

The Automobile: An American Icon

by Luke Vinton

As Americans, we have an intense passion for driving. This essay examines the connections between the car and American ideals. Song lyrics and pictures throughout the essay offer examples of how the iconic car penetrates the different mediums of text, image and song. As you read the lyrics, think about why the artist chose to sing about the car in that context. As you look at the photos, think about actually being out on the road. Our passion for the automobile is rooted deep within our culture. In a changing world where fuel efficiency and personal budgets affect our daily lives more and more, our favorite icon might not exist in the future unless we change our values. If we do not change our attitudes, the image of the American automobile as piece of American culture will be irreparably damaged.

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“I am a traveling man” speaks volumes, capturing in a single line our basic human need to stretch our reach across every ocean and continent. While most of our world has been mapped and explored, people still seek the thrill of going out on their own. We have taken Nat King Cole’s injunction to “get your kicks on Route 66” to heart, no matter where our own Route 66 might be.

The invention of the car gave us this ease of mobility and personal freedom in America. In 1909, when Henry Ford first produced the Model T and perfected the assembly line, he unknowingly started a revolution. He was able to make the automobile affordable to the common person. This massive auto production gave birth to a new culture, the heart of which was a new icon: the car. After several decades of competition, the price of the automobile dropped and its popularity soared. The influx of automobiles combined with a nationwide interstate system formed the primordial soup from which this icon grew. Driving a car was a new type of personal freedom never experienced before. People were suddenly able to get up, go out, and travel on their own. Today we have the ability to leave whenever we want and go wherever we choose.

As Americans we live in our cars. We eat, shave, powder our nose, talk, sleep, read, and do any number of other things that are probably not conducive to good driving. An entire generation used the automobile for alone time with a significant other. Terms like “make-out point” and “parked” create strong feelings for many baby boomers. So what would America be if we lost what is so obviously a major part of our lives? Today’s different world creates new problems that could jeopardize the car’s status as an American icon. In recent years, the automobile has suffered. The combination of global warming and skyrocketing gas prices paints a bleak and unpromising future for the car. In order to comprehend the extent of the problem, we must confront our obsession with the automobile and understand why it has achieved such an iconic status in American culture. How can something as simple as four wheels and an engine mean so much?

Given that Henry Ford perfected the assembly line in 1909, it seems safe to say that teenagers have been lusting after cars for almost a century. When we were fifteen or sixteen, all we dreamed about was getting our license. Most of us just wanted to stop bumming rides from our parents, but we also wanted the freedom to do our own will. It was the wealth of our nation during the mid-and late 1900s that allowed most Americans to dream about purchasing a car. This availability in turn created a unique link between the automobile and young Americans that would snowball in future generations.

Everyone remembers their first automobile. Usually first cars are old clunkers, with rust spots, broken handles, torn seats, a busted radio and a bad smell. Regardless of the sad condition most people, me included, look back and say “I loved that car.” This unreasonable attraction between human and machine exists because car ownership is usually the first sign of maturity. Our culture has made owning a car a major stepping-stone on the road to adulthood and responsibility. When we have a car, we have to take care of it, clean it (maybe), put gas in it and make sure it stays in running shape. This relationship emulates the one between a mother and baby, and our pride is shown in every picture of someone standing next to his or her new vehicle.



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Automobiles mean social status and achievement for most Americans. A new car represents hard work and determination. In the song “Mercedes Benz,” Janis Joplin asks God to bless her with an expensive brand of car as payment for her struggles and hard work:

Oh lord, wont you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So lord, wont you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Rap and hip hop songs also compare the amount of success achieved to the quality of the automobiles. In “Act a Fool,” Ludacris brags about how much money he can put into his automobile:

Let's take it to the streets cuz I'm ready to cruise
Just bought me and my cars all some brand new shoes
And the people just stare so I love to park it
And I just put a computer in the glove compartment
With the pedal to the floor, radar in the grille
TV in the middle of my steering wheel

These songs express the connection between being successful and owning an automobile.

