



CRAZY ‘BOUT A MERCURY

INTRODUCTION¹

*If I had my money, I'd tell you what I'd do.
I would go downtown and buy a Mercury or two.
I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury; yes I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury Ford.²
I'm gonna buy a Mercury and cruise up and down the road.*

–K.C. Douglas and Robert Geddis³

What do we really purchase when we purchase an automobile? There are the obvious attributes such as performance and economy, which can be easily quantified, and styling and accessories, which cannot be measured but which can certainly be described. What we are also acquiring, however, is an amorphous but very real image, that is, the statement which the automobile makes about its owner to the public. And it is through the media of popular culture—newspapers, magazines, films, television, music, etc.—that such images are forged. Automobile companies try mightily through their marketing to manage the brand images of their products in the media, but the process is largely beyond their control. Popular culture is just that, the culture created by the population. Companies can exploit or perhaps even augment a pre-existing favorable image, but it is rarely within their power to reverse an unfavorable one or create one from scratch.

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1. The author wishes to thank musician Scott Bachman for his insights regarding the recordings of “Mercury Blues.”
2. Although most of the lyrics of the song are clear, the last word in this line is not. “Ford” is a likely guess.
3. These and subsequent lyrics were transcribed from the 1974 recording. There are few apparent differences in lyrics among the different recordings in 1948, 1952, 1960, and 1974, and the lyrics in the most recent are the easiest to understand.



Fig. 1. 1949 Mercury. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1949_Mercury_\(15792839729\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1949_Mercury_(15792839729).jpg) (CC BY 2.0).

Mercury is an automobile brand that had an auspicious post-WWII debut in popular culture. In 1948, K.C. Douglas recorded “Mercury Boogie” on a 10-inch 78-RPM, with its memorable line in the chorus “I’m crazy ‘bout a Mercury.” Five years later in 1953, George and Sam Barris transformed a 1951 Mercury Club Coupe into the Hirohata Merc, creating a classic of customization that has been described as “the most famous custom of all time” (Taylor 2006: 56). In fact, a 1985 commentator argued that “[a] small fleet of incredible Mercurys, customized in Los Angeles during the early 1950s, has forever identified the ‘49-’51 Mercury as *the* all-time custom” (reprinted in Ganahl 2005: 41, italics in original). Unfortunately for the Ford Motor Company, which manufactured the model, no subsequent composer was sufficiently crazy about any Mercury to write another song about one, and no subsequent Mercury designs, which were obviously Ford derivatives, provided memorable artistic inspiration. Despite these early appearances in popular culture, Mercury never did develop a distinctive image in the minds of consumers, and in 2011, 73 years after its birth, the nameplate disappeared forever from the automobile marketplace. Nonetheless “Mercury Boogie”—subsequently renamed “Mercury Blues”—has lived on in notable cover versions by blues musician Steve Miller (1976), slide guitarist David Lindley (1981), and country musician

Alan Jackson (1993), and numerous groups around the world continue to perform their own variations today. Customizers not only base new creations on 1949–1951 Mercurys but also restore and even duplicate the original historic customizations. (Ganahl 2005; Taylor 2006) The bathtub Mercurys from that era make notable appearances in films whenever it is necessary to endow a character with an outlaw image.

Ford occasionally attempted to take advantage of Mercury's strong roots in popular culture formed in the make's earliest days, but the company's efforts were not notably successful. The Lincoln-Mercury Caravan of Stars 1963–1966⁴ featured vehicle concepts created by factory designers executed by private customizers, but by then customization was a niche interest that did not stimulate interest in the brand (Taylor 2006). Later, the Jackson recording led to an attempt by the Ford Motor Company in 1996 to appropriate "Mercury Blues," licensing the song, changing "Mercury" to "Ford truck," and hiring Jackson as a pitchman in commercials featuring the revised lyrics. Despite Mercury's auspicious beginnings in media, it has had only a slight presence in music and film. Mercury's image never influenced the automobile market beyond the first few years, and it was unable to prevent the brand's demise.

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4. The Ford division had a corresponding Custom Car Caravan that had been launched a year or so earlier.

