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An Open Letter to the Editors of Advertising Age

Just before the holidays, Advertising Age published its list of the top ten, "[Ad Songs of the Year](#)." Unfortunately, the magazine and its junior web editor, Charlie Moran, got it all wrong.

What should have been a celebration of the year's most creative, innovative, and effective uses of music in advertising, instead resembled a playlist from (*insert your favorite Brooklyn-based hipster music blog here*). Indie superstars Santogold, Yael Naim, and Saul Williams sat atop a heap of licensed tracks that included entries from renowned songsmiths The Kinks, Ennio Morricone, and Robert Plant. While the list mentioned a few quality tunes, Ad Age failed to include even a single example of a *true* "ad song."

I recognize that my thoughts may not be in line with most of the advertising community, but I define an "ad song" as a piece of music created specifically for a commercial. It is a song that is exclusively tied to a brand, and would not exist were it not for the ad in which it was originally used.

This list from Ad Age is not one of "*ad songs*;" rather, it is merely a list of pop songs. Yes, the tracks appeared in commercials, but these songs have an identity all their own. They belong to artists and fans, not to the brands that paid hefty licensing fees for the right to bury them under voiceover and slap their logo on the end.

Furthermore, these songs fail to make any *real* connection to the brands. Search Google or Youtube for Santogold's "Creator" or Liars' "Clear Island" (two of the songs on the Ad Age list). See any hits for Bud Light Lime or Timex? I didn't think so. Typically, a search like this results in pages of hits for the bands and nothing for the brands. In fact, I'm willing to bet that if we played any one of these songs for a survey sample, and asked the participants to make an association between the music and the brand that licensed it, almost no one could do it. I've conducted similar tests with roomfuls of advertising folk and witnessed, first hand, their inability to make a band/brand connection, even for some of the most high profile licenses. It's not surprising, considering that artists like Saul Williams have about as much to do with Nike as Jerry Seinfeld has to do with Microsoft.

Advertising is supposed to deliver a clear and consistent message to consumers. To do that the elements of the commercial must be uniquely connected to the brand. Advertisers understand this idea as it pertains to elements like logos, wordmarks, and slogans (which are entirely *sui generis*, and fervently protected), but they often neglect to apply the same principle when dealing with music. Licensed songs, by their very definition, cannot be owned by a brand, only borrowed. Therefore, unlike branded visual imagery, rented music negates any chance to create an exclusive link between song and brand. The end result is that consumers, when shown a Swoosh, will think of Nike, and when played a Kinks' song, will think of The Kinks ... not Converse.

Yet in their endless struggle to remain relevant and connect with consumers, advertisers continue to spend time and money (even starting their own [agency record](#)



[labels](#)) to find and license music from the next big buzzing artists. The hope is that by merely associating their product with a cool new band, said coolness will transfer to the brand in the consumer's mind.

This "halo effect," as it's called, is wishful thinking. In this new-media world of email, text messages, Bit Torrent, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, iChat, Blogger, Xbox, etc., consumers simply have too many distractions and too little time to care about indie rock peddling beer brands. While a cool licensed track may drive a few viewers online to find the name of the song, within minutes they can have that song downloaded on their ipod, in full, with no voiceover and no corporate logos. The brand inevitably fades, and the only financial transaction is a \$0.99 download from Apple.

In a recent article about the impact of licensed music in advertising, The New York Times' chief music critic, [Jon Pareles](#), wrote, "Music always had accessory roles: a soundtrack, a jingle, a branding statement, a mating call. But for performers with a public profile, as opposed to composers for hire, the point was to draw attention to the music itself." By its very nature the halo effect diverts consumer attention away from the product being advertised and places it, instead, on the artist. If a brand like JC Penny is lucky enough to cut through the media clutter and capture thirty seconds of consumer attention, why would they spend that time trying to help Robert Plant and Alison Krauss sell more records? Why share the spotlight? This licensing relationship is great for musicians, record labels and publishing companies - desperately trying to cope with fragmenting radio and declining record sales - but the bottom line is that it does very little for the brands involved.