For adolescents stuck in the house or school, the automobile gives a chance to get away from parents and troubles. It is not unheard of to go on a drive simply to get away and clear the mind. This type of trip does not need a destination. All it needs is a full tank of gas, some music on the radio and the open road. The atmosphere in a car is tranquil, almost like a type of meditation. The ability to leave your anxiety behind, and to escape from everything, even if it is only for a small amount of time, is an enormous breath of fresh air. At first, this idea sounds pointless. Why would you get in a car to simply drive in circles, wasting time and money? But this quick judgment is shallow and overlooks the deeper meaning. When you are driving for leisure, it is not just brake, gas, left, right, forwards and backwards; it is a total experience.



“Open Range”

Country singer Allan Jackson highlights the feeling in his song “Drive”:

It was just an old hand-me-down Ford
With a three-speed on the column and a dent in the door
A young boy, two hands on the wheel
I can't replace the way it makes me feel.

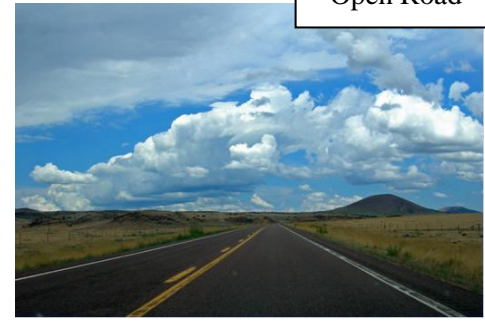
The feeling of driving with the windows down, the music loud, and the countryside whizzing by is impossible to achieve anywhere else. And this rare feeling cannot be described in basic words; it must be experienced.

Kanye West's song “Drive Slow Remix” captures the feeling:

We'll take a Saturday and just circle the mall...
I used to love to play my demo tape when the system yanked
Felt like I was almost signed when the [stuff] got cranked.

The car's ability to travel long distances with relatively little effort is the reason we treasure it so much. A road trip is the manifestation of this gift. The American “road trip” is full of symbolism. For example, if you were to define a road trip on paper you would describe one or more people stuck in a small area for an extended amount of time, with no bathroom. Simply reading this definition makes a road trip sound horrible. But the explanation on paper leaves out the emotion and substance that validates why road trips are so enjoyable. When most people hear “Hey man, let's go on a road trip,” they perk up with excitement because they understand the underlying meanings. The popular song “Low Rider,” by the band WAR, demonstrates the enjoyment of going for a ride:

All my friends know the low rider,
The low rider is a little higher...
Take a little trip
Take a little trip with me
Take a little trip
Take a little trip and see.



The road trip is the height of the American Dream. Once on the road, we have control over our direction, and freedom from everything in the rear view mirror. This power is the ultimate control. With two hands on the wheel and a foot on the gas, we have the power to travel anywhere. As elemental as this supremacy seems, it is a relaxing change, especially in today's chaotic world. The different atmosphere while driving usually stimulates intuitive conversations between its passengers. It is almost as if driving represents the beat for the melody of conversation that follows. And even if there is no talking, the road keeps a steady, peaceful rhythm. The original definitions of "car" or "road trip" cannot account for the freedom, independence, and creativity possible on the road. These emotional responses parallel the American dream. After years and years, Americans have accepted the car as a representation of freedom and an embodiment of the American dream.

Since the car is so symbolic, it is an easy source of inspiration for many musicians and artists. Their songs are about how the car makes them feel, what the car looks like, or a story in which the car is mentioned. A skillful musician uses the audience's feelings about the car to reach us on a personal level, and, conversely, our large appreciation of the automobile is demonstrated by the songs' popularity. The "driving experience" or "car motif" is recognizable in many famous songs like "Pink Cadillac" by Bruce Springsteen, "Moonlight Drive" by The Doors, or even any modern-day rap star who raps about his "rims" and "grillz." And some country artists express more sincerity towards their vehicle than their spouse. So, next time you listen to a song you like, notice whether there are any car references. In some cases, the references are small but still present; in others, our obsession knows no bounds.

