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## **In the Shadow of The Great Depression- Car Imagery in Post War Rhythm and Blues Country**

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## In the Shadow of The Great Depression- Car Imagery in Post War Rhythm and Blues Country

You may have heard of jalopies  
You've heard the noise they make  
But let me introduce you to my Rocket '88  
Yes it's great, just won't wait  
Everybody likes my Rocket '88  
Baby we'll ride in style  
Movin' all along  
V-8 motor and this modern design  
Black convertible top and the gals don't mind  
Sportin' with me, ridin' all around town for joy  
Blow your horn, Raymond blow your horn  
"Rocket 88"-- Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats 1951  
"As I was motivatin' over the hill  
I saw Maybellene in a coup de ville.  
A Cadillac a-rollin' on the open road,  
Nothin' will outrun my V8 Ford.  
The Cadillac doin' 'bout ninety-five,  
She's bumper to bumper rollin' side by side."  
"Maybellene" Chuck Berry, 1955

One of the most striking aspects of post war rhythm and blues and country music, as well signature songs in the early years of Rock and roll (1954-1964) the prevalence of car imagery, particularly imagery boasting of cars as objects of personal consumption. Whether it is Hank Williams going "Honky tonkin round this town" or Chuck Berry "Riding around in my automobile, my baby beside me at the wheel" there are literally hundreds of country, R&B and rock and roll songs where racing cars, driving to dates, or impressing a women with a luxury car is a central theme

The most obvious explanation for this car imagery is the long and deep post war prosperity that put disposable income in the hands of working class as well as middle class Americans, . and allowed adolescents to have enough income to become a consumer market all their own. From 1945 on, even the most marginalized sections of the American working class, Blacks, Latinos and southern whites, were making enough money to buy cars for personal consumption and were supporting themselves in jobs which allowed them time for leisure.

The sheer joy that ownership of a new and beautiful car provided to those who had once known poverty, or whose parents never stopped talking it, cannot be underestimated. Think of the first line of the Jackie Brenston song "Rocket 88" "You may have heard about jalopies, you've heard the noise they make, but let me introduce you to my Rocket 88 " During all the years of the Depression, and even during World War 2 when few cars were manufactured, most Americans, if they had cars at all, owned ancient, rusted vehicles that used for work or family functions. Significantly, there is no Depression era music that portrays "joy riding"--the most powerful vehicular images to come out of that period is of broken down vehicles piled with people and possessions heading from Oklahoma and Texas to California after dust storms and bankruptcies

had displaced them from their homes. So when Jackie Brenston invokes the "jalopy" to highlight a shiny new Oldsmobile he was able to purchase, he is extolling a new and wonderful time in American history for people like him. Wages are high (thanks to strong unions), cars are affordable, gas is cheap, and life is good, even for a Black man who still faces discrimination and dangers most whites will never know. Freedom from the humiliation of Depression Era poverty is a beautiful thing, and a beautiful shiny car makes a man feel powerful, especially in a gendered society where cars are a symbol of manhood.

Years later, Bruce Springsteen would capture that feeling of power in so many of his songs, none more than in Cadillac Ranch

Well there she sits buddy just a-gleaming in the sun  
There to greet a working man when his day is done  
I'm gonna pack my pa and I'm gonna pack my aunt  
I'm gonna take them down to the Cadillac ranch  
Eldorado fins, whitewalls and skirts  
Rides just like a little bit of heaven here on earth  
Well buddy when I die throw my body in the back  
And drive me to the junkyard in my Cadillac"

But perhaps the best expression of it is the scene in the movie about Chess Records, "Cadillac Records", where Leonard Chess gives Muddy Waters a new Cadillac and where the Willie Dixon character, memorably played by Cedric the Entertainer, talks about what owning a car like that meant to a "Jew Boy and a Black Boy."

As the movie makes clear, owning a Cadillac was not a magic elixir to make racism disappear. But it did symbolize the end of Depression era poverty and humiliation that had scarred everyone who experienced, and whose passing was an occasion for joy and celebration.