

Resonating With Consumers in Just a Few Notes

By Tim Parsons

When he sang “Madison Blues,” Elmore James wasn’t making a sale pitch to sell shoes, but he certainly could have been. Blues artists struggle to be heard on mainstream radio, but their music is in demand for television programs and commercials. The nature of the blues creates a powerful emotional pull on its listeners, and thus on consumers.

“Madison Avenue definitely feels that blues sells products,” said Marc Lipkin, a publicist for Alligator Records, referring to the American advertising industry.

In 1948, B.B. King may have been the first to sing the blues to sell a product. He visited the radio station WDIA in Memphis, hoping to make a record. The owner said the station didn’t make records, but added he needed a song for an advertiser. King quickly wrote a blues jingle:

“Peptikon sure is good; Peptikon sure is good; Peptikon sure is good; You can get it anywhere in your neighborhood.”

Peptikon was a medicinal tonic, which perhaps was popular because it was 12 percent alcohol. Utilizing blues to sell booze has been popular ever since.

Berghoff beer, for example, features guitarist Eric Sardinas using a Berghoff bottle as a slide for a 30-second commercial, and the same ad campaign has blues harmonica player Billy Branch rhythmically stomping his foot to the music, catching a bottle to take a swig just before it falls off the porch.

“The whole history of beer and blues and rock ‘n’ roll goes way back. They kind of fit like a hand in a glove,” said Steve McCabe, who runs a music and sound design company and has produced many commercials throughout his career.

McCabe is a musician who learned about the blues from his college schoolmate Bob Corritore, now a famed harmonica recording artist in Phoenix, AZ. He got his start after college living in St. Louis and playing in a band with some older musicians,

whose day job was selling advertisements for Budweiser. “When I found out what they did, I started to torture them [asking for a job],” he said. McCabe landed a position as



Howlin’ Wolf’s “Smokestack Lightnin’” was once used in commercials for Viagra!

Photo by Robert Hughes



At the beginning of his career, B.B. King secured a job at Memphis radio station WDIA by writing an impromptu radio jingle for Peptikon

Photo courtesy B.B. King Museum

a copywriter and eventually became Budweiser’s first music director.

Artists such as Leon Redbone, Johnny Guitar Watson and Lou Rawls had sung in commercials, but

celebrity musicians began to be used much more in the 1980s. Blues music, in particular, resonates with consumers because it has an honesty and hipness that listeners can relate to, in just a few notes.

Artists such as Robert Palmer preferred to write their own songs for commercials, as did Muddy Waters with “Dr. Pepper Blues.” A Muddy Waters track also was used for Levi’s “501 Blues.”

The double entendre always has been a staple of the blues, seen in the use of Howlin’ Wolf’s “Smokestack Lightnin’” and John Lee Hooker’s “Dimples” in commercials for Viagra, for example. Or you might have caught a recent GEICO Motorcycle commercial featuring “Going Up the Country” by Canned Heat.

“You could really give your commercial some energy, whether you want it to be fiery or cool and mellow,” McCabe said. “Blues can make you sad or relaxed, but it’s also cathartic and can be exciting as well – it just covers all of that. You could see why brands like Levi’s and Budweiser would turn to the blues for that kind of feel.”

Robert De Pugh, the director of licensing at Alligator Records, agrees that blues can quickly create a mood for listeners.

“That’s exactly what it’s about,” he said. “And if it’s a recognizable song, and they can share the feeling the audience has about that song and transfer it to their product, the song does a lot of the heavy lifting for the commercial.”

De Pugh said Alligator Records frequently gets requests for songs to be used in commercials, television programs and big-screen movies.

Sometimes, the intended meaning or context of the song may alter for the benefit of marketing a product. The Luther Allison song “Cherry Red Wine” is a poignant tale of a woman destroying her life with alcohol. However, the storyline for the commercial is changed. The verse ‘I’m watching you’ is sung while a child looks longingly at another youngster who is eating macaroni and cheese.