MUSIC, ART, AND MERCURY

*Hey Mama, you look so fine
Ridin' around in that Mercury '59,⁵
Cause I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury; yes I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury Ford.
I'm gonna buy a Mercury and cruise up and down the road.*

—K.C. Douglas and Robert Geddins

MERCURY BLUES

K.C. Douglas⁶ was born on November 21, 1913 on a farm near Canaan, Mississippi southeast of Memphis, Tennessee, although later biographical material states that it was a farm in the vicinity of Sharon, Mississippi near Canton, northeast of Jackson. As Douglas is quoted in the liner notes on one of his albums: “[It was] about 25 miles north of Jackson right out in the country from Canton. The nearest town was a place called Sharon, that was about 4 or 5 miles from where I was born, and all it had was a post office and a general store.” In 1934, at the age of 21, he left the farm for Canton, where he picked up the guitar and played with family members (cousin Walter Deans and uncles Smith Douglas and Joe Douglas) and other musicians (Clarence Collins, Theodore Harris, John Stovall, and R.D. “Peg Leg Sam/Pig” Norwood) (Evans, 1968). He later moved to Granada and Carthage, Mississippi, where he worked for the Pearl Valley Lumber Company and reputedly bought his first guitar in 1936, although that poses the question what he had been using since 1934. Around 1940 he began playing with Tommy Johnson on street corners in Jackson, Mississippi, but he also had to work on farms, in sawmills, on railroads, and in construction gangs throughout the delta to earn a living.

5. In the 1960 and 1974 recordings, it was “Mercury '59,” and in the 1948 and 1952 recordings it was “Mercury '49.” Since the 1949 Mercury appeared in showrooms on April 29, 1948, there would already have been folks ridin' around in a Mercury '49 when the song was written, recorded, and released in 1948. There is no indication that Ford played a role in Douglas's model year update. While the rhyme was preserved, it is unlikely that anyone looked “quite so fine” in the '59 as they did in the '49.

6. See Chris Strachwitz, “K.C. Douglas Interview,” *Arhoolie.org*, <https://arhoolie.org/k-c-douglas-interview>. Accessed 01 Aug. 2021.

Passing up an opportunity to travel with Tommy Johnson because of his excessive drinking, Douglas was recruited by the US government in 1945 to work in naval shipyards in the San Francisco Bay Area, participating in the familiar post-war migration from the rural south to the urban north. Landing first in Vallejo, he bought an electric guitar, and in 1947 he moved to Richmond, where he met Sidney Maiden, the harmonica player on “Mercury Boogie.” The song’s co-author, Bob Geddins, had also worked at the shipyard in Richmond when he arrived in the Bay Area from Los Angeles in 1943. Subsequently, Douglas was employed as an agricultural laborer, as a construction worker, and by the Berkeley Department of Public Works, performing around the region when he had a chance to do so. Early on, before rock musicians initiated a blues revival, there were not that many such opportunities, and at the time of a 1968 interview, his last performance had been three months before at “a white party in San Francisco” for \$60. The frequency of gigs subsequently increased, but his career ended in 1975. Douglas fainted during a performance in Modesto, California and died of a heart attack in Berkeley on October 18th of that year, about a month short of his 62nd birthday.

Douglas was described as playing down-home country blues, and that is clearly the tone of his “Mercury Boogie”/“Mercury Blues.”⁷ Considering the lyrics, the narrator might have left the country to work in a factory or shipyard, as had K.C. Douglas, but the country never left him. The narrator does not sound too streetwise and also not too well off. The city women who drive around in a Mercury are only within the reach of the guys who own the Mercurys. If he had the money, he’d buy one himself, but he never will. And since he can only imagine having the money, he can only imagine having the Mercury and the women the Mercury could attract. Nonetheless, the song is still upbeat, and the Mercury is a pleasant dream. Notwithstanding the gal he loved having been stolen, these are not lyrics about the losses that

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7. Country blues had little widespread appeal before the rock-and-roll-generated blues revival. Even blues aficionado David Evans dismissed the song in his 1968 K.C. Douglas interview: “It combines the old beat, which will appeal to nobody, commercially speaking, though I understand it is quite a good record from the collector’s standpoint” (Evans 1968: 4).

often bring on the blues or even about longing; rather, they describe a daydream. The most likely reason that Douglas chose to feature Mercury in the song is simply that the '49 Mercury would have been receiving considerable publicity at the time and the phrase “crazy ‘bout a Mercury” had the right number of syllables, the right pattern of accents, and a nice ring to it.

