod racers, greasers, and hoods. Dean's passing also helped to start a decade-long fascination with the car crash as a moment of

tragedy or veiled suicide that resulted in a spate of 'death discs' and 'splatter platters' (Plopper and Ness, 1993). Automation and speed became driving forces in the emergent rhythm of modern society and consumer culture. Rock 'n' roll was designed to suit commercial radio formats, encapsulated in three-minute symphonies, and pressed on to mass-produced vinyl singles; the music was placed alongside buzzing neon signs, flash clothes, fast food, and other short order delights of the era.

Notions of 'the road' defined cars as steel horses of a new frontier, suggesting a greater sense of personal freedom. Scholars such as André Nóvoa (2012) have examined the argument that musicians actually *depended* on transportation for their 'cool' identities. On tour, they are perceived as figures *of mobility*. Expressing the notion that freedom can be found by taking off on the highway, Bobby Troup's "Route 66"—which was first performed by the Nat King Cole trio in 1946—has been covered by many artists, from Chuck Berry and the Stones to Manhattan Transfer and Depeche Mode. Ten short years after Levitt and Sons announced their first residential community, Viking Press published Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a beat novel championing the emancipating benefits of enjoying life on a trip. At least for those who were able to share in the dream, life out on the highway became emblematic of the possibilities of personal freedom. Touring musicians were seen as *freewheelin'*: socially rebellious and sexually liberated.

Fourthly, allied to a broad gendering of driving practice, cars have become *mobile sites of heterosexual courtship and display*. Drive-in theatres, which boomed in the early 1950s, allowed young people to escape domestic spaces. Away from the watchful eyes of their parents, teens had greater control over their personal conduct and social lives. Other activities like dining rapidly went mobile too (Marsh and Collett, 1986, p. 194). Automobiles functioned as domains controlled by adolescents that could always be relocated if they wanted more privacy. Brookesmith (1983, p. 100) summarizes at least some of the ways in which car ownership, drive-ins, and popular music came together to facilitate a new and more liberated dating environment for 1950s teens:

> What happened at the drive-in, however, remained beyond parental control, and was nothing that adjusting one's dress before leaving the theatre could disguise. American cars were like American teenagers: over comfortable, over-powered. But cars brought young people together—as couples, as individuals, in groups—and the constant rambling on the car radio of the Saturday night DJs and their frenetic, suggestive music bound them all together in what felt like a nation within a nation.

Nostalgically celebrated in the film *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), the hedonistic and newly mobile 'nation within a nation' kept its motor running on a diet of rock 'n' roll.

One of the numbers that have been forwarded as a candidate for the first record in the new genre was Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats' tune "Rocket 88"—a song which many 1950s music fans know was written in celebration of the pulling power of the Oldsmobile 88. The new models were rapidly equipped with Rocket V8 engines, push-button starters, and automatic transmission systems. Such powerful cars epitomized the enticing prospect of carefree driving. No wonder, then, that the "88" stayed in Oldsmobile's catalogue until the organization was shut down by General Motors at the dawn of the new millennium. Back in the 1950s, the vehicle's popular slogan had been "Make a date with the Oldsmobile 88." For a time—to use the parlance of John Travolta's single from the blockbuster musical *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978)—the car was as smooth, and seductive, as "greased lightnin'." Discussing Jackie Brenston's recording, in their history of Sam Phillips' Memphis Recording Service, Escott and Hawkins (1980, p. 18) explain, "It was not the first eulogy to the automobile but this slab of unsolicited advertising for Olds' latest product predated Chuck Berry by almost five years and was a rollicking example of contemporary commercial R&B." Brenston's "Rocket 88" song was released on Chess in 1951. A few months after the Chess release, Bill Haley, accompanied by his western swing outfit Saddlemen, delivered his own cover. In Haley's hands, "Rocket 88" began with the sound of beeping horns and screeching breaks, as if inadequate motoring could be effortlessly surpassed by the superior pleasure of a ride in an Oldsmobile. His Holiday Record's single resonated with a demand made long before by Luigi Russolo in a Futurist manifesto called *The Art of Noise*:

> We must break at all cost from this restrictive circle of pure sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds . . . [as] we get infinitely more pleasure imagining combinations of the sounds of trolleys, autos and other vehicles, and loud crowds, than listening once more, for instance, to the heroic or pastoral symphonies. (1913/2004, p. 6)

It was almost as if Haley's cover of "Rocket 88" formed a missing link between Russolo's manifesto and the Art of Noise—a British avant-garde pop group that featured a sample of a stalling Volkswagen Golf on its 1984 single "Close (to the Edit)."