More often than not, licensed music fails to deliver on one of the core functions of advertising: brand building. While a licensed track may drive an individual spot - [Taco Bell](#), for example, used Modern English's "I Melt With You" in an ad for their new Cheesy Beefy Melts - the question we should be asking is, does the music contribute to the overall branding mission? In other words, when we look beyond the individual ad, is the music helping to create a branded identity? Considering that the *same* Modern English song has recently been used in ads for GM, Ritz, and Hershey's, I think most would agree that the music adds nothing unique to the Taco Bell ethos, and could even be construed as brand-diluting and brand-deluding.

Yet irresponsible music uses like this are all too common. Spend a day looking at [splendad.com](#) to discover dozens of examples of the same piece of licensed music being used by multiple brands, often in the same year. Worse yet, watch the [Esurance ad](#) that came in at number ten on the Ad Age list. It is a thirty-second animated music video for The Cloud Cult with an Esurance logo at the end. If you hear distant booming echos in the background, it's probably just me banging my head against the wall trying to figure out how this ad ever got approved. The spot has absolutely nothing to do with car insurance. It is an advertisement for the band, paid for by the brand. It is evident that in their effort to be associated with pop-culture, brands are being obscured by it.

Maybe we saw the success Apple has had with licensed music (keep in mind, Apple actually *sells* music). Maybe using licensed music makes us feel less like advertisers (pushing fried chicken, shoes, cars, and tampons) and more like record executives and



movie producers. Maybe we like telling our friends that we helped jump-start a young band's career, or that we got to hang out with Kanye West on our lunch break. Whatever the reason, as an industry we have bought into the fallacy that using rented music enhances the effectiveness of our advertising. In reality, it seems we have lost track of our responsibility to our clients and to their brands.

As advertisers we are not here to make movies, break indie bands, or hobnob with celebrities. Our primary purpose is to help our clients build a branded identity and *sell their stuff*. This is an industry built on originality and innovation, and we must not compromise or undermine the integrity of our client's message with unbranded, uninspired, and often recycled uses of music. Music is a branding element and it should be treated as such.

This Ad Age list represents everything that is wrong with the current state of music in advertising. It is nothing more than a validation of mediocre music strategies and ineffective audio branding. It's pageantry for the creative director with the best iTunes library, or perhaps the brand with the deepest pockets.

So what *should* be on the list of the best ad songs of 2008? I would suggest Wal-Mart/Coke's "[Extended Family](#)," EA's "[Oh No You Didn't](#)," Audi's "[Living Room](#)" track, or Zales' "[Don't Forget Love](#)." I'd even nominate Subway's "[\\$5 Footlong](#)" jingle, and any of the [Freecreditreport.com](#) tunes. They aren't very sexy, but they deliver a clear, branded message - everyone can sing them - and they have *actually* helped sell sandwiches and credit reports.

Whether or not the songs I've suggested will ever be up for a Grammy, or become the buzz of the blogosphere is beside the point. These songs deserve recognition for their originality, their creativity, and most importantly, their effectiveness. These are prime examples of how music can be used not only to drive the individual commercials, but also to enhance the overall value and perception of the brand.

Ultimately, recognition from Ad Age would just be icing on the cake. The real reward is that any interest, attention, and possible affection generated by these songs belongs exclusively to the brands that were brave enough to take the risk, imagine something completely new, and release it into the ether. These brands didn't borrow from pop culture...they created it.

As for the future of the Ad Age top ten list, to avoid any confusion next year I would suggest it be given a more appropriate title like, "Top Ten Songs On My iPod That Happen To Be In Commercials," or "Top Ten Licensed Tracks You Are Sure To Hear On *Different Ads In Six Months*."

In any case, I hope 2009 marks the beginning of a musical renaissance for the advertising industry. I look forward to hearing some great new original songs that will, hopefully, translate to even better new sales.

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