In the interview published in *Living Blues* in 1973, Douglas’s response to a question about whether he still did “Mercury Boogie” was “every once in a while the guys keep on after me but I don’t like to. I think somebody else has recorded since too. Some white kids, they recorded it” (Mazzolini 1973: 17). We do not know who the “white kids” might have been; there is no record of “Mercury Blues” having been recorded by anyone other than K.C. Douglas before 1973. The first cover on vinyl, by the Steve Miller Band, appeared on the album *Fly Like an Eagle*, recorded in 1975 and released in 1976. Since that band was based in San Francisco, it is possible that Douglas was not referring to a recording but to a live performance he had heard about. Miller’s version is much different from Douglas’s though, more swamp blues than country blues—in a minor key at a much slower tempo. The music and lyrics do not feel as if they belong together, Miller’s version clearly not making the narrator sound “crazy ‘bout a Mercury.” Why, then, did Miller choose to cover the song and overlay his musical style on lyrics that did not fit? At the time, many rock musicians were *exploring* the blues roots of rock and roll, putting it charitably, or *exploiting* the blues roots of rock and roll, putting it cynically. And in this case, the result makes the latter more likely than the former. We cannot know whether Miller had stumbled on one of Douglas’s recordings, heard or *heard of* one of Douglas’s regional performances, or been alerted to Douglas and his work through an obituary such as Mazzolini’s in *Living Blues* (1975), which only mentioned a single Douglas song—“Mercury Boogie.” Regardless, from then on it is likely that musicians found Douglas via the far more popular Miller, which was what had happened with many other blues musicians and their songs.

In contrast, David Lindley’s rockabilly lap-steel slide guitar version created a vivid sonic picture of the Mercury in the narrator’s

imagination. Not only is the Mercury now faster, but every stage of the drive is audible. The Mercury starts up, idles, and then roars off at high speed, exactly the larger-than-life automobile and experience that the narrator is dreaming about. It is arguably the finest musical portrait of automobility, communicating the automotive images powerfully even without the lyrics. The question, though, is why “Mercury Blues” was the song chosen for this treatment. Again, there is no definitive answer; maybe it was the customized bathtub Mercurys Lindley had seen in southern California. Finally in 1993, Alan Jackson returned “Mercury Blues” to where it began, even down to matching the timing of the quickest Douglas version. The pure country style is smoothed out and polished up for a wider audience, and quite possibly Jackson had an eye toward the promotional potential which was realized three years later.

THE HIROHATA MERC



Fig. 2. The Hirohata Merc. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NHRA_Museum.jpg (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Along with Fords, even the earliest pre-war 1938–1940 Mercurys were popular choices for customization, some accomplished before the war (the Westergard Mercury in 1940 [1940 model], the Ohanesian Mercury in 1943 [1940 model]) and some afterward

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(the Mataranga Mercury in 1949 [1940 model]) (Taylor 2006). However, it was the post-war 1948–1951 Mercurys that became custom icons. It might have been their obsolete design elements—eschewed by General Motors, Ford, and Studebaker but embraced by Packard, Hudson, and Nash—that contributed to the bathtub Mercurys’ attraction to customizers. As described in an essay by Harry Bentley Bradley “‘49–’51 Merc Customs—a Styling Critique” in an unidentified custom car magazine:

Virtually every line and shape was familiar to the Los Angeles custom shops that had been working with the ‘40–’48 Fords and Mercs for nearly a decade. Chopping the V-windshield was much easier than chopping GM’s new curved designs. When chopped, the small windows and thick pillars had the familiar, sinister custom look. The long Mercury roof could be given the same flowing sweep into the rounded deck as the earlier cars had. A dechromed and lowered new Mercury back end also looked very much like the earlier customs. The low front fenders and tall hood were much preferred over Ford’s higher boxy fender line and nearly flat hood. And, strangely, Mercury’s add-on fender skirts seemed more “custom” than GM’s flush skirts. (reprinted in Ganahl 2005: 41)

Although this does not explain why similar-looking Hudson and Nash models were far less frequently customized, it does make sense that post-war customizers chose Mercurys; they could apply styles and techniques which they had mastered and which had proven to be popular.⁸ What is somewhat puzzling is a custom car revival in the 1970s that featured new bathtub Mercury customizations and restorations and clones of historic vehicles, including the Hirohata Merc. An obvious explanation is that when kids grow up and make money, they want to spend it on the unaffordable automobiles that they longed for when they were younger, an effect which Mustang, Camaro, and Challenger have been attempting to exploit. Folks who were teenagers in 1950 would have hit their 40s in 1975 and been facing mid-life crises that a customized Mercury might have assuaged.

A related phenomenon is that pre-war customization was an outgrowth of hot-rodding and shared its outlaw associations (DeWitt 2001; Taylor 2006). So, whenever it was necessary to sig-

8. Packards also had bathtub styling, but they were likely too expensive to be purchased for customization.

nal that a character in a film was a loner outside polite society and thumbing their noses at convention, their driving a customized post-war Mercury sent a recognizable message. As DeWitt describes it:

In *Cobra* (1986), Sylvester Stallone plays a contemporary cop who drives a chopped '50 Merc and talks like a refugee from a fifties hot rod movie. The car tells everyone that he is a maverick, a rebel, an individual with no connection to organization men like the Joe Fridays of the world, even if he does wear a badge. (DeWitt 2001: 118)

Bathtub Mercurys have indeed made especially memorable cinematic appearances. In 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean drove one that had been lowered, nosed (hood trim removed), and decked (trunk lid trim removed). In more recent films, Duane drove a '50 Mercury in 1971's *Last Picture Show*, and George Lucas put The Pharaohs gang in a customized '51 Mercury in 1973's *American Graffiti*. Tony Stark had a '49 Mercury in his collection in 2010's *Iron Man II*. Doc Hudson in Pixar's 2006 *Cars* correctly referenced the historic Fabulous Hudson Hornet, which while not a Mercury, looked enough like one to tap into Mercury's popular culture connotations, especially for those for whom all bathtubs looked alike.

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Fig. 3. 2011 Mercury Grand Marquis. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2011_Mercury_Grand_Marquis_\(6255947466\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2011_Mercury_Grand_Marquis_(6255947466).jpg) (CC BY 2.0).

MERCURY

Ford officially announced the Mercury 8 at a press conference on October 24th, 1938, although production had begun over a month earlier on September 21st at the Richmond, California assembly plant (Gunnell 1994).⁹ General Motors had completely covered the automobile market price spectrum from Chevrolet through Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, and LaSalle to Cadillac, but Ford had a large gap between the \$825 Ford Deluxe Station Wagon and the \$1,295 Lincoln-Zephyr Three-Passenger Coupe. Mercury was created to fill it and compete with the Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, and Buicks that were already in that market niche. Although the earliest Mercurys shared some mechanical components with Fords and Lincoln-Zephyrs, their external body panels were unique, and they had their own performance profiles.¹⁰ From the very beginning, though, Ford faced the problem of how to position the Mercury with respect to its existing models: Was it a 'big Ford' or a 'baby Lincoln'? From an interview with designer Bob Gregoire:

I think one of the most interesting things about the 1939 Mercury—the development of it—was the difficulty Mr. Edsel Ford seemed to have in grasping the idea of what this car was going to be. Oddly enough, he wasn't trying to step up far enough from the basic Ford. His whole concept was to tie it in with the Ford, and it was very difficult for me to get the point across—he was very touchy on the subject. In other words, to make this an effective [medium-priced] car, we thought that every effort should be made to dissuade the public that the Mercury was just a blown-up Ford which, of course, it really was. It suffered from that for a number of years. (Lamm and Lewis 2002: 9)

If Mercurys had been sold in their own dealerships, differentiation would have been less of a problem. But they were also in showrooms along with Fords, Lincolns, or both, inviting inevitable comparisons by customers and sales personnel alike. And it was also unclear which General Motors marque the Mercury

9. According to Lamm and Lewis (2002), production began at the Dearborn, Michigan assembly plant. Mercurys were announced and shown to Ford dealers on September 29th, and they were first shown to the public on November 4th.

10. The Mercury engine was a Ford "police" engine, one with a larger bore that had been available in law enforcement vehicles.

was competing with. In spite of this congenital confusion, Mercurys sold well over the four model years from their launch in late 1938 through February 10th, 1942, when Ford terminated production of civilian vehicles and converted their plants to manufacturing for the military.