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As vast and endless as our love for automobiles seems, a speed bump looms in the future. Towards the latter part of the 20th century, a rust spot began to form on our precious icon, as years of obsession caused us to act carelessly. After the energy crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s gas prices dropped, and car fuel efficiency and common sense were relegated to the back seat. Manufacturers began making cars that had impractical but still affordable fuel economy (United States, EPA). This is best reflected in the Sport Utility Vehicle trend. SUVs are a cross between a minivan and a pickup truck. They offer masculinity to fathers embarrassed to be seen driving their kids around in a minivan, and give overprotective mothers the ability to encase their children in two solid tons of metal and steel. These massive vehicles represent power and safety; feelings obviously lusted over by most Americans. In recent years, however, the price of gas has shot through the roof, making these monstrosities less desirable. But as Americans we still want our safety and

power. We carelessly sacrifice our wallets and our environments, so we can get everything we want. Ben Folds questions this gluttonous behavior in his song "All U Can Eat":

[Look] out the window to the parking lot
At their SUVs taking all of the space [...]
They give no [crap]
Just as long as there's enough for them.

As Ben Folds points out later in his song, the wealth of our nation can be a blessing as well as a curse. Only the looming recession has helped Americans to abandon their monstrous wheels for public transportation or cars with more reasonable gas mileage.

Our hesitancy to spend money at the pump and dealership has rocked the auto industry. The massive production of inefficient cars was suddenly unnecessary. The number of vehicles coming off the line was

reduced, which started a chain reaction. The auto manufacturing business supports many American families and the decline in demand meant many workers were laid off. Employees with many years of dedication to one company were suddenly let go. The number of layoffs has remained high over the years following 2000. In 2001, 133,686 auto employees were laid off. By March 2007, 90,000 auto workers had already been released, and the number was expected to top the 110,000 layoffs of the previous year (“A Big Year”). This massive release of workers devastated many towns where large plants employed a majority of the residents. These towns are now stuck in a depression because of unemployment.



To keep the sales coming, many auto companies have shifted away from big, heavy, outrageous, and gas-thirsty cars toward electric or hybrid power, with their higher fuel economy, lower emissions, and lower impact on the environment (“How”). This new technology has taken time to catch on. Many people complain the new cars don’t have the same power as the old muscle cars of the past, which required extra gas for that extra push. Others say that the hybrids out today are ugly. This a problem that comes with the territory. Hybrids are designed to be as aerodynamic as possible, which means some style sacrifices must be made.

But the idea of hybrid cars should be pushed. Our image of the car needs to change and become more ecological to better fit the global crisis of our time. Our icon is at a crossroads; if we do not act together now, our future as well as that of the automobile could be in danger. These problems should not tarnish the image of the car. Why not change our own actions and incorporate the solutions to these problems for the next generation of car lovers? If the automakers continue to produce vehicles with high emissions, there is no doubt the glory of the car in America will die out. We need to work to change our previous ideas of what to expect from an automobile, or we will be forced to choke on our smog, or go broke paying for gas. Our love has become a blinding obsession. We need to change our habits to ensure the future of the automobile. The car has become such a big part of our world that life without it seems impossible. In “Drive My Car,” the Beatles sing, “Baby you can drive my car / And maybe I’ll love you.” Maybe our love for the car will help us save it.

Much like receiving our first car, we need to take an oath of responsibility to help lower emissions and wean us from our dependence on fossil fuel. If we change, we can continue to enjoy the thrill of the open road for years to come. Regardless of what it runs on, the essential car only needs the capability to take us from point A to point B. America is definitely a country on the go, so let’s keep the drive alive.

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