Songs are often rerecorded to fit into a commercial. It also is sometimes less expensive to record a sound-a-like, De Pugh said. Songwriters and publishers can be paid a flat “synchronization” fee and then receive additional royalties every time it airs. The label gets a one-time synch fee.

"There is going to be a song in an upcoming *Hawaii Five-0* episode – an old track by Big Walter Horton, an older track by Fenton Robinson will be used in an episode of *Bull*, and an upcoming episode of *Greenleaf* will have a track from our Grammy-nominated Blind Willie Johnson tribute album, sung by Lucinda Williams. It's her version of 'God Don't Never Change.' There's my [work] week."

McCabe said he would watch commercials with no sound and add music to them. He said he'd always offer seven different tunes as possibilities, but admitted he had a bias for the blues.

"It was an opportunity to pay those artists... I was proud of that," he said. "A lot of them didn't get paid like they should have. If you get a Howlin' Wolf track from the Chess Box Set, it's going to be great. It's going to give your brand some credibility and some coolness."

Keeping cool while working with your music heroes can be a challenge. "I had to pretend with all these artists that I was totally composed," McCabe said. "I had to pretend that I didn't really care. [One time, the] engineer turned around and said, 'It's the Allman Brothers,' and the hair on the back of my neck just stood up. We were like little kids."

McCabe said blues artists accustomed to playing hundreds of shows a year were easy to work with, since they were so fast and on their best behavior because it was a well-paying "corporate gig."

"We had to do the commercial with Leon Russell late at night because he slept during the day," he said. "He was very quick. He was a genius. It was awe inspiring to watch these guys. I've worked with Etta James, Wilson Pickett, Sam Moore, B.B. King, Bo Diddley and more. And these were just one-take guys. It was just stunning to be around. It was amazing to hear it happening."

The use of blues music in marketing has a rich history, and is just one more way the blues has impacted the American landscape. So, while you may not hear your favorite blues songs on your mainstream radio dial, you might catch them on the latest television program or commercial. 🎵

The 2011 recipient of *Keeping the Blues Alive (Journalism)* award, Tim Parsons is the editor of the online music magazine TahoeOnstage.com. He also contributes to the Blues Festival Guide and Blues Music Magazine. He lives at Lake Tahoe with his wife, Joan, and three dogs, Wooford, Dock Watson and DigzBee.



Producing Gregg Allman circa 1993 at Omega Studios: (l to r) John McCurry (arranger), Steve McCabe (producer), Gregg Allman, Steve Hardwick (account executive), Josh Abbey (engineer) | Photo courtesy Steve McCabe



Finalist for The Blues Foundation's Best Self Produced CD - 2017

2016 Blues411 'Jimi' Award for Best R&B/Soul Release

2016 Living Blues Magazine Most Outstanding Blues Singer Nominee for Joseph "Smokey" Holman



Available on iTunes, Amazon, and Spotify.

- 6/10 - Untitled - Chicago, IL
- 6/11 - Locust Street Fest - Milwaukee, WI
- 6/22 - Thelma Sadoff - Fond du Lac, WI
- 6/30 - Summerfest - Milwaukee, WI
- 7/6 - Concert in the Gardens - Hales Corner, WI
- 7/28 - Fargo Blues Festival - Fargo, ND
- 7/31 - Time Out Pub - Rockland, ME
- 8/1 - TBA (east coast tour)
- 8/2 - TBA (east coast tour)
- 8/3 - Square Jam Concert - Sharon, MA
- 8/4 - The Extended Play Sessions - MA
- 8/5 - TBA (east coast tour)
- 8/17 - Mitchell Park Concert - Milwaukee, WI
- 8/22 - Skyline Music Concert - Milwaukee, WI
- 9/1 - Marquette Area Blues Fest - Marquette, MI
- 10/14 - Garvin Gate Blues Fest - Louisville, KY

More Dates At:

www.twweedfunk.com

booking@twweedfunk.com 414.828.6395