After WWII, Ford created a Lincoln-Mercury division, leaving no doubt that it intended to position Mercury closer to Lincoln than to Ford. And there were clear stylist differences. Unlike the more conservative Fords, Mercurys and Lincolns shared the distinctive and somewhat radical bathtub styling, an aircraft-based design concept created during the war that was also adopted by post-war Packards and Hudsons among others. It had taken a few years for all automobile companies to completely return to civilian production after the war, and it was not until April 22nd, 1948 that Lincoln introduced the first dramatically new postwar automobile (from among the “Big 3”: General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) as a 1949 model. The Mercury '49 followed one week later.¹¹ Naturally, there would have been considerable public interest in the new Lincolns and Mercurys, and it is likely to have been greater in Richmond, where K.C. Douglas was living and where Mercurys had been assembled.¹² It is not hard to imagine people in the spring of 1948 being crazy 'bout the coming Mercury, and it is not difficult to imagine people still today being crazy 'bout the Mercury '49. While the big, broad, bold bulk of the bathtubs did not turn out to be the wave of the future, however, it did have its admirers. The 1949–1951 Mercurys sold well, but at that time there was such a strong overhanging demand for automobiles that just about every model in those years sold well. In 1952, Mercury chose to move back into the mainstream with a design closer to those of General Motors, which was setting the trends in what people wanted their automobiles to look like in the early 1950s.

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11. The landmark 1948 Cadillac with its nascent fins had been in showrooms since March, 1948, but beneath its dramatic surface was an essentially pre-war chassis.

12. It has not been possible to determine, though, whether or not Mercurys were assembled in the Richmond plant between WWII and the plant's closure in 1956.

Unfortunately for Mercury, during the last 60 years of its life between 1952 and its demise in 2011, its products more or less lingered in the background of the automobile market, at least from a stylistic standpoint. Although Mercury had some interesting designs in the 1950s and 1960s, it was never in the forefront. In January 1965, Lee Iacocca became the vice-president of Ford's car and truck group, and one of his first assignments was to initiate the effort to revive Mercury that culminated in the 1967 introduction of the Cougar and the Marquis. At the time, every Mercury model had a Ford counterpart that it quite closely resembled under the skin (the sheet metal) and often *inside* the skin as well. The Mercury Comet was a Falcon, and the Mercury itself was a Ford (Iacocca 1984). Iacocca did his best to create dramatic images with the vehicles' introductions to dealers and with their subsequent advertising campaigns, pushing as many popular culture buttons as he could imagine. The Marquis was unveiled by a massive release of balloons from the deck of a Caribbean cruise ship, and the Cougar drove off a WWII landing craft onto a St. Thomas beach accompanied by singer Vic Damone. Cougar print ads featured a live cougar photographed on a Lincoln-Mercury sign, and Marquis television ads promoted the car's smooth ride with Green Bay Packer quarterback Bart Starr being shaved by a barber while the car was in motion (Iacocca 1984).

Despite the marketing hoopla, occasional forays into racing, and the inclusion of unique captive imports in its line, Mercury never overcame the identity problem that had plagued it since its origin in the 1930s and established a distinctive image for itself. Football stars and wild animals notwithstanding, the Marquis was still a Mercury (which was still a Ford), and the Cougar was still a Mustang (which was still a Falcon). Similar to the problems faced by General Motors' Oldsmobile, Mercury never said much of anything about the person driving it to the general public.¹³ It is not so much

13. General Motors produced its last Oldsmobile on April 29, 2004. And after failing to position Pontiac as a 'performance' brand, it too was discontinued on November 29, 2009 (Pontiac-branded imports destined for Canada were manufactured in South Korea by Daewoo for another month). Buick survived, but it was no longer marketed as an intermediate step up the financial ladder between Chevrolet and Cadillac. Rather, it became General Motors'

of a surprise that following its brief notoriety in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a songwriter searching for an automobile with which to make a statement or an artist searching for an exciting design as a muse would never have settled on Mercury.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

*The gal I love, I stole her from a friend.
The fool got lucky stole her back again,
Cause you know he had a Mercury; yeah you know he had a Mercury Ford.
I'm gonna buy a Mercury and cruise up and down the road.*

–K.C. Douglas and Robert Geddins



Fig. 4. Mercury Super Marauder. Quoted in: Vienna Auto Show 2018 blog (<https://www.viennaautoshow2018.com/2018/05/06/mercury-super-marauder-1964-by-george-barris-with-a-wheelbase>) (Fair Use).

As has been described, Mercury had a popular culture presence in the form of a catchy song and outlaw customization that offered an opportunity for brand image development and exploitation, but it was not enough to save the name. The failure of “Mercury Boogie/Mercury Blues” to play any role in cementing an image of Mercury in popular culture is not very difficult to understand. At the time it was written, so-called “race-music” did not register on the popular music charts. Music performed by African-American

‘upscale automobile with conservative styling’ and Cadillac a somewhat more prestigious ‘upscale automobile with progressive styling’ (with hopefully a younger and wealthier customer base). La Salles had disappeared long before in October, 1939

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musicians was assumed to appeal only to an African-American audience, a market which no company (i.e. record labels, radio stations, and advertisers) had any interest in tapping. Widespread interest in authentic blues as K.C. Douglas played did not emerge until musicians from the United Kingdom brought the songs back to the United States during the British Invasion and audiences sought out the original artists. Sadly, K.C. Douglas was not one of the more prolific or popular bluesmen. While he played local gigs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he had no national recognition, and it was not until 1975 that his song was covered by the Steve Miller Band. If its revival had come from a more popular group with a catchier version that rose high on the singles charts—and if the mid-1970s Mercury Cougar XR-7 had not been suffering from a severe case of middle-age spread and shared the name Mercury with the bloated Grand Marquis—Mercury might have benefitted from the song. But it would have meant an extraordinary conjunction of unlikely events for that to have occurred.

Could Mercury have exploited its position as *the* all-time custom? The company tried with its Caravan of Stars in the mid-1960s, and George Barris, who built the 1964 Super Marauder, was very positive about the effort:

Looking back at this one adventure in custom history, you can start to see that Detroit was actually paying close attention to what customizers and hot rodders were really doing. It wasn't just a matter of finding the hot trends in auto body ideas; it was as much about trying to understand the culture and to see how it could be used to create sales. I think Ford perceived that if you had the hot car these kids could buy at that age you could build ardent Ford fans who would continue buying Ford products for the rest of their lives. Today, that idea of using specialty vehicles to promote new vehicle sales is about as everyday as a Mustang convertible, but back then it was the cutting edge of youth marketing. If any of the first-hand accounts of attendees of these shows is worth repeating, this one sums them up: "So many people were crowded into the Custom Car Caravan display that it was hard to see what was on the stands!" (Barris and Fetherston 2002: 65–67)

The size of the crowds notwithstanding, Barris is likely biased in his assessment of the popularity of customized cars at the time.¹⁴

14. Considering the timing, it is likely that Lee Iacocca saw that the Custom Car Caravan was not turning attendance into sales and decided that

As he inadvertently noted, the market wanted Mustangs, not futuristic versions of large two-door sedans. The Mercury Marauder was decidedly not a “sports roadster,” as Barris described it. And the mid-1960s might not only have been too early to capture the middle-aged retro market described above, but the Super Marauder’s science fiction styling would also not have been the vehicle to do it.

Mercury’s failure leaves us with the question as to whether a company has significant ability to shape its image in popular culture or whether the process is out of its hands. Bentley and Cadillac were two makes that were able to exploit their popular culture images—one intentionally and the other fortuitously—that suggest what, with a little (or a *lot* of) luck, Mercury might—just *might*—have been able to do. Bentley’s post-war tradition of model names had been the nondescript sequence R-Type, S-Type, and T-Type. Then in 1980 its new model was christened the Mulsanne after a straightaway at Le Mans, where Bentley had distinguished itself in the late 1920s. And two years later it installed a turbocharger, which did little to enhance the performance of a heavy sedan but which harked back to the famous “Blower” Bentley of that same era. Sales soared (McGoun 2020). Bentley had kept a meaningful presence in popular culture despite its owner, Rolls Royce, keeping it on life support but making very little effort for decades to revive it. To the surprise of General Motors, Cadillac, which no longer produced vehicles with the flamboyance of the ‘30s, ‘40s, and ‘50s which had attracted the attention of blues musicians among other notables (McGoun 2019), regained that cachet in the 1990s when rap musicians began to purchase Cadillac’s very large SUV, the Escalade, and appropriately customize it. Cadillacs were no longer spotted only in Florida retirement communities, although the company still struggles to shake that dimension of its image.

The odds might not have been great, but if Mercury had had its own big, bold, and bad model that reflected its ‘49–’51 models, it might have had a positive impact on sales and kept Mercury alive—even if not overwhelmingly thriving. Interestingly, the redesign

exciting new models (albeit derivatives of Ford models that at least *looked* new and exciting) was a better strategy.

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of the Chrysler 300 in 2011 did just that, reviving the chopped look of classic customs giving it an appearance that proved to be a hit with consumers. Popular cultural images do endow a vehicle with a certain magic. It might not have the power to steal gals—or guys—as it might have had once, but it can still add to the experience of cruisin' up and down the road.

Car Culture(s)
Machines, Roads
Mythologies

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