Fifthly, car ownership became linked to *racial and class-bound aspirations*. Possibilities of social advancement through material abundance enabled the American dream to be formulated not just in personal terms—as a kind of individual escapism—but also in collective ones. On the one hand, there were those who were left out of the automotive revolution. Poor folk were immobile and had to make do with their own localities. Street corners therefore became mythologized locations where public singing depended intricately on the limitations of wealth, race, and class (see Goldblatt, 2013). Cars were expensive items. They were sold in a variety of types produced for a socially stratified marketplace. Thus they became a key way to express material desires and the possibility of 'moving on up.' Elvis's early car purchases were often Lincolns; he said in 1956 to Wink Martindale, "My daddy's got Presley's Used Car Lot out on Audubon Drive! . . . I'll tell you the reason I bought those cars. Maybe I'll go broke one day and sell one of 'em" (Osborne, 2000, p. 37). In other words, Elvis initially collected cars as potential collateral and recognized the possibility that his fame was fleeting. History associates him, however, with an important symbol of having 'arrived' in 1950s America; Elvis will always be remembered as the man who bought Cadillacs.

In his portrait of the 1950s, David Halberstam (1994, p. 118) suggested that the Cadillac was for "the top executive or owner of the local factory." It was not marketed to the very pinnacle of the luxury market, but positioned somewhere just below as a car that reflected *well-deserved* comfort. The idea was to appeal to a Calvinist mentality that said affluent buyers deserved glittering prizes that could be justified as a result of material success *through hard work*. Elvis's connection to pink Cadillacs dates back to April 1955, when Sun released his rockabilly version of Arthur Gunter's "Baby Let's Play House." In the middle of the song, its new singer customized the lyrics to reflect 1950s car culture by portraying a girl driving her own luxury vehicle. As music critic Mike Eder (2013, p. 20) noted, Elvis's version of the song "has the bonus of adding the pink Cadillac to the list of 1950s iconography, once a flip religious reference was replaced by one adding the grandiose vehicle." Elvis bought his first actual pink Cadillac early in 1955. While his band was touring Arkansas that summer, it was destroyed in a fire. In July, when "Baby, Let's Play House" stormed the *Billboard* country chart, he purchased a replacement which he donated to his non-driving mother and then used himself. Elvis bought a pink suit too, which he proudly wore on stage until excited fans ripped it apart. The following January, Presley explained to interviewer Don Davis, "I kinda thought that would be a gimmick

and really, it drew a lot of attention from the trade papers, about the pink suit and pink car" (Osborne, 2000, p. 8). Elvis was not the only 'poor boy' aiming to 'make good' in the land of the free. Musicians from non-white ethnic groups have frequently bought into more universally shared car cultures and found niche spaces to express their own version of material success. George Lipsitz (1989, p. 277) observed:

> The car culture's quest for fun and good times expressed a desire for the good life and material success, but it also provided a means for satirizing and subverting ruling icons of consumer society. Just as Chicano car customizers 'improved' upon the mass-produced vehicles from Detroit, Chicano rock songs like "Whittier Boulevard" celebrated Mexican-American appropriations of automobiles as part of a community ritual.

Sixthly, when identity became associated with consumption and collecting, cars were used as the ultimate *markers of personal style*. Of course, automobiles are, for some, simply a convenient means of transportation. Yet, although cars represent an interest long shared by many, some lines have never quite been mass commodities—demographically segmented, expressing cultural capital—they are understood as reflecting something personal. Many prize them as chromium-plated materializations of ego. In other words, as public vehicles of self-expression, cars have become used as a way to boost personal and collective self-esteem. As the media technology theorist Marshall McLuhan put it, back in 1964, the car has become a kind of automotive prosthetic, "an article of dress without which we feel uncertain, unclad and incomplete" (1994, p. 217). Car owners frequently use their vehicles to attract wider attention. Jonathan Bell (2001, p. 115) explained, "Car stereo culture offers not only another means of self-expression but also allows the driver to control their surroundings, producing sounds so intense that the bystander is literally physically moved." I once saw one antisocial motorist receive odd stares for playing Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" at full volume as he casually cruised downtown Vancouver. It made me think about how city walkers expect to hear dub bass or other particular sounds when they notice drivers who have installed huge speakers and cranked up their stereos.

Cars are not simply boom boxes. The connection between driving, music, and self-esteem can work in quieter ways. As Derber (2000, p. 64) explains:

> The automobile is another possession that symbolizes social worth and is 'displayed' to bring attention to the self. By driving such luxury cars as Cadillacs, Continentals, Mercedes, and Rolls Royces, wealthy individuals attract attention

> in the streets and in public places. One millionaire's "outsize white Cadillac with a gold plated dashboard" has been described by C. Wright Mills as a lavish example from an earlier era. Nowadays, the acquisition of expensive but less blatantly garish vehicles, including sports cars, antique automobiles, and chauffeured limousines, remains a means by which dominant groups indirectly 'purchase' attention.

While artists from many different genres are known for collecting cars—in Britain some notable examples include Jay Kay of Jamiroquai and Brian Johnson from AC/DC—it is hip-hop that has, perhaps, been most associated with the public process of 'purchasing' attention through the acquisition and display of spectacular material possessions.

The popular website CarThrottle.com has listed "40 Rapper Stars and Their Performance Cars" (Ebrahim, 2009). The article reveals that 50 Cent drives a Rolls Royce Phantom and a Lamborghini Murciélago Roadster. Eminem and Dr Dre prefer their Hummer H2s. Snoop Dogg, meanwhile, loves his 1969 Buick Riviera, and Pharrell Williams owns a Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren Roadster. Missy Elliot drives a Lamborghini Gallardo and Jay-Z, a Maybach 62S. Such cars are, of course, elite reflections of a materialist lifestyle that defines social status as something *bought into* through acts of conspicuous consumption. Not only do they signify that their owners have achieved their aims, risen out of poverty and become small corporations. They also act as endorsements for car manufacturers and spread brand names to far corners of the market place. That stars collect cars is no accident; we might think twice if we saw Snoop in a Ford Fiesta or Pharrell driving a Skoda.

Seventhly, given that cars have been so intimately associated with the masculine ego, they have also become *a barometer for the rising tide of female independence*. Car advertising in the 1950s, for example, positioned women as decorative objects (Walsh, 2006, p. 7). Sexist ideologies located female autonomy as a potential threat. Widespread adoption of the pill allowed women to demand more enfranchisement in the labour market, and in the 1960s they gradually became more independent. Songwriters used male fascination with cars as beautiful machines to raise the parallel questions about male control and objectification of women. Since cars had primarily been claimed as male spaces, anxieties about masculine authority could be expressed through portrayals of women assuming the driver's seat.

The Beatles played on the era's rapidly shifting cultural landscape in their racy pop tunes "Day Tripper" and "Drive My Car" which were both recorded at the

1965 *Rubber Soul* sessions. Literary scholar James Decker offers an interesting analysis. After saying that earlier material like "Ticket to Ride" focused on a male narrator's love, or frustration, he continues:

> "Drive My Car," by contrast, establishes a dialogue in which the female announces her dreams and desires—desires that include thinly veiled sexual urges ("you can drive my car"; "I can show you a better time"), but not necessarily love ("maybe I love you"). No longer the central attraction, the male narrator functions now as a way station of sorts: "You can do something in between." Love, while still present as an idealized state that the female may withhold, fades to the background, as the lover expresses her true design "to be famous, a star of the screen." The cosmopolitan narrator, far from put off by this cynical attitude, fully participates in this transaction, pledging not, as in "Love Me Do," to be true, but that his prospects are good and he could start right away. The lack of a car, rather than a male companion—whether the narrator or not—is the impetus behind the materialistic 'girl's' heartbreak. The male cares little that his paramour wants to call the shots or that she lacks the symbol of her would-be superiority—so long as his sexual appetites are satisfied, and the repeated lines that close the song suggest that they are. (Decker, 2009, p. 78)

Exploring the ways in which sexual desire—plus its connection to love and marriage—has been used to renegotiate gender roles, Decker considers the way that cars can function as metaphors for the shifting battle of the sexes. During rapid changes which heralded the permissive society era, notions of the 'lady driver' as a woman who took charge were used to explore changing attitudes towards female independence.

Eighthly, to bring things back to Levittown, cars and music have long been united as *they both reflect the social and industrial rhythms of the contemporary era*. Car travel, after all, can be seen as a sensory and, for some, sensual experience, even one generating 'automotive emotions' (Sheller, 2004). Think of cars and music and you might also think about Berry Gordy's Motown, the 'hit factory' label that reflected the mechanized bustle of automotive construction in Detroit, the motor city (see Quispel, 2005). Another seamlessly *automated* variant of the experiential connection between motoring and music can be found in the demand for 'drive time' formats to fill daily slots on commercial radio. Songs like the 1984 number "Drive" by the Cars offer a sense of expansiveness which, for many, best reflects the desire to escape rush-hour traffic jams and experience unfettered driving.

Europeans have offered a more minimalist but no less pleasurable take. Krautrock's focus on the droning motoric beat reached its aesthetic conclusion

in the disinterested and yet compelling music of Kraftwerk. The group's fourth album, *Autobahn*, was released late in 1974 with a title track, which made *Billboard's* Top 30 singles chart when it was reduced to a length accepted by commercial radio. Ralf Hutter, a key member of the group, explained to Pascal Bussy (2000, p. 56) that anyone driving on the motorway soon realizes that their car itself is a musical instrument. "Autobahn" actually had its roots in the Regents' 1958 doo-wop hit, "Barbara Ann," a song made a surf music classic in 1965 by the Beach Boys. Kraftwerk re-imagined their own version of "Barbara Ann" while giving impression of smoothly sailing down one of Germany's federal motorways. In Kraftwerk's version, traces of the original disappear in an almost celestial electronic symphony calculated to express the carefree feel of approaching the national speed limit. Creating robotically automated, minimalist music, playing upon notions of German efficiency, and adding an edge of nostalgic futurism, the group attempted to capture "the experience of modernity through music" (Bracewell, 2002, p. 289). Motorway driving became emblematic here of a whole way of life.

As Paul Virilio points out in his extended essay "Speed and Politics" (2006), as society has embraced its technological destiny, public life has come to be measured on the basis of its increasing velocity. A recent report for Scotiabank notes that international car sales have almost doubled since 1990, to a figure of 73 million units per annum, with China growing the most rapidly and now accounting for a quarter of all sales (Gomes, 2015, p. 2). Despite warnings about the limits of fossil fuel consumption and global climate change, late modern society shows very few signs of relinquishing the automobile.

In the context of a car-driven society, what does popular music now mean? For many decades, consumer demands have been served by a silent partnership based on ergonomic imperatives. Not only have vehicle designers worked to improve the experience of popular music listening; as Justin Williams's (2010a and 2014) interesting studies of hip-hop have shown, music producers also carefully mix their tracks, adjusting sub-bass frequencies and other tones for in-car audio environments. Sound studies is likely to continue its significant contribution to our understanding of music and automobile culture in future years.

With a $250,000 grant, in recognition of a long-running association, the Ford motor corporation financed the creation of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland (Berger, 2001, p. 220). Their grant indicates that cars and popular music are closely hitched. Together they represent the triumph of the idea of consumer choice in segmenting the market, reflecting the nostalgia, and heralding